

SARAH SKYE

WHISKERS & *sunshine*

HE'S HER TOTAL
OPPOSITE... AND
EXACTLY WHAT
SHE NEEDS



WHISKERS & SUNSHINE

UNLIKELY PAIRINGS

BOOK 3

OceanofPDF.com

SARAH SKYE



Anti-Belle Books

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*Dedicated to everyone who chose a different path than what
they had planned.*

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THE UNLIKELY PAIRINGS SERIES

OceanofPDF.com

BY SARAH SKYE

Sips & Strokes

Vibes & Feels

Whiskers & Sunshine

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HARMONY

Pink confetti flutters around, and I have the distinct impression that I'm staring into a snow globe.

Problem is, I'm supposed to be inside the globe, aww-ing and cheering along with everyone else while Marco and Morgan exchange a weepy kiss. Instead, I feel like an impenetrable pane of glass separates me from this happiness.

Don't make a scene, Harmony. Smile, dammit.

I stretch my lips back over my teeth. It kind of feels like a grimace, but I've done this since I was a kid. I know it looks like I'm beaming. Morgan's grandmother hugs me quickly before everyone rushes to clink glasses in a group cheers. I grab my nearly-full flute of sparkling juice and join in.

"Congrats, guys!"

Morgan turns to me and wipes a tear from her eye. "Thanks, Harmony. Thank you for being here."

"Where else would I be?" My smile doesn't slip. I'm not about to selfishly make this moment about me.

"No, it's just... I'm so happy we can all be friends. This is the big family I never had, and it means more to me than I can say."

I roll my eyes and poke her with one fingertip. "You always say that, silly. But you know you're like family to me, too, right?"

She hugs me. I throw my arms around her too, but when her baby bump presses against me, I involuntarily suck in my stomach. I'd forgotten for a second about the dread tugging at my thoughts. A glance at the juice in my hand brings it all back.

Relax. It's not catching.

I breathe out a soft chuckle and squeeze Morgan one more time. Marco walks up and slips an arm around her, tossing me a friendly grin. His smile is relaxed, proud, and full of genuine happiness.

It's not a look I ever saw from him back when we were engaged.

"Fatherhood looks good on you," I say, and he grins harder with a murmured thanks.

It's an honest compliment. I'm thrilled that these two are so in love. Yeah, Marco dicked me over big-time, but that's ancient history. So much has happened for him and for Morgan that he's a totally different person. I can hardly believe he's the same guy I thought I wanted to marry. That guy was aloof and cool—and, under all that, an insecure, selfish prick.

But Marco Woodruff is a textbook case of how someone can truly change.

Besides, what I thought I wanted doesn't seem to be what actually makes me happy. I'm realizing this all over again as that dread continues to tickle my brain.

Marco showed me how much I didn't want a businessman husband who'd be a good provider and check all the right boxes. And, as I swing by the pharmacy on my way home from the party, I have to admit that the three pink boxes on my passenger seat are showing me how much I'm not ready to be a mom.

At home, I stomp into the bathroom. It's been exactly three days since my period should've started. It's been precisely thirty days since the last time I saw Jaden.

Plopping down on the toilet, I sigh to myself. “Just have a fling, you thought. It will be fun, you thought. Yeah, right. There’s a reason you take things slow, Harmony.”

I met Jaden at Lily and Calder’s wedding. He was a friend of a friend of Lily’s family. We saw each other for almost a month. Things seemed to be going well. He was nice. Good job. Stable relationship with his parents. Interested in movies and books that I’d at least heard of.

I finally stayed over once, and that seemed to go well. He was enthusiastic, if a little disappointed that I didn’t come. Then, the following weekend, he asked me over again. We didn’t have condoms, but he’d pulled out, and I was just a day away from my like-clockwork period start.

The next day, he stopped returning my texts. I never heard from him again.

Damn that good boy vibe. Damn me for falling for it. Again.

I couldn’t resist the seemingly nice guy. He seemed so safe, so... nice. No guy who gets along with his parents and does well at work can be a douchebag, right? A guy with a good car and no drama in his past must be the kind of stable, courteous man who’d make my parents beam when I brought him to brunch.

Only problem is, my parents have beamed before. And yet, here I am, sitting on this toilet by myself.

I look at the stick in my hand and swallow hard. If I’m pregnant, what next? How will I know how to take care of myself? What am I not allowed to eat? It feels like Morgan has a laundry list of off-limits foods, but I can’t remember any of them right now. Will Dad get me a trainer, nutritionist, and the best OB in town so I can have an optimal pregnancy? Or will he be so disappointed to have a single-and-pregnant daughter that he’ll send me away to live with Aunt Susan in Phoenix? Will I have to start working in a diner to pay for diapers? Will I live on pie and black coffee until I don’t even think about going to the gym anymore? Will I hit the road one night in a fit of desperation and just keep driving, hoping that somewhere

I'll find a place to call my own? Then I can send for my child and carve out a quiet but honorable life where we...

"Jesus, Harmony," I blurt aloud to the empty room. "You're reading way too much chick-lit, girl. Just get on with it."

So, I pee on the stick. Then I get up, drink a huge glass of water, and pee on the second. And the third. All different brands, all "99% Accurate." I even make sure to pee mid-stream because I read that's the best way to get an accurate reading.

I'm not taking chances. I need data.

The sticks sit on the counter for five minutes while I prowls around, floss my teeth, and prowls again. When my phone timer goes off, I huff another deep breath and creep toward the lineup.

Single line. Minus sign. NO.

I'm not pregnant.

I slither to the floor. There will be no prenatal yoga, no diners, no Aunt Susan. There will be no pink confetti or diapers or late-night feedings.

And there is nothing inside me that wishes the tests were wrong.

That realization makes me open my eyes. In a way, I'm shocked at myself. I love babies. I can't wait to snuggle Morgan's daughter. My niece and nephew are the sweetest dolls ever. I always wanted to be a Mrs. and a mom.

At least, I thought I did.

But now I've had a failed engagement, a ghosted relationship, and a pregnancy scare. It's becoming clear that I don't want any of the things I always thought meant a good life.

So, Harmony Calista Daniels, what exactly do you want?



Once I picked myself up off the bathroom floor, I gave myself the night to splurge. I ordered Indian food takeout, opened a bottle of wine, and spent the evening watching Korean romance movies on Netflix.

When I woke up, I made a protein shake and hit the gym for an hour. Back to normal, back to routine. Sometimes it's good to give myself a night off. Plus, my period finally came once I was home from the gym. Now I feel balanced again, back in control. Yesterday's dread is gone. Although I kind of feel like I have a hole in my life thanks to that unanswered question, it's not a wrecking ball. It's something I can figure out later.

Mondays are light at the spa where I work as an esthetician. I've been doing this for a year and like it heaps better than waxing eyebrows. The spa belongs to my older sister, Aspen. When we were kids, we spent hours raiding mom's beauty stash until she bought us our own. It makes sense that Aspen would run a business since she was always bossing me around. But I like helping people feel good.

My last appointment is at three. My GYN appointment to get an IUD is at four. I'm not taking chances after this weekend.

Once I'm done there, I head over to my parents' house for dinner. Mom greets me dressed in her yoga leggings, water bottle in hand. "Just got home, honey. How are you?"

"Pretty good," I say. It's not a lie.

I follow her into the kitchen where her housekeeper, Jana, is preparing salmon and a big salad. Mom and I pour glasses of wine as we praise how delicious the food smells, then meander to the patio to wait for Dad to get home. We chat about this and that, Morgan and Marco's baby shower, and my brother and sister's lives. Light stuff. Exactly what I need to feel back to normal today.

Dad's Bentley prowls into the driveway. We hear the garage open and close, and then he appears, his signature Manhattan in hand. Jana has been making him a Manhattan every weeknight since I was a little girl. I love traditions.

I grin and go hug him.

He kisses the top of my head and clinks my glass with his. "Happy Monday."

"Happy Monday, Dad. How's business?"

"Busy as usual," he mutters as he rifles through the mail. His hands stop on an envelope, and his salt-and-pepper brows furrow. "Hmm."

"Everything okay?" Mom asks from her chair.

Dad plops down beside her, so I sit, too. He rips open the envelope and reads the letter. Every line on the page makes the line between his brows deepen. He mutters for us to hold on as he pulls his phone from his suit pocket. Mom and I trade a glance and sit forward to shamelessly listen in.

"This is Neil Daniels, calling regarding a letter I received just now. Case number sixteen-seven-eight b? ... Uh-huh. Yes, Elizabeth Daniels is my aunt—oh, oh my. Was my aunt, I suppose, yes. She lived in... that's right. And... I see. I see. Next of kin? Me? I see. And so I... hmm. Mm-hmm. Alright. Thank you. I'll have my assistant schedule an appointment for the paperwork tomorrow. Thank you very much."

Dad drops the phone and rubs his eyes. "Suppose you heard. Aunt Beth died. I hadn't spoken to her in a few years, but apparently she entrusted her estate to me."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

He nods at Mom's words. "We were close growing up, but then I think she and my father had a falling out. Knowing him, likely over something he said." He breathes a dry laugh. My dad has always worked to be different from his own father in that way.

"The estate. Is it complicated?" Mom asks. She's not looking for money or anything. She's most likely mentally

calculating the tax implications. We have more than we need with how hard she and dad work. Mom is a semi-retired litigator and Dad manages a hedge fund.

But Dad shakes his head. “A small sum of money that we’ll donate right away. It seems the primary asset she’s entrusted us with is...” He checks the paper again. “A dog rescue facility.”

My heart melts. “Your aunt rescued dogs?”

“Apparently.” Dad’s eyes don’t leave the page. “It’s a private facility an hour outside the city that takes in abandoned dogs and rehabs them. Fido’s Farm, that’s the name.”

I press my hand to my throat and squeal. “Oh, my god, that is so sweet!”

He flickers a grin at me. “Always so tender-hearted, even when you were a kid.”

That makes me bite my lip. I wasn’t. I was an asshole, if I’m honest with myself. Yes, I was kind to pets, siblings, and friends. As the baby of the family, I was usually a peacemaker for my older brother and sis. My parents worked long hours, and with three kids, we each had to have something unique to get us attention. Aspen was talented. Trae was smart. So I was sweet.

But anytime I had even a little bit of power, I abused it. Just thinking about it makes me queasy. One of my dearest friends, Lily, took a lot of my shit when we were kids. I bullied her. Kids are mean sometimes, and no one noticed enough to stop me. I did it because I could. I did it because it made me feel better about myself. Because it made my so-called friends laugh and not abandon me. Because they became afraid I’d bully them too, so they were nice to me.

I stopped being a bully when I went to middle school. I got braces, hormones made me break out, and I was terrified of being called ugly. So instead, I started being sweet at school, too. I didn’t trust my frenemies really wanted me around, but I was so nice that no one gave me a hard time.

Sweet and upbeat is definitely my nature. Morgan says that makes sense because I'm a Cancer with Leo rising, but I think it's more about being the baby of the family. Still, in the last two years—since I broke up with Marco on the eve of our wedding—I've found it easier to care less about making everyone happy. Finding true friends like Lily and Morgan have taught me that people can like me for *me*, not for what I do for them.

I shake off those memories and smile. “Rescuing animals sounds amazing. Helping defenseless, scared dogs find a home? I love it!”

“Hmm, I don't think Beth adopted the dogs after they were rehabbed. According to this, eighteen dogs live on the grounds at this time.” Dad sighs. “Let's hope we can find a buyer who loves it as much as you do.”

Dad's words make me frown and tilt my head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I hope we find a buyer quickly. I can't run a dog shelter. And there's no way that's a good investment of capital.”

“What if no one wants to buy it?”

He shrugs, a faraway look in his eye like he's strategizing. “I guess we can liquidate the assets, send the dogs to another facility, and sell the property as-is in that case.”

Something is building inside of me. Not dread. Not worry. Restlessness. I cross my arms. “What if I run it?”

My blurted question freezes Mom's glass halfway to her lips. Dad's brow arches.

“You're going to run the shelter? You have no business knowledge, honey.”

“But I could get the people who already work there to help me. I'm good at working with people. And I could ask you when I have questions.”

“You want to take over a dog rehab facility. You want to oversee dog handlers and groundskeepers and ensure the place

is up to code. You want to be in charge of running the books and paying people.”

“I...”

Damn, that sounds like a lot of work. Aspen running a spa makes sense. But me, Harmony, running a farm full of dogs? That doesn't fit in this reality.

I chew on my lip, thinking about the responsibility. Thinking about the plan I'd had for my life that I'd recently thrown out the window. I might be thirty-one, clueless about what I want, and highly unqualified to do this. But dammit, I could try.

“Yes. I want to.”

“But sweetheart, what about your job at the spa?” Mom says. “Are you really going to quit on a whim to try this out and leave your sister and her business in a lurch?”

“I won't quit. I have a bunch of vacation days saved, so I can use that. Besides, Aspen will understand. I practically ran the spa when she was on maternity leave both times. She'll be fine with me taking some time away for a bit.”

Mom and Dad trade a look. They debate with their eyes for a moment, but then Dad laughs. “Fine, honey. Go see what it's like. I'll help with any questions you have, and my accountant will run the books.”

I leap up and do a little dance of excitement, but Dad points his finger at me.

“Just know, when you get tired of this and want to come home, I'm selling it before the week is up. Understood?”

“Yes, Dad. But I won't give up.”

He laughs again. “Famous last words, little one. Famous last words.”

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LUCAS

I push open the metal door to the kennel and kick it shut. Immediately I'm rushed by a dozen dogs.

I plop on the ground and lie down in the dirt as they climb all over me, licking and whining. I do my best to pet each of them in the furry chaos.

"I know, guys. This fucking sucks, doesn't it?"

I glance at the two-story house on the other side of the property. I still can't believe Beth is gone. She was a spitfire. Nearly ninety years old and barely came up to my shoulder when she stood up straight. But I've never met a stronger, tougher, more hardworking person.

She worked every damn day to keep this dog rescue running. This place was her heart and soul. And now it's gone. Just like her.

Just like these dogs will be.

I fight the lump that sprouts in my throat at the thought of what will happen to them.

Bruno, the beagle mix Beth found abandoned at a rest stop last year, nuzzles my neck before licking my face. Another dog, a chunky black lab mix she named Tuco, plops in my lap. The rest of the dogs crowd around, whining while vying for some pet time.

"Fuck this," I mutter, petting them. "Fuck heart attacks. Fuck getting old. Fuck all this bullshit."

I think back to when that estate lawyer stopped by the day after Beth's funeral while I was cleaning the kennel. He told me her next of kin had been notified. Some distant relatives who lived in the city would be taking over, likely selling it. Which meant I was out of a job.

But I didn't give a fuck about that. I only cared about the rescue and what would happen to these dogs.

"They'll likely be dropped off at whatever shelter nearby will take them," the suit said while looking at his phone. "I'd start looking for a new job ASAP if I were you."

I had to grit my teeth and shove my hand in my pocket to keep from punching the guy. He clearly didn't give a shit what happened to these dogs, that they'd likely be euthanized since every shelter in the area is almost always full. That's the reason Beth started this rescue in the first place. She was an animal lover who cared for dogs more than people. She made an exception for me when she hired me a few years ago to be the trainer and groundskeeper at the rescue.

I offered right then and there to buy the place to save it and the dogs, but the prick in a suit just scoffed at me. "You couldn't afford it, Mr. Mallender."

He was right. Beth came from money. And despite working for her, talking to her regularly, and me visiting her at the care facility every couple of weeks when she moved there a few months ago as her health declined, she was pretty tight-lipped when it came to her family. She never mentioned them, and no one ever came to visit her. I figured she didn't have any relatives.

Wally, a massive German shorthair who thinks he's a lap dog, plops on my legs, jerking me back to the moment. I hug him and kiss the top of his head.

This is why I'm rolling in the dirt with these dogs. They're my life. I have no idea how much time I have left with them, so I'm trying to savor these last few moments.

Like I should have done with Taylor.

I shove the thought out of my mind the second it creeps in. Just then, I hear the sound of tires on gravel. I stand up and see a silver Land Rover pulling up the gravel driveway on the property.

My heart plummets to my gut. I bet this is the relative who's gonna come and shut things down.

The car parks near the barn, about fifty feet away. The driver's side door flies open, and out steps a tall, busty, leggy blonde in gigantic sunglasses, a short, white flowy dress, and the highest heels I've ever seen. She carries a leather purse in the crook of her elbow.

I huff out a breath. Of fucking course.

She's grinning wide while glancing around the property. As she walks around the front of the barn, I'm amazed she doesn't trip and fall in those stilts she's wearing.

Her grin turns toothy when she spins around and catches eyes with me. She swipes her sunglasses off as she starts walking toward me.

Holy fuck. She's stunning.

Seriously, Lucas? That's what you're focusing on in this moment?

The gorgeous mystery woman waves at me. "Hi there! Do you work here?"

"Used to." I step out of the kennel and shut the gate. The dogs whine behind me.

She frowns as she stops in front of me. Damn, she's tall. My work boots put me at around 6'4", and in her heels, she's almost eye-to-eye with me.

"Used to?" she asks, those crystal blue eyes sparkling with worry.

"Well, yeah. I assumed you're Beth's next of kin and are taking over the place. That means I'm out of a job."

Her flawless face scrunches in worry. It's cute as fuck.

“Oh, no. No, that’s not....” She pulls some papers out of her purse and hands them to me. “I’m Harmony Daniels. My family inherited this property.”

I skim the papers, which look like legal documents transferring ownership of Beth’s house and property to the Daniels family.

When I look back at her, she’s holding her hand out with an expectant smile.

“Lucas Mallender.” I shake her hand, surprised when she returns a firm grip that throws me slightly off balance. Okay, so she’s a lot stronger than her appearance lets on.

“I was the groundskeeper and trainer here. I was just stopping by to say goodbye to the dogs.”

Harmony flashes a sympathetic look at the pups, who are now crowding at the gate door, whining for attention. She sets her purse down, walks over to the fence, and pets them.

“I know this is kind of last-minute. And a bit of a mess.” She leans down and gives Wally a kiss on the top of the head before turning back to me. “But my family just learned what happened to my Great Aunt Beth. I’ve decided to take over the rescue.”

My eyes bulge. Before I can catch myself, I let out a laugh that sounds a lot like a scoff. Harmony’s perfectly arched eyebrows furrow, turning her expression annoyed. That’s damn cute too.

I clear my throat. “Sorry. I just... you don’t look like you’ve done this sort of work before.”

She straightens up and crosses her arms over her chest. “Yeah, well, looks can be deceiving. Legally, I’m the new owner of this place. I’ll be the one in my family taking over the dog rescue. I’d like to keep it running as smoothly as Beth did. I love animals, dogs especially. And I’m determined to do a good job.”

This time I have the sense to bite my lip so I can hold back my chuckle. No way this bombshell has ever done a day of hard labor in her life. I’m guessing she’s more accustomed to

going to yoga or pilates or spin classes or whatever it is that rich hot girls do to fill their time.

“Okay, well. Good luck to you,” I say.

Her gaze on me turns focused. “How would you feel about staying on as the groundskeeper and trainer?”

I stammer. I wasn’t expecting that. “Uh…”

“Look, as much as I want to do this, I know I’m a fish out of water here. Could you show me the ropes? I’ll pay you extra, or overtime, or whatever.”

I take a second to think about what she’s offered me. If I say yes, I could keep my job—I could keep looking after the dogs and make sure they end up okay. I’d have to get used to being around Sorority Barbie day after day and putting out whatever fires she’s sure to start. She clearly has no idea what she’s getting into. But whatever. I’ve had worse jobs.

And worse bosses who weren’t half as fun to look at. She’s a fucking smoke show, gotta give her that.

I shake my head, annoyed at just how much her appearance is throwing me off. I’ll have to get used to that too.

“Okay. I’m in.”

Another gorgeous fucking smile lights up her face as she squeals and claps. “Yay!”

She walks over to the kennel fence and throws open the door.

“Whoa, wait, Harmony, you don’t have the right shoes—”

“I know what I’m doing,” she says without looking back at me. The second she’s in the kennel, she’s knocked off balance on her heel-stilts as the dogs rush her. She falls to the ground as they jump on her, excited to see a new person.

I dart over. “Back up! Now!”

The dogs immediately back away from her and sit quietly while looking up at me. Harmony stares up at me, eyes wide, mouth agape. I walk over to her and offer my hand. She grabs me, and I pull her up.

She stands there, covered in dirt, grass stains, and probably dog crap. Her dress is trashed, and her cheeks are on fire. “See? Fish out of water.” A flustered chuckle falls from her crimson lips.

“Good thing you’ve got me on your payroll, Princess.”

That flustered look morphs into a frown. “Princess?”

I glance down at her feet. “You’ve got the right shoes.”

She rolls her eyes before reining in her expression. She starts to wipe the dust off of her dress. “Whatever. Why don’t you show me around?”

“Let’s get you a more sensible pair of shoes, Princess.”

I head for the barn and hear her scoff behind me. “God, this is going to be a thing with you, isn’t it?”

I smile to myself. “I’m a package deal. Groundskeeper, trainer, and no bullshit.”

She sighs. “Of course you are.”

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HARMONY

I haven't wiped my hands on my clothes since kindergarten. That twenty-five-year streak is over right now—not that it makes a difference. My palms are red and stinging. My BCBG dress is covered in what I'm telling myself is only dirt, despite the fact that I just crashed ass-first into a pen of dogs. No matter what's making these dark brown streaks across the white chiffon, it is most definitely ruined.

While I try in vain to wipe the dirt off my aching hands, Lucas strolls to the barn. That leaves me trying to regain my balance on a gravel driveway. I'm glad he misses the moment where my ankle twists as my heel sinks into a soft spot. Hissing, I right myself and look around. *What do I do now?*

There are dogs. There is a farm. I imagined it would be clean and cute like Sawyer Farms, the orchard where my family goes apple picking every year. My outfit was supposed to say, "let's just walk the grounds and get started on some business." Clearly, I misunderstood the assignment because this place is more... rustic... than I'd anticipated.

I've just made up my mind to follow the trainer guy and ask him where the office is—there *has* to be an office, right?—when he returns from the barn. A pair of shoes dangle from his fingers. I frown, and he wiggles his eyebrows at me. "These'll have to do."

My nose wrinkles when he holds out a pair of dusty black work boots. They're ancient. "I'm supposed to wear those?"

“No, you’re supposed to wear your own proper footwear for a farm. But since you didn’t, these will hold you over for an hour or so while I show you around.”

I scowl at his retort, but the slight curl on the side of his mouth keeps his words from being mean. He’s not mad—he’s laughing at me. *Great. I’m not the asshole boss. I’m the airhead boss.*

But he’s right about the shoes, so I grab them and set them on the ground. The gravel driveway has been baking in the sun all day, and I don’t want to accidentally plant a bare foot onto it. I’m extra careful as I step out of one heel and into the boot, but I wobble again anyway. Without thinking, I wrap both hands around his bicep to steady me. He tenses at my touch but braces so I don’t fall.

Musty darkness envelopes my foot, and I try not to think about the fact that I’m wearing a stranger’s shoes. With no socks on.

“You have little feet,” I grumble when my toes bump the front of the boot way too soon.

He chuckles. It’s a pleasant sound that makes me glance up. Hazel eyes, gray and green and brown all at once, gaze steadily at me. Up close, his beard is full but well-trimmed. A few silver hairs mingle in the brown, making him look a little more seasoned than his smooth skin and laughing eyes would suggest.

I swallow hard and teeter again. He flexes his bicep, and the muscle bulges under my hand. I sink my fingers into his flesh, but *oh, my goodness*, is this guy jacked. Both my hands don’t fit all the way around one of these guns.

“What are you implying, Princess?”

It’s hard to remember what I’d said. Between standing on one foot, ogling the trainer—*my freaking employee, get a grip, Harmony*—and trying not to stomp down on blistering hot gravel, there’s a lot going on. But as I hurry to step into the other boot, it comes back to me all too fast.

I release his arm and try to give my toes some wiggle room as I step away to acceptable social distance. “I said you have little feet. And you know what they say about guys with little feet.”

“They have little hands.”

We say this line in unison. I bite my lip and scold myself for making adolescent jokes with the help on my first day, but *the help* just chuckles again.

He threads one tanned hand through his hair. The light brown locks stand up for a moment, then fall onto his forehead as he holds that hand out in front of him.

It is not small. Not even a little bit. He’s got long fingers with surprisingly well-groomed nails and a light covering of brown hair on the back. One of his hands could probably wrap around my neck.

I gulp at the thought, but he just hums. “Guess small is a relative concept, huh, Princess?”

“I’m sorry, what was your name again? Luke, right?” My question is a nervous blurt because this conversation is getting way too inappropriate. Heat creeps up my neck, but I fan myself and will it away.

He drops his hand. “Lucas.”

It seems like he’s disappointed I didn’t remember, but come on. My brain is too jumbled with sensory overload and the very real feeling that I am way out of my depth so far. “Lucas, sorry, yes. Like I said earlier, my name is Harmony Daniels. You can call me Harmony, or, if you prefer to be more formal, Ms. Daniels. But you don’t have permission to call me Princess. Are we clear?”

I cross my arms over my shit-stained dress and adjust my stance in my too-small shoes. This situation has gone right off the rails. Still, I’m not going to have an employee belittling me with a condescending nickname from day one. *This couldn’t get worse.*

His lips set into a line. The laughter in his eyes dims. “Yes ma’am, Miss Harmony.”

I should feel satisfied with this small win. I don't. But he doesn't need to know that. "Thank you. Now, if you'd please show me around, I'm not sure how long I'll be able to walk in these shoes. They really are about two sizes too small for me."

He twists his mouth. "They were your aunt's, not mine."

Musty old shoes that belonged to my dead aunt. This just got worse.

My feet want to leap out of the boots, but I just keep my arms crossed and nod once. Lucas gestures to the pen, and suddenly we're in business mode.

"This is the small pen. Kennels are over there, see." He points to a row of doghouses along the side, each with a gate standing open.

Lucas continues. "Each dog who's pen-ready has their own spot to sleep. We lock them in at night but leave them open during the day." Now he points to the back of the pen. "In the back, there's the gate. That opens into the pasture. After the dogs are fed in the morning, we usually open up the gate to let 'em roam for the day. They've got two acres to explore back there."

"Nice," I murmur.

His smile flickers. "They like it, yeah. Especially since so many have only known a life of being tied to a stake in all weather—or worse."

My heart twists as I skim my gaze over the pups. They quit paying attention to us a while ago and are lounging around in the pen. I don't want to think about their backstories right now. I'll learn all that in time, I'm sure.

Lucas distracts me by turning to walk toward the barn. This time, he flips one hand in a gesture for me to follow. I stomp-walk in the boots to tail him into the barn. It smells like gasoline and grass despite the doors being wide open on the front and back. Leashes hang on pegs along a wall. Piled high in stuffed-but-tidy storage crates are bowls, cones, frisbees, towels, and all sorts of things I can't decipher right now. But Lucas leads me straight through to the back doors, and we

come out in a narrow path between rows of chain-link fences—more kennels. The path we're on is open air, but the kennels are fenced on the front and sheet metal on the sides and tops.

I have to nearly sever my tongue to keep from bursting into tears.

“This is for our new intakes and tough cases,” Lucas says softly, but I didn't need to be told that.

Not every kennel is full. But the ones that are contain pups who are curled into the back corners, looking up at us with fear, distrust, anger, or all three.

Some of them have one eye or one ear. Scars mark several faces. One of them doesn't have *any* eyes. Another is standing—on his three legs. His ear is tattered. The other one is gone.

I clap a hand over my mouth. Tears well up, even though some of the dogs are baring their teeth at us. I don't blame them. Whatever has happened to them, I completely get why they'd be pissed.

Lucas makes clucking noises and tosses treats into each pen as we go by. He doesn't stop to see if the dogs take the treat, and I have to assume some of them won't while we're nearby. His shoulders are down, and his whole demeanor—his *aura*, Morgan would say—is soothing and quiet. As he passes, some of the snarls diminish. Some of the more fearful ones perk their heads up. It's nothing monumental, but it's clear this man understands these animals, and they appreciate that.

He's going to make a great employee.

I eye the t-shirt stretched over his broad shoulders. He's built, sure, but this guy is so far from my type it's funny. I can already tell that he's a little rough around the edges and doesn't mind teasing a woman he just met. Yep, not my type at all. Good.

A freaking great employee.

We finish the tour with Lucas assuring me there will be time to explore the back fields soon. I think he can tell by my little stomp-walk that these shoes will have to go ASAP. He tells me that he starts work at 6 a.m. and closes up around 5

p.m. He works five days a week. On weekends and holidays, the two other groundskeepers take turns watching over the dogs. The way he says it implies they have more of a supervising role. He seems to be the one who works with the animals. I'm mentally making notes on everything. When we amble back to my car, he faces me and crosses his arms.

"Any questions, Pri-uh-Harmony?"

"About a thousand, but at the moment, I'm not sure what they are," I admit.

He nods at that. "Makes sense. Will you be here before me tomorrow?"

Before six in the morning?

My eyes go wide, and his mischievous smirk flickers. "Of course," I reply like I regularly get up at crack-thirty. "I'll see you when you get here. Good night, Lucas."

"Miss Harmony."

As soon as I'm in my car, I wiggle out of the boots and throw them in the back. My feet sob to be free again. I slip into my driving slippers—it's not safe to drive in four-inch heels—and aim my car back down the lane.

Aunt Beth's house sits on the front of the property, about a quarter mile from the farm and much closer to the road. I drove past the sweet Cape Cod with the slate roof on my way in. Now, I walk barefoot up the front steps, my overnight bag on my shoulder, and open the door.

The house smells of coffee. Dishes for one are washed and in the drainer. The furniture is old but well-maintained. I'm surprised at the lack of dust. I thought Aunt Beth had been in a nursing home for a couple months, but this place feels sparkling clean, not shuttered and stale like I expected. A deep breath gives me a pleasant scent of gardenias. It's lovely, really. My shoulders drop about a foot as tension eases off me. This will do nicely.

I refuse to think about this as temporary. Surely, after a while, I'll be able to go back to the city and delegate authority out here. But that won't be soon. And I won't even think of

giving up and proving Dad right. *In time, I'll swap out the furniture and make this more me. Then I can have a country home for whenever I need to come out on business or just to chill.*

Yes. Yes, Aunt Beth's house will be perfect for the short and long term.

A smile curves my lips. *This is what I want. I love it.*

For the first time in a long time, those thoughts feel true.

But the gardenia scent is soiled by a sour, earthy aroma that I'm horrified to realize is *me*. I strip out of the filthy dress right in the middle of the kitchen and dump it in the garbage, making sure the lid closes tightly. It needs to be emptied anyway, so I'll do that later. My bag sits in the entryway, and I walk barefoot to it and crouch down. The trunk of my car is filled with three large suitcases, but this bag contains necessities, including a change of clothes. I rummage to find my underwear and toiletry bag, already mentally in the shower and scrubbing the filth from my nails and hair.

But then the door swings open.

With a shriek, I fall backward, square on my ass. Again.

"Christ." Lucas's already-too-familiar silhouette fills the doorway. His features are shadowed, backlit by the evening sun, but his startled curse hits my ears loud and clear. "What the hell?"

"Get out! Get fucking out of here! How dare you!" My voice is hitting octaves that might shatter the windowpanes as I desperately grab the duffel and hold it to my chest. A strapless bra and lace boyshorts are *not* the impression I want to make as a boss.

But then again, my *employee* shouldn't be breaking and entering.

I throw the bag to the ground and jump up. "What are you doing in my house? Don't answer. Just get the hell out."

Lucas ignores my erratic commands. He shuts the door and flips on the front hall light.

I swear, his jaw literally drops as he looks at me. I want to run away. Instead, I ball my fists at my sides and tense up every muscle in my body. This is a battle of will.

I never was very good at battles of will.

“I... I... Christ, woman, what the *hell*?”

Lucas’s thoughts seem as erratic as mine. He finally stops staring at my legs and drags his gaze up to meet mine. I snarl a little, mostly because I want to cry. *Go away, just go away. I don’t need you standing there, judging my body. Judging me.*

“What?” he asks, and I realize I’ve spoken aloud.

“Get. Out. Of. My. House.” That’s all I can say right now.

But that just makes him smirk. “Well I would, but it’s kind of *my* house. Beth has been letting me live here for about three months since she needed to go to the nursing home.”

“But—but I—dammit, I can’t have this conversation right now. I have to go shower.”

He laughs then, and I’m not sure if I’m furious or ready to laugh, too. “I’ll wait on the porch. Take your time. We can talk when you’re done... Princess.”

I try to glare, but I’m on the verge of hysterical giggles. “What did I tell you about that?”

“Yeah, well,” Lucas opens the door and saunters onto the porch. “We’re not at work right now.”

I slam the door behind him and sprint to the safety of the shower upstairs.

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LUCAS

I walk to the bottom of the porch stairs and chuckle to myself. Well, how's that for a way to end a work day? I walk into Beth's house, which I've been living in for the past few months, only to find my new boss wearing nothing but her bra and panties, crouched on the floor.

I gotta admit, my initial reaction wasn't the least bit professional, given that I was sporting half a boner. Goddamn, is Harmony fucking gorgeous... and seems to have no idea. She doesn't need my judgement? Doesn't she realize I was struggling to keep the drool in my mouth? Clearly not. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out from that jumbled ranting that this beauty doesn't realize how stunning she is.

I don't know how the hell she couldn't. She got the body of a fucking goddess: tall, curvy, soft in all the right places...

Aaand here comes my boner again. Great.

I pinch the inside of my upper arm, the pain a welcome distraction. It takes a full minute before I start to lose steam below the belt.

Fucking fantastic.

I really, *really* shouldn't be thinking of Harmony in that way. She's my boss. Yeah, we flirted a bit earlier today, but she seemed into it, and I was definitely into it. I've never had a problem with a flirty edge to conversations. If the mood and the vibes are right and the boundaries are clear, a little flirting keeps things fun and interesting. But there's something about

this woman. She's a hot mess for sure, but she's also sweet and determined and a little bit feisty—

Watch it. You're in no position to even think about anyone this way after the shitstorm breakup you had.

I force a breath, annoyed that I even let my brain go there. A couple minutes later, I hear the front door swing open and turn around to see my hot goddess boss march down the steps wearing a pair of cut-off jeans and a loose-fitting tank top, along with the most adorable fucking frown I've ever laid eyes on.

I bite my tongue to keep from making a quip about how quickly she cleaned up. I expected longer than a five-minute shower from Miss High Maintenance. But she's clearly not in the mood. I need to stop this shit. I owe her an apology.

She halts at the top of the porch stairs and leers down at me.

“Sorry for walking in on you earlier,” I say.

“It's fine. Let's just move on, okay?”

I nod once.

“It seems like we have a bit of a situation on our hands.” She crosses her arms.

I open my mouth to reply and am hit with the smell of something sweet and floral. Must be the soap or shampoo she used. God, it's fucking intoxicating. I let out a strangled noise before coughing.

Her frown deepens as she leans forward slightly. “Are you okay?”

I look up and catch a peek of cleavage from the low cut of her top. My eyes go wide for a split second before I catch myself and direct my stare at her face.

“Yeah. Fine. So, a situation, you say?”

She lets out a breath. “Yes. From what I gathered back there in the... chaos... of that little moment we had, you live here.”

“I do. When she moved to the nursing home, Beth asked me to move in.”

“Okay, well, as nice as that was of her, I think we can both agree that the two of us living here in the same house would be weird as hell.”

“Would it?”

She scrunches her lips, clearly annoyed. Of course it would be awkward as fuck to share a house with my new boss who I just met, but damn it, she’s cute when she’s flustered and angry. I can’t resist giving her a hard time. Her reactions are so sexy and adorable.

I refocus on the moment, letting the seriousness of the situation sink in. “Okay yeah, sorry, you’re right. It would be weird for the two of us to live in this house.” I know exactly what she’s gonna say next.

“Good. We understand each other then. So you can start packing up your stuff as soon as you—”

I hold up a hand. “Hang on. Just where the hell am I supposed to go?”

She stammers. “I guess I didn’t think that far ahead. You kind of caught me off guard when you barged in.”

“Into my own place?”

“*My* place. I’m the owner now, remember?”

I huff out a breath, tugging at my hair. She’s right, but that doesn’t make this any less frustrating.

“Well, yeah, but there are rules and laws for this sort of thing. You can’t just kick me out with zero notice.”

She hesitates.

“What a day this turned out to be,” I mutter. “I find out I get to keep my job, and I get evicted by my new boss. Lucky me.”

Judging by her deadpan stare, Harmony isn’t amused by my sarcasm.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I just don’t think it’s the most professional thing for the two of us to live together. We don’t even know each other. And we work together. That violates all sorts of boundaries.”

“Okay, Princess, now that you’re taking over, how exactly do you plan on handling things if I move out?”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw the dogs in the kennel behind the barn—the new intakes, the tough cases—how rough they are. They need round-the-clock care. Half of those dogs require medication and their wounds to be checked every few hours. You gonna do that?”

Her full cheeks go pale. She looks both hurt and devastated. Guilt throttles me for making her feel like that.

But this is my livelihood, and this is my home... even though it’s not really mine. Ever since my life took a U-turn all those months ago, this place feels more like home than anywhere else. I’ve been left broken, and this house and these dogs mean the world to me. I’m not going to walk away without a fight.

This time when I speak, I make sure I sound softer and less like an angry dickhead. “Look, when Beth asked me to move here to take over the rescue, she made me promise I’d take care of every dog that comes in. She had a soft spot for hurt and abused dogs. You know, the ones that no one else wants.”

My throat squeezes at just how much what I’ve said resonates. I clear my throat.

“I’ve got a soft spot for them, too. Ever since I started working here, I’ve looked after these dogs, day in and day out. And once I moved in, I’ve been there for them 24/7. I can’t just walk away from them now. Will you please reconsider letting me stay for a little while?”

There’s a softness that lingers in her blue eyes. “Okay. You can stay. But listen, this can’t be an indefinite living arrangement, you and me in the house together. There needs to be some sort of deadline.”

“Of course. Let me stay long enough to rehab the tougher cases. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of months. Then I’ll move out. And I’ll find a vet’s office that you can refer any cases that need round-the-clock care to once I’m not living here.”

She nods like she’s warming up to the idea. “That should give me enough time to get a handle on things and learn to run the place on my own.”

I raise an eyebrow at her.

“Oh, don’t give me that look. I may look like a total priss, but I’m not afraid of hard work.”

“I’m sure.”

She rolls her eyes before turning around and walking toward the front door. She opens it and twists to me. “Are you coming or not?”

I follow her inside and shut the door behind me.

“We need to set up some ground rules.” She leans against the back of the nearby couch. “Like, no going into each other’s bedrooms.”

I scoff. “Duh. I’d never.”

“I assume you’re sleeping in the master?”

I shake my head. “Didn’t feel right to be in there. That was Beth’s sanctuary.”

“Right,” Harmony says quietly.

“It makes sense for you to move in there. You’re her grand-niece.”

She smiles slightly like she’s relieved to hear me say it.

I gesture to her still-wet hair, which is tied up in a messy bun. “So you found the upstairs shower?”

She nods, her face flushed. “I’ll use the en suite from now on. I was so flustered earlier that I just darted into the nearest bathroom, which I now realize is the one you’re probably using.”

“No problem.” I redirect my gaze to the kitchen behind her. I can’t look at her too long. Otherwise, I’ll start to picture what she looks like naked and wet in my shower, smelling like sugar and flowers, and that bastard in my pants will rear its ugly head.

“Kitchen and living room are communal areas,” I mumble. “Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m not a disruptive housemate. I’m quiet and go to bed early.”

“Same.”

“Guess that’s settled,” I say. “Need any help bringing in your stuff?”

She shakes her head. “Nah, I’ve got it.”

She’s out the door, and I’m left standing there, processing how my entire living situation flipped on its head in the space of a few minutes.

I have a new housemate. Who’s my boss. Who’s off-the-charts hot. Who I can’t seem to stop fantasizing about despite knowing her for a grand total of ninety minutes. Who, as enthusiastic and well-intentioned as she is, also appears to be a disaster in heels. Who will likely run this rescue into the ground if I don’t keep an eye on her.

I tilt my head back and let out a groan. My life just got a million times more complicated.

Instead of heading to the kitchen to scrounge up something for dinner, I kick off my boots and walk up the stairs to my bedroom to decompress for a bit.

I plop down on the bed, check my phone, and see texts from my mom and brother.

Mom: *Hey, hon, just wanted to check and see how you’re holding up after what Jessica posted on her Instagram. Love you.*

Levi: *Hey, man. Steer clear of Instagram today, okay? And Facebook. Just trust me on this.*

Gritting my teeth, I swallow back a bitter taste in my mouth. I know my family means well, but Christ is this getting old. Ever since Jessica broke up with me six months ago, my mom's been coddling me like I'm a fussy toddler. My brother has been acting like he needs to screen all social media posts that I might happen to see to manage my emotional reactions.

I get where they're coming from. I was a wreck when Jessica broke up with me after nearly five years together to get back with her ex. But losing her wasn't the worst of it. It was losing her son Taylor. That kid...

I press my hand over my chest. It aches like a hole's been blasted through it, just like it has ever since the day I came home to an empty house, to a note from Jessica saying how sorry she was to leave me, but she had to give Taylor's dad one more shot. They were a family after all...

I'd been with Jessica since Taylor was a baby, when her piece-of-shit ex ditched the both of them. I raised Taylor like he was my own. He even called me Dad, and I'll never be part of his life anymore. I'll never get to see him again.

I drag my hand to the inside of my bicep, where Taylor's name is etched in black ink. My eyes burn as they start to water. I blink hard, then I pull up Instagram on my phone. I know I shouldn't. I should listen to my brother and leave it. But I can't. I miss the hell out of that kid. I miss the hell out of the life I used to have. They were my family.

I'm numb when I gaze at the photo Jessica posted on Instagram. It's of her, Taylor, and her ex, smiling as they crowd together to take a selfie.

*Sunday Funday with my two favorite guys #familyday
#myheart #myloves*

My chest is so tight now I can hardly breathe. I toss my phone on the bed, stomp out of my room, down the stairs, and out the front door, mumbling "no, thanks" when Harmony asks from the kitchen if I'm hungry.

My stomach is a mix of knots and acid. I couldn't even force myself to eat if I wanted to. I need a distraction.

I head to the kennel behind the barn where the new intakes are. Half of them regard me with skittishness like they always do, but they don't fuss as I lower myself to sit on the ground in the narrow space between the rows of kennels. I toss more treats to them and watch as each of them gingerly approaches and eats. Except for the one with a missing leg and a missing ear. He stays sitting in the corner of his kennel, glaring at me like he's pissed and broken all at once.

I sigh. "Me and you both, buddy."

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HARMONY

I jolt awake at the blaring alarm and nearly roll off the bed. Aunt Beth really took the word *firm* to a new level with that slab of rock she called a mattress. I guess it was good for her spine or whatever, but damn. Still, I'd rather be buried in the sheets right now instead of stumbling around in the dark, looking for my clothes.

"I usually get here around six. I assume you'll be here before me?" Lucas's words from yesterday are my only motivation right now. I have to adapt to this farm life, so I will. Even if the only time I ever rise before the sun is to catch a flight.

While I shower and do my hair and makeup, I make a mental list of the things to tackle today. Talk to the accountant to get an understanding of the finances of this place. Start learning what Aunt Beth did around here so I can figuratively fill her shoes. Order a new wardrobe, starting with boots, so I don't have to literally fill her shoes again.

"Add a mattress to that," I mutter as I walk downstairs in the dark house. Only a soft light glows above the kitchen stove, but I smell coffee. My stomach growls in relief because Beth owned a percolator, and I have no idea how to use it. I figured I'd Google it, but there's a note on a napkin beside the pot. "Left you some. See you when you get there."

I'm not sure if I'm surprised at the kind gesture or annoyed at the implication that I would be late. My watch reads 5:40

a.m. I have more than twenty minutes to be on time, and it's a five-minute drive down the lane.

I pour the coffee into a travel mug set beside it and give myself a little pep talk. *You have to prove yourself, Harmony. You're out of your element, and no one will take you seriously until you show them that you deserve to be here. Don't expect kindness.*

"I never expect it. I earn it." When I blow onto the steaming drink, it's more like a sigh.

But the rich flavor of dark roasted coffee with real cream perks me up. Lucas didn't have to leave me this. That alone was a kind gesture, even after the disaster of yesterday. I grab a meal bar and hurry out the door.

While I drive, I analyze that. *He's nice enough. A little standoffish, a little salty. I can tell he's not thrilled to have a newbie around and assumes he'll have to babysit me. But he's an ally. Or he can be. I just have to show him how likable I am and how I'm here to save the farm. Once he realizes that, he'll be happy to help me learn what Beth did all day. Be sweet, Harmony.*

When I hop out of the Land Rover, a wall of sound hits my ears. The dogs in the pen all rush to the fence, barking their heads off. I nearly drop my coffee from the fright but instead grip it and press my shoulders against the car.

"Easy, easy!" Lucas jogs up and stands in front of the fence. He spreads his arms wide, just like he did yesterday. "Back! Get back!"

They stand down. Like magic.

I have to learn that trick.

He glances over his shoulder. "Morning, Sunshine," he says, and I can hear the smirk in his voice. "Didn't expect to see you for a while."

I lift my chin but bite my tongue before a snippy reply about his expectations can fly out. Instead, I soften my jaw and smile. "You said we start at six. So of course I'm here at six. Is it safe to approach?"

He drops his arms and nods. “They were just surprised to see someone else so early.”

“How long have you been here? And thank you for the coffee.”

“Eh, an hour or so. Didn’t sleep much last night. Figured I’d get a jump on things, maybe knock off early tonight. Don’t mention it.”

“So... what’s the first thing you do each day?”

Lucas walks me through how he checks on each dog before they’re let out of their kennel. He says that hot spots and little scabs from rough play are common, and I make a note to Google hot spots. But once they’re inspected and out in the yard, it’s time for food and play in the back acreage.

“Which is where we are now,” he says as he walks toward the door. “Want to join us?”

I do. I really do. But I check my impulses. “I’d love to, but I should probably go to the office and start organizing things.”

He twists his lips and nods. My gaze flickers to his mouth. The funny expression contrasts with the thick stubble on his jaw in a way that’s a little too appealing. Like this gruff guy knows how to be silly. I can tell he doesn’t want me to know that, though.

Just like you don’t want him to know how overwhelmed you are. So stop looking at his mouth and start figuring stuff out.

I flash a little smile and turn for the office. It’s a camper beside the barn that looks exactly like I expect it to once I’m inside. Old but clean, with a coffee maker and tiny fridge in the kitchenette. A desk covered in paper takes up most of the rest of the space. I rummage and find a garbage bag in a drawer, then set my mug down and prepare for a massive clean-up.

Except that the first paper I lift off the desk has a huge red stamp on it that says “PAST DUE.” And the letter after that says “FINAL NOTICE.” And there are six more letters with similar screaming messages, all littered on this desk. There are

also old bank statements, vet bills, and mail, some opened and some not.

Breakfast threatens to make a second appearance. My stomach is a knot.

I take some deep breaths and force myself to sit down and face the letters one at a time. They add up to thousands of dollars in collection notices on everything from vet visits to lawn care. The only thing Beth had paid recently was the electricity bill. My mind whirls, but all I can do is send an email to Charlie, Dad's CPA. Since the sun just now broke the horizon, I'm going to guess he's not yet up and working. All of this will have to wait a few hours at least, so I put the bills in one pile and get busy going through the rest of the papers.

A lot of stuff can be trashed right away, but several of the unopened letters catch my eye. The return address stamp is a puppy drawing, and the sender is something called Forever Homes. I open one and read.

Dear Ms. Daniels,

We are writing again in the hopes of partnering with you on dog adoptions. As you know, our foster-to-forever program places dogs with members looking to find their family pet. Your excellent skill at rehabilitating dogs makes your animals ideal candidates for our program. We hope you will consider collaborating with us to find homes for your charges. Please call Rita at the number below.

Hmm.

I jump up and hurry out of the office.

Dew soaks my sneakers as soon as I step through the back gate. It's another reminder to buy new stuff ASAP, but this is a priority. When I spot him, Lucas draws his arm back and lets a ball fly about a hundred yards. Three dogs race each other to find the ball, but two perk up and come jogging my way. I push away the jolt of tension and let out a breath as they bump me with curious noses.

"Good pups, good dogs not knocking me down," I coo while petting them.

“Thought you couldn’t make it,” Lucas calls to me.

“I can’t, but I have questions.” The dogs follow me for a few paces but then veer off, distracted by a squirrel or something.

“Hit me.” Lucas launches another ball. His flannel shirt flutters, unbuttoned over a gray tee. He’s got a knit hat on to keep the morning chill away. He could be a model for an outdoor company.

The thought makes me smile.

“What’s that smile for, Sunshine?”

I roll my eyes but make sure he doesn’t think I’m annoyed. “Now it’s Sunshine?”

“You woke before the sun. It felt right for this morning.”

That makes me smile a little harder, and I don’t know why. “Harmony. My name is—”

“Harmony Daniels. But come on, you don’t like Sunshine? I thought it was clever.”

“I don’t like pet names from people who have no reason to give me one. It’s condescending. Like calling me sweetheart,” I say lightly. I’m working damn hard to keep this light. I don’t want him to call me sweetheart, but I do want him to think I am one.

“Don’t think of it as a pet name. Think of it as a nickname. Like T-Bone or Daniels or Ace. Just, except it’s Princess Sunshine.”

I can’t help it. A laugh bubbles out of my mouth. “Come on, that’s silly.”

He’s grinning too, and the way his eyes crease at the corners makes them glint in the morning light. That shifting hazel color looks greenish gold right now, warm and terribly inviting. I can totally picture him as Mr. Darcy, walking across the field to finally pledge himself to Lizzie. I’d slip my arms around his waist as he tilted my chin up, telling me, “You have bewitched me, body and soul.”

Whoa, Harmony. What the hell?

I clear my throat and try to shake away that hilariously hot image. “Um, well, nicknames aside, I had some questions about the farm.”

“Not sure if I can help, but I’ll try.”

“I guess to start, two things. How do we make money?”

His humor dries into a tight lip and headshake. “We don’t. We’re a nonprofit. Beth ran the farm out of her family trust and donations.”

A frown tugs at me. “But nonprofits can make money, right?” Lucas shrugs, and that means I have another question for Charlie, the accountant. “Okay, well, have you heard of Forever Homes?”

Now his tight expression becomes a scowl. “Yeah, I’ve heard of ‘em. Beth said they’d been bugging her for a year or more. Want to sell our dogs.”

That’s not the tone I got from the letter, but I don’t mention that now. “Why do you sound like they’re the bad guys?”

“Our dogs belong here. They don’t need to be sold off to line the pockets of some corporate douchebag. Or to clueless people who think they want a dog, then get rid of them after a few weeks because owning a pet is harder than they thought. Here they’ve got fields and food and good care. What else do they need?” He punctuates the thought by hurling another ball.

I chew on my lip a moment and contemplate. Then, I give a nod. “Thank you, Lucas. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Sure thing, Harmony.”

I attempt a teasing smile.

But as I walk away, I kind of wish he’d called me Sunshine.

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LUCAS

I watch Harmony walk back into the office. Gotta hand it to Princess Sunshine. She's jumping into things head-first. I admire that.

I know I've been giving her a hard time about things because it's honestly really fun to tease her.

I shake my head, frowning at myself.

Jesus, what the hell is my problem? But teasing and chatting with Harmony is a nice change from feeling like absolute shit. Jessica's Instagram post last night was the millionth reminder of what I lost when she left and took Taylor.

I force the thought from my brain and turn back to the dogs, who are whimpering for me to toss the ball again. I chuck it across the field. Most of them take off after it. The few stragglers trot at the back of the group, just happy to be outside running around.

The truth is that as much as Harmony clearly doesn't know what she's doing, she's got more guts than I do. If I had to force myself out of my comfort zone, like work at some corporate office job or something like that, I'd be frozen with fear and insecurity. I wouldn't last an hour. At least Harmony is brave enough to try something new.

But despite how much I respect her can-do attitude, I can't help the churn in my stomach. All the good intentions in the world won't save this rescue. This place only ran for as long as it did because Beth was passionate about it. She made

sacrifices—both personal and financial—to keep it running. And if Harmony loses interest or never gets comfortable working here, we won't make it. She might decide to sell the property and give away the dogs to Forever Homes, some other sham charity, or anyone who will take them. And that'll be the end of this place—of Beth's dream...

...of the one thing I've got left in my life that actually means anything to me.

I shove the thought out of my mind. No way. I'll do everything I can to keep this rescue running, to help Harmony find her footing and become a suitable owner of this place.

I huff out a breath, ignoring the nerves crackling inside me at just how impossible that seems right now.

I focus back on playing fetch with the dogs. A couple hours later, after I've finished exercising the dogs and feeding them, I head to the kennel to check on the injured ones. As skittish as they are, their wagging tails tell me they're happy to see me, probably since I'm dumping food into their bowls. I spend an hour checking and cleaning up wounds, giving plenty of pets and treats as I go.

I save the most skittish for last, the dog with the missing ear and leg. I should really name him. He's shoved himself into the corner of his kennel. He's lying close to the ground, shoulders and hind legs tense. A faint growl noise sounds from his throat.

"Hey, buddy. It's alright," I say softly.

With slow movements, I open his cage and refill his food and water bowl. I pull a piece of beef jerky from my pocket and set it next to his food bowl. When I close the cage, I sit on the ground next to the door and watch him lift his head up, his black nose wiggling slightly at the smell of the jerky.

"Can't resist, huh?"

He limps forward, giving the jerky a sniff before devouring it. He digs into his food, his low growl muffled by his chewing and swallowing noises.

I chuckle, heartened that he's actually eating in front of me now. Normally he growls until I start to walk away, then he eats.

"Baby steps, buddy. You'll get there."

My eyes bulge when I walk out of the barn and look back to the main kennel. There's Harmony, trotting down the property with a half-dozen dogs on leashes. They yank her tall frame forward, clearly pumped at the prospect of going on a walk.

"Aww, you're so excited to be out and about, aren't you?" she coos at them, both hands wrapped in leashes.

"Harmony! What are you doing?" I holler as I jog toward her.

She flashes a confused frown at me. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

She chuckles as the sheer force of the six dogs she's walking pulls her. They're jerking her so fast she starts to jog to keep up with them.

I swallow back a curse. She really is jumping head first into this—and is gonna get herself injured.

I'm maybe twenty feet away when a bunny darts from behind a bush near the dogs.

"Fuck," I mutter before breaking into a sprint. It's not fast enough.

Half the dogs bolt forward to chase the bunny. Harmony lets out a yelp as she's yanked ahead. She tries to speed up her pace, but the dogs are too fast. A second later, she goes flying forward, landing on her chest.

As soon as she's on the ground, she loses her grip on the leashes. Three dogs disappear into the treeline at the end of the property while the other three mill around Harmony, sniffing at her.

Once I've reached her, I crouch down and gently place my hands on her shoulders. She lets out a groan.

“You alive, Sunshine?” I pull her up so that she’s sitting and crouch in front of her.

She nods even though her face is twisted in pain. “Yeah. Um, fine.”

“You sure about that?” I raise an eyebrow, taking in the scrapes along her cheek and chin.

She nods again, waving a hand. There’s a huge red gash marring the peaches-and-cream skin on the underside of her right forearm. “Yes. Totally. I’m good.” She makes a sound like she’s forcing herself to chuckle.

“Harmony. You’re clearly not fine.” I take in her battered knees. The top of her left thigh is scraped up, too.

“No, no. I swear I’m—” She shakes her head and winces, cupping her cheek.

“Sure, Sunshine. Stay there.”

I grab the leashes of the dogs that stuck around and run them back to the kennel.

“What about the ones that ran off?” Harmony says when I walk back over to her.

I help her stand up and start walking her toward the barn. “They’ll come back.”

She stops walking. “How do you know that?” she asks, her tone shaky with worry.

“This isn’t the first time a few dogs have gotten out. They know where the food and cozy places to sleep are. They’ll be back before sunset when they’re hungry and tired, I promise.”

She’s wobbly when she starts to walk again.

“Hang on.” I move to stop her, then crouch down to slide my arm under her legs so I can carry her the rest of the way.

The “oh!” sound she makes once she’s cradled in my arms makes me smile.

“Wow. Um, you’re... you’re really strong,” she says as I carry her to the barn.

“Am I?” I try to keep my tone as even and neutral as possible. She’s got her hands clasped around the back of my neck. I swallow and try not to think about just how good it feels to have her insanely soft skin on me.

“Well, um, yeah. I’m no tiny thing.” She makes a chuckling-strangled noise. I turn my head slightly to look at her. Our faces are maybe three inches apart. Damn. This close up, it’s clear just how flawless she is. Her eyes, her skin, her pouty mouth...

This time it’s me making a strangling noise. I clear my throat to hide it and try not to stare too long at the gorgeous woman in my arms.

I direct my gaze forward, careful not to bump her against anything as I make my way through the barn to the area where I keep all the first aid stuff.

I set her on top of a wooden table. “You’re pretty damn easy to carry, Sunshine.” I wink before stepping over to the nearby cabinet and grabbing the first aid kit.

A much more natural-sounding chuckle falls from her lips. I catch her cheeks turning pink and smile to myself.

I set the kit next to her on the table and pull out what I need. “Wanna tell me why you decided to go rogue with half the dogs in the rescue just now?”

She makes a scrunch-face, her gaze on her lap. “I just thought I’d help you by taking the dogs for a walk. You’re doing so much of the physical labor here. And I could use some fresh air after spending the past few hours digging through paperwork and making phone calls in the office.”

“I see. Well, you get an ‘A’ for effort. ‘D’ for execution.”

I wet a cotton pad with disinfectant. When I look back at her, she’s smiling, those crystal blue eyes bright. “Not an ‘F’?”

“You get extra points for grace. Only you could make falling down look so good.”

Her head falls back as she laughs. I kneel down in front of her and press the cotton ball to her skinned knee. She instantly

jerks back.

“Ouch!”

I wince. “Shit, sorry.” I pull the cotton ball away. I lean in close to blow on her knee while gently rubbing my fingers along her leg to soothe her. When I look back up at her, her expression has gone wide-eyed and dazed, like she’s hypnotized. “Better?”

She silently nods.

It’s a few seconds before I realize I’m still rubbing her leg. I stop and get back to bandaging her up.

She’s quiet as I clean up the scrapes on her knees and thigh.

“You’re a people-pleaser, aren’t you?” I say after a minute.

She frowns. “What makes you say that?”

“How appeasing you were when you were hurt.”

I take in how her expression goes from thoughtful to embarrassed. “I guess I am.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “Life-long habit, I suppose.” She opens her mouth, then closes it.

“What were you gonna say?”

She shakes her head. “No. It’ll sound awful.”

“Well, now you gotta tell me.”

She lets out a soft chuckle, and I feel a weird sort of pride for getting her to laugh during what’s clearly a tough moment.

“Maybe it’s a personality thing. Maybe it’s part of being the youngest child, I don’t know. My brother’s smart. My sister’s successful. I’m sweet. Yeah, maybe I look like some spoiled, blonde stereotype. People don’t expect much from me because of that... but I can at least be sweet. Accommodating. Supportive. Someone who won’t cause you too much trouble—except when I take six dogs for a walk at once.”

She makes an embarrassed laughing noise and looks away. Something in my gut makes me gently grip her chin and turn her to face me.

“You don’t have to be like that, always minimizing yourself. You can take up space. You can be loud. You can cause as much trouble as you like, Sunshine. You can do whatever the hell you want.” It’s not till I’m done speaking that I realize how much my voice sounds like a growl—and how close our faces are. If I move forward an inch, I’ll bump noses with her.

I pull my hand away. Her mouth parts open. The breath she lets out wets my lips, and I can practically taste her on my tongue. My mouth waters.

What the hell are you doing, Lucas?

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HARMONY

I can't stop gazing into his eyes. The swirls of green, gold, and brown have me mesmerized this close up. Hazel is such a funny word, but then I guess "the best of everything" doesn't flow as an eye color.

I'm also perfectly aware that I need to stop staring. I need to back up, and I needed to do it about thirty seconds ago. But he's so close, and the gritty passion of his words just now... I don't know how to process all of it at once. Be loud? Take up space? I've spent my life trying not to do that, literally and figuratively.

And really. *Damn*, those eyes.

Lucas presses his lips together, and my attention is jolted away from his gaze. His lips roll out, full and tempting and a little too well framed by his beard. I blink slowly, and a wild image of throwing myself on him flashes behind my eyelids. Just leaning forward, mouth open, tits forward, shameless, and taking up all the damn space I could. He'd catch me in those big arms, and we'd roll into the dirt. He'd—

"Harmony? You still with me?"

Lucas's hand cups my face. My eyes fly open, and I realize I've been daydreaming *way* longer than a blink. Heat floods my cheeks, but *oh, my gosh*, now he's even closer, if that was possible. He's closer, and my heart is pounding, and this is a bad idea but—

But none of it matters because the Bernese Mountain Dog who got loose when I fell chooses that moment to come

bounding back.

Right onto Lucas's left shoulder.

He tumbles to the ground with a surprised shout. I squeal as the massive black-and-tan fluff absolutely clobbers Lucas, who's laughing and groaning all at once now.

"Jesus, boy, get off—*ooft, off my nuts,*" he finishes in a pained, high-pitched cry.

"Shoo! Shoo! Come on, boy, just... just shoo, please." I gently push the bear-sized dog.

"Not that way." Lucas is about to start speaking in falsetto.

"Oh, uh... oh!" I grab a treat from the little pouch I'd found by the leashes, hold it in front of the dog's nose, and then toss it away to the right. "Go get it, good boy!"

He lumbers away immediately, so I throw about six more treats to keep him busy and kneel down, not giving a damn about my busted knee. My heart is pounding. Mere seconds ago, that was a warm, fuzzy feeling. Now it's just panic. Lucas is flat on his back, one arm slung over his eyes, one hand cupping his crotch.

"Lucas! Are you okay?"

"Ughhh," he groans.

"Shoot, shoot, what should I do? Speak to me, please. Are you concussed?" I brace one arm by his shoulder to lean closer and inspect him.

A grin splits his face. I can feel his stomach vibrate with a chuckle, which crashes me into the fact that I'm on hands and knees over him.

"I'm okay, Princess Sunshine. But it's nice to know you care."

I try to scowl, but my face is burning, and my lips are threatening to crack into a smile. "I care about getting the dogs back in their pen. You're the man for the job. *That's* what I care about."

“I don’t know. This looks a lot like genuine concern to me.” He stops smiling and knits his brows. “Your knee, Harmony. You shouldn’t be putting weight on it.”

Lucas lifts his hand off his crotch and slides it up between our bodies. I suck in my stomach to be sure he doesn’t accidentally touch me, which makes his glance dart toward his hand.

“Uh, it’s fine,” I blurt and roll off onto my butt so he can sit up. When I inspect my scraped knee, though, it’s definitely not fine. It’s bleeding again, and I didn’t even notice. I hurry to cover it because I don’t want him to worry. “Just fine,” I repeat with a smile.

He rolls his eyes. “Dammit, Harmony, what did I just say?”

“Well, I mean, I can take care of it, so don’t—”

Lucas looks over my shoulder and emits a piercing whistle. The other two dogs run up but avoid body-slammings us like the Bernese did. He jumps to his feet and jogs away, whistling as he goes. They follow. I’ve barely hobbled to my feet when he’s back.

“They’re in their pen. Let’s get you to the house.”

“You are *not* carrying me to the house.”

That grin is dangerous. I’ve decided in this moment that he should really have a license to flash something that lethal. “Interesting option, but I thought it might be easier to just drive you.”

“I’m winning everything today, aren’t I?” I rub my forehead and accept the fact that my face is in permanent blush mode.

Lucas just chuckles and points to his truck. “I’ll help you in.”

He holds my hand to help me into the cab, and we’re back at the house in a blink. When he helps me down, he palms my waist. I jolt and have to swallow a little moan at how good his hands feel. It sounds like I’m choking on my tongue.

“You okay?”

“Perfectly fine,” I mumble and hurry to get my footing. “Thanks. I’ll... just go shower.”

“I’ve gotta get back to the dogs. You’re alright on your own?”

“For sure. Go on, get back. Thanks for the ride.”

He gives me another nod, then drives away. Inside, I take my time showering and dressing the wound, then pull on a short sundress and limp downstairs. It’s nearly six already. As I think about the kindness Lucas showed me, I know the least I could do is fix a little dinner.

By the time he rolls up, I’ve got chicken sautéed and a salad ready. He walks in the door, and his brows walk up his forehead. “Honey, I’m home?” he asks with a smirk.

I roll my eyes again. “I’m just here, doing nothing. It seemed like a good way to say thanks for your help today.”

Lucas crosses the room in about two strides until I have to look up to meet his gaze. “Harmony. What did I tell you about doing whatever you want? You should’ve rested that leg and watched TV or something.”

“Um, so by doing whatever I want, you mean I should do what *you* want me to? How does that make sense?”

His lips twitch. *Don’t grin again, please. Not this close. I can’t take it.* “Fair point, Princess. Guess you got me there.”

“Do you want food or not?”

“Hell yeah, I do. Let me wash up real quick.”

He ambles away and is back in ten minutes, changed and smelling like a shower. And, since I’ve been treated to too many close-ups with my employee/housemate today, I’m now attuned to just how delicious he smells with his spicy soap scent.

Be fair. He smelled damn good after rolling around on the ground with the dogs, too.

I hurry up and plate the food.

Lucas frowns when we sit down. “Where’s the rest of yours?”

“What a rude question.” I busy myself by slicing the chicken so I don’t have to look at him.

“You’ve got a baby-sized chicken breast, a salad with no dressing, and two tiny potatoes. Don’t tell me you’re not hungry after a day outside?”

“I’m good, thanks.” The truth is, I am hungry. But I’ve been on too many first dates where the guy has commented on how women order or eat to be comfortable loading up a plate in front of him.

Not that Lucas is my date or anything.

“Harmony. That cannot be enough food.”

Date or not, this infuriating man isn’t getting the message.

I slam my fork down and flash a forced smile. “I’m conscious of my body and what I eat, okay? Can we please just have dinner?”

Lucas’s eyes drift over me again. “Are you... worried about your weight?”

“No, I’m not, thank you very much. But I eat what I want. I don’t need you commenting on it. So let’s talk about something else.” *Even if you’re commenting in the exact opposite way most guys do.*

I watch him chew on his lip, eyes narrow in assessment. “Since every thought in my head is a joke on being conscious of your body, and therefore probably grounds to get me fired, I guess we should.”

Heat threatens to color my cheeks, but I take a long drink of water. “Thank you. How were the isolated pups when you left?”

“Mm, okay. I’m a little worried about the infection on the one with the missing ear and leg. Little buddy’s been through the ringer. Gonna ask Dr. Wheating about the level of antibiotics when she comes in tomorrow. But...”

“Little buddy? That’s cute.”

The corner of his mouth hooks up in the most delicious half-smile. “That’s what I’ve been calling him. He didn’t have a name when he came to the rescue.”

“I say we call him Buddy.”

I relax and take in the soft expression on Lucas’s face as he looks at me. The tension between us from a minute ago has melted completely.

“Okay,” he says with a nod. “Buddy it is.”

We spend the next hour talking about the dogs. It’s amazing how well he knows each one of them. Their personalities and triggers are all filed neatly in his mind. The smile he wears while he talks about them isn’t as lethal as that grin, but it’s still got me warm and happy like I haven’t been in a while.

I finish my food. When Lucas has a second helping, I admit that my stomach is still rumbling and refill my plate, too. He smirks at that, which makes me roll my eyes. “But see, I’m making dessert too,” I explain. “Got to save room.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Lucas says, but his eyes squint, and his lips pucker. “But I won’t say no if you do.”

I laugh and rise from the table while he clears the dishes. In a few moments, I’m at the stove with a big skillet, dumping ingredients in and then slicing bananas. “Do you think Aunt Beth kept any rum around here?” I ask while I stir the bubbling sauce.

Lucas chuckles. “She did, actually. Has a pretty well-stocked liquor cabinet in the living room. I’ll be right back.”

“Dark rum if you have it,” I call after him.

When he returns, I’m adding a pinch of walnuts and nutmeg, my secret ingredients. Then, I dump the bananas and let them simmer in the fragrant sauce. Two bowls of ice cream sit ready.

“Damn, that smells amazing.”

I grin. “Yeah, but this is the best part. Watch.”

I pour the rum over the mixture, then reach for a match and flick it across the strike.

“What the hell are you—” Lucas shrieks as I touch the flame to the rum.

A little fire dances across the skillet. “Harmony, fuck, don’t burn the house down just for some dessert!”

The fire dies just as quickly as it started. I cut the heat, lift the pan, and roll my eyes. “Look. I know I wore a white dress to a farm, fell in the pen, fell again trying to walk dogs, and generally probably present as someone who’s barely functional in your eyes. But I know how to make Bananas Foster, thank you very much. This has been my specialty since I was in high school.”

He eyes me. “I didn’t say all that.”

I just laugh. “But you won’t argue, huh?”

“All I’ll say is, flaming desserts don’t seem like the safest idea given your track record so far.”

“Try it and tell me if you have regrets.”

He moans as the spoon slides into his mouth. I wish it didn’t make the hair on my neck stand up, but it does. I focus instead on my own bowl, glad that at least I got something right today.

We’ve just finished up, and Lucas is heading to wash dishes, when my phone rings. It’s Dad, so I wander into the living room and answer.

“Dad, hey!”

“Hi, honey. Just checking up on you. How’s it going?”

I huff a laugh. “Well, since it’s been about two days, it’s a little early to say. Good overall, though.”

“True, but I know you, Harmony. I had an inkling you might be done roughing it with the dogs and ready to come home.”

I swallow back a wave of irritation and recall what he said on the porch last week. *When you get tired of this and want to come home, I'm selling it before the week is up.*

It's been two days, and he thinks I'm ready to throw in the towel.

Stubborn pride ignites inside of me. Despite how tough things have been so far, despite how much I've messed up, I want to be here. I'm committed to getting this rescue back in working order and helping these dogs.

"Well, I've got news for you, Dad. I'm not quitting. Yeah, it's hard, but I like it here. And I don't plan on leaving anytime soon. And... and... I'm calling Aspen and letting her know I won't be coming back to the spa, either."

Dad coughs hard. I imagine him choking on his Manhattan. "Really? You're that set on it?"

"I am. I called Charlie earlier today and sorted out most of the past-due bills. And I'm learning how to work with and rehab the dogs." I leave out the part where my attempt at walking six dogs at once resulted in me scraped up and bruised. He doesn't need to know that.

"Also, we need to start thinking about ways for the rescue to earn money so it can stay viable long-term," I say. I glance over my shoulder and lower my voice to make sure Lucas can't hear. "I talked to Lucas, the groundskeeper and trainer here, and he mentioned that fundraising is a major source of money. I'm going to email a woman who's interested in partnering with us to adopt the dogs. It seems like a good collaboration. On top of that, how would you feel if I organized a fundraiser or a gala that your company could sponsor? All the donations would go to the rescue."

"Wow. That's quite a lot you've accomplished in just a few days. Nice work, honey." There's a tinge of pride in his voice.

"Have a little faith in me, Dad," I say, my tone lighter.

"I wouldn't dare doubt my baby girl. And I'd be happy to sponsor a gala for the rescue. I'll tell the partners all about it at

our meeting tomorrow. Maybe I could even get a few clients on board if you'd like."

"That would be great!"

"I'll email the details once I have Pam get some feelers put out," he says, referencing his assistant. "You keep at it, and call me if there's anything you need."

I tell him I will. We exchange "I love yous," and hang up. When I spin around, Lucas is in the kitchen doorway, an amused expression on his face.

"Damn. You tell him, Sunshine."

I bite my lip and shrug. "Just, you know. Trying to be loud, take up space, and do whatever the hell I want."

He flashes that killer smile. "That's my girl."

My knees go weak. *My girl.*

I can barely stay upright as I watch him walk upstairs to his bedroom, but as soon as he's gone, I grab my phone again.

"Aspen? Hey, it's Harmony. So, listen, sis..."

The conversation goes much easier than I'd feared. Aspen is excited for me and knows a couple estheticians via Instagram who are looking for work. So I hang up from that call with a grin as well.

When I think of the enormity of what I've done, of the fact that now I have nothing to fall back on, my grin freezes for a moment.

Just for a moment. Because then it's shining bright again, and I'm thinking, *hell yeah. I've got nothing to go back to. I can freaking do this!*

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LUCAS

I watch Harmony push open the door to the kennel and walk in, standing tall as a dozen dogs rush her.

“Easy,” she calls out to them. The dogs slow their pace and sniff around her, their tails wagging, looking up in anticipation of her next command. They don’t knock her over, and she doesn’t shy away like she used to.

She plants her work boot-clad feet firmly on the ground and stretches her arm above her head, tennis ball in hand. “Wait for it.” Every dog sits and waits obediently. “Go!”

She chucks the ball across the field. They all dart after it.

I smile to myself while watching from the outside of the barn. Princess Sunshine has proven me wrong.

It’s been just over a month since she showed up here in her Land Rover, dressed like she was on her way to a bachelorette party, looking the exact opposite of what Fido’s Farm needed.

But the way she’s taken to this place has blown me away. Thanks to her supervision, and her family’s financial support, most of the outstanding bills have been taken care of. Every day she’s been here, she’s made time to play with and walk the dogs whenever she needs a break from office work. Right after the “walking six dogs at once” incident, I could tell she was a bit skittish. But now she’s a pro, taking just a couple dogs at a time and learning commands. She’s even traded her sky-high heels and designer sneakers for actual work boots.

Warmth pools in my chest when I think about how she even makes time to visit with the injured dogs. Every day during her lunch break, she sits on the floor between their rows of kennels and chats with them in her sweet voice. Even Phantom, the pup with no eyes, is warming up to her. He still growls at first, but after a minute or so, he eases up, and I notice his body relaxes after she talks to him for a while. She's like this ray of sunshine slicing through the darkness.

Sunshine.

A smile tugs at my mouth when I think of just how perfect that nickname ended up being.

I'm hosing off the dirty mats from the kennel when I glimpse her jogging with the dogs, her flowy, low-cut top swaying with the movement. I feel my mouth curving upward once more. Yeah, she's roughing it, but she's still kept bits of her prissy self. That's who Harmony is: a princess who isn't afraid to get dirty. I like that a lot.

My phone buzzes with a text.

Levi: *Hey, dude. We still on to grab a beer tonight?*

Me: *Yup.*

Levi: *Cool. I'll pick you up*

Me: *Why? I can meet you.*

Levi: *Nope. I'm picking you up. I don't want you giving me some BS excuse at the last minute for why you can't make it.*

Guilt hits when I think about how I blew off my younger brother the last two times he tried to get me to go out with him. But I wasn't in the mood. I knew the whole "let's go out for a beer" was code for "I'm checking up on you because you've sworn off socializing almost completely ever since Jessica walked out on you."

As much as I hate feeling like my younger brother is fussing over me, it was a dick move to blow him off. I owe it to him to actually see him this time.

Levi: *I'll see you after work.*

Me: *Sounds good.*

I finish the work day and head back to the house to clean up. When I walk in the front door, Harmony's sitting on the couch, her laptop on the coffee table.

She looks up at me. "Oh hey! I'm Skyping with some friends. Hope that's okay."

I start to tell her that of course it's okay and that I'm about to head out when I hear two voices echo from her computer.

"Is that Lucas?"

"Harmony, you gotta introduce us to him!"

I take in the flustered expression on Harmony's face and try not to laugh. She rolls her eyes, though her smile remains.

"God, you two," she groans.

"Come on!" one of them whines. "We're dying to meet him!"

I look on, amused when Harmony's cheeks start to flush. I wonder what exactly she's told her friends about me.

Before she can say yes or no, I walk over and sit next to her on the couch.

"Hey," I say to the two unfamiliar faces on the screen.

I try not to laugh when both of them go wide-eyed for a split second as they look at me. Not sure if they're pleasantly surprised or horrified.

"Morgan, Lily. This is Lucas, the groundskeeper and trainer here at the rescue."

"Lucas," they murmur in unison.

"It's so nice to finally see you. I'm Morgan," the woman with short, dark blonde hair says.

"We've heard so much about you!" the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman I assume is Lily says with a wide smile.

"Damn, I'm sorry," I tease.

Beside me, Harmony makes a "ha!" noise.

“All good things. Promise,” Lily quickly says.

From the corner of my eye, I catch Harmony squirming and tugging at her hair. Interesting.

“So, Lucas! Question: would you mind if we dropped by to visit our girl sometime? Since you’re sharing a living space with her, we figured we should ask you.”

“We miss her bunches and desperately need a girls’ weekend.”

Morgan shifts, pointing to her very pregnant belly. My chest aches. I quickly swallow back the surprise burst of pain.

“I’ve only got a limited amount of free time till this little one comes along, and I want to take advantage,” she says.

“Congratulations to you. And of course, you’re both welcome. Come whenever you want.”

Harmony bumps my shoulder with hers and says a soft “thanks” before turning back to her friends.

“I know I’ve been terrible about driving back to the city to see you guys,” she says. “I’ve just been so busy with things here. Plus, it’s been kind of nice being away.”

I notice a look pass between the three of them and take that as my cue to duck out.

“Morgan and Lily, it was great meeting you, but I’ve got to meet my brother. I should take off.”

We exchange pleasantries and goodbyes, and I head up the stairs. As I reach the top of the stairs, I hear Lily’s and Morgan’s voices go pitchy.

“Oh my god!”

“Holy shit!”

“Okay, Harmony, you absolutely underplayed how hot Lucas is.”

I stop at the top of the stairs when I hear Harmony make a flustered sound.

“Shh! He’ll hear you,” she scolds.

Muffled apologies follow. Harmony exhales sharply. “He’s, like, nuclear explosion hot, isn’t he?”

Her friends murmur in agreement. I’m grinning like a smug bastard. From all the teasing and joking we’ve done—and that day in the barn when I bandaged her up, and we almost kissed—I’ve felt pretty confident that Harmony likes me. Still, it’s pretty damn flattering to hear her say it.

“He’s the dictionary definition of ruggedly handsome.”

“So? Have you two jumped each other’s bones yet?”

Harmony makes a huffy noise. “Of course not.”

“Have you almost?”

There’s a long pause.

“Um, well...”

I grin while Harmony stammers.

“I knew it!” Morgan and Lily yelp.

Harmony quickly explains the moment when we were about to kiss right before Paul Bunyan—the name she gave the Bernese Mountain Dog—crashed into me.

“It’s probably best that the moment was ruined,” she says. “We work together. And live together. Not the smartest thing in the world to cross boundaries like that.”

Even though I’ve silently repeated those exact words to myself about that moment, part of me is disappointed to hear Harmony say that.

“Screw boundaries,” her friend says. “If you could jump his bones and not have it ruin anything, would you?”

Harmony makes a pitchy groaning. “Of course I would. God, he’s amazing. Like, not only is he hot, but he’s so kind and sweet with the dogs. And he’s patient and hardworking and unlike any guy I’ve ever met before and...what? Why are you guys looking at me like that?”

“Harmony, sweetie. You’ve got it bad for Lucas.”

I make myself walk down the hallway and to my room. As much as I want to stand there and hear Harmony say more things to stroke my ego, I've eavesdropped enough. I walk to my room, the biggest grin on my face knowing that this living goddess is into me.



“You’re in a good mood, big brother,” Levi says before draining the rest of the beer in his bottle and signaling for two more.

“What makes you say that?” I shout over the country music blaring over the speaker system in this dive bar.

The Rusty Hinge looks like a Nascar fan vomited all over a country saloon. Cardboard cutouts of race cars and drivers I don’t recognize are displayed across the all-wooden interior of this tacky-as-hell bar. There’s even a swinging door at the entrance and an area for line dancing. Some singer with a grating voice wails about how sexy his tractor is.

I laugh. This place is easily the seediest joint in a hundred-mile radius. It’s also mine and Levi’s go-to spot for two-dollar beers. We’ve been coming here since he turned twenty-one. The owner’s name is Rocky, and anytime we walk in, he kicks people off the stools at the end of the bar so we can have our usual spot.

“How’s working for Mom going?”

Levi groans. “You of all people should know. She’s a damn dictator. But money’s money.”

“Who’s she got you dressing up as? Flynn Rider? You’ve got the hair for it.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yup. That and Tarzan. Sometimes Prince Charming.”

Our mom owns a small party-planning business where performers dress as princesses and princes for kids’ birthdays. She runs it with the strictness of a prison guard.

“How many times have you been chewed out so far?” I ask.

“Three times for cursing. Once for not staying in character when I stubbed my toe on a Lego sculpture.”

I chuckle. “Sounds about right.”

“Quit trying to change the subject,” he says when the fresh beers arrive. “You’re in a way better mood than I’ve seen you in since... you know.”

I nod, thankful that he clearly doesn’t want to mention Jessica leaving me. I don’t want to talk about it, either.

“I was just curious about what brought on the change. Your mood’s lighter. You’re smiling a lot more, too.”

I shrug, even though I know exactly what he means. It’s the boost of hearing Harmony rave to her friends about me... and the boost of having her in my life, if I’m totally honest.

But I’m not planning to tell my brother about that. As much as I love him, I’m not about to spill my feelings to him. My personal life has been the Mallender family’s central topic of conversation since Jessica and I got together. What they thought about me dating a woman with a newborn. How they disapproved of me raising another man’s kid. What they thought when Taylor started calling me dad. How they thought I should move on and start dating after Jessica left me.

I’m not interested in yet again enduring my family’s overbearing advice and comments, no matter how well-meaning they are.

“I’m just happy that Beth’s next of kin was located and decided to keep the rescue going.” I pick at the label on my beer just so I don’t have to look my brother in the eye when I lie to him.

“Hmm. Okay.” He doesn’t buy it. “New owner is treating you well then?”

“Yup. All’s good.” I chug the rest of my beer and wince the second a new country song starts up. “Can we get the hell out of here, please? My ears are bleeding.”

When he pulls up to the house to drop me off, I spot Harmony sitting on the porch swing. She's staring up at the nighttime sky, a glass of wine in hand.

Levi lets out a low whistle. "Well, damn. Now I know why you're in such a good mood. Nice work on the rebound there."

I clench my jaw. I know my brother is just giving me shit, but hearing him talk about Harmony like she's eye candy sets off something inside me.

I twist to face him. "Not a rebound, asshole. That's my new boss. And landlord. Don't talk about her like that, understand?"

Levi's eyes go wide. He nods quickly, his expression turning sheepish. "Sorry. You're right. That was a shitty thing to say."

I unbuckle my seatbelt and move to open the car door. "Thanks for the beers."

"Lucas, wait." I stop and twist back to Levi. "Look, I know it's weird when the two of us try to talk about heavy stuff, like relationships and emotions, but...." He hesitates and runs a hand through his scruffy hair that's a shade lighter than mine. "You're my brother. I care about you. You've been through some shit, and I want you to be okay."

I can feel the muscles in my shoulders and back ease as I look at my little brother. "Thanks, man."

We give each other a nod goodnight, and I walk up the porch steps to Harmony. She smiles at me, the glow from tonight's full moon illuminating her. She looks like a sexy-as-hell angel. "Have fun tonight?"

"As much fun as you can have with your annoying younger sibling."

"Hey, now. Remember who you're talking to," she says in mock scolding, pointing to herself with her free hand. "Youngest sibling over here."

I wince, holding up both of my hands. "Sorry."

She scoots over to make room for me on the porch swing. “Wanna have a nightcap with me? I only have one glass. Hope you don’t mind drinking from the bottle.”

I sit down next to her, swipe the bottle from her hand, top off her glass, and then take a swig. She laughs. Good god, the things that sound does to my heartbeat.

She takes a long pull from her glass. Seeing her do that, the way her swallow moves slowly and smoothly along her delicate throat, makes me happier than it probably should. I look at her sitting next to me on this porch swing. Her posture’s relaxed, and she wears a wistful smile as she gazes up at the starry sky.

“So when are Lily and Morgan coming over?” I ask.

“Next weekend.” She lets out an adorable squeal. “I’m so excited. It’s gonna be a grown-up sleepover, pretty much. Without the alcohol, of course. Morgan is pregnant, and I’m pretty sure Lily is trying to get pregnant, too, because I haven’t seen her drink a sip since her wedding. We’ll probably just end up bingeing on Netflix and gossiping all night.”

“Sounds like a blast. I’ll be sure to stay out of the way.”

She waves a hand. “You’re fine. They’d be thrilled for you to hang out a bit.”

She mentions how Morgan and her husband have been busy painting their baby’s nursery and taking baby CPR classes.

“Marco even bought a baby doll to practice on. It’s ridiculous and adorable.” She shakes her head, laughing. “Hard to believe he was such a douchebag when we were together.”

I choke on my sip of wine. “Wait, you—you dated your friend’s husband?”

“We were engaged, actually. A couple years ago. Lily dated him too, before me.”

I make another choking sound. She laughs like it’s no big deal, like she’s talking about something as meaningless as her

kindergarten boyfriend.

“Um, wow... that’s... sorry, that’s really fucking weird,” I say.

“Oh, you haven’t heard the half of it.”

I’m stunned into silence, my mouth a perfect “O” as she tells me how when she was engaged to Marco, he tried to hook up with Lily during their rehearsal dinner, and how Lily’s now-husband—some Scottish guy named Calder—broke Marco’s nose in retaliation. She says something about Marco coming from an abusive family, eventually cutting them out, and getting into intensive therapy. Apparently, the dude apologized to her and Lily for mistreating them when they were together, and now they’re all friends.

“He’s a completely different person,” she says. “It’s amazing. I’m so thrilled for him and Morgan.”

I stare in disbelief at how genuinely happy she sounds. I can’t imagine ever feeling that way for my ex, Jessica. Being friends with her and Taylor’s dad? No way in hell.

“Sorry, but how can you be so okay with everything?” I ask, mystified.

Harmony shrugs. “Because I’ve seen Marco change. He did the hard work to be better, to take accountability for what he did wrong, and he apologized sincerely for hurting me. I have nothing but respect for him now. Besides, we weren’t a good fit. We wouldn’t have lasted if we had gotten married. Or god, if we had kids...”

She shudders before downing the rest of the wine in her glass.

“You don’t want kids?” I ask.

“No, not... well...” She scrunches her lips like she’s searching for the right words. “I don’t know. I thought I did. I thought I wanted to have a huge wedding and get married. I thought I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom and have a house with a white picket fence, and well... I almost had those things. But they didn’t work out. And I’m relieved that they didn’t because I don’t think I ever really, truly wanted any of

it. I *thought* I did because my whole life, that's what I'd been conditioned to want by society, my family, and the people around me."

A quiet moment passes where I think about what she's said.

"Running a dog rescue definitely wasn't where I thought I'd be at thirty-one," she says with a shrug and a slight smile. "But honestly? I'm happier now than I've been in a long time."

Something about what she's said hits deep.

"This isn't where I thought I'd be either," I mutter, mostly to myself.

"Did you have the 'married with babies and a house with a white picket fence' dream too?" Her expression and her tone are lightly teasing.

"I, uh, I did. And I lost it."

Her face falls. "Oh my god. Lucas, I'm so sorry."

She scoops my left hand in both of hers. Something about the gesture, about her beautiful, impossibly soft fingers lacing with mine, sends a tidal wave of emotion through me.

Maybe it's all the alcohol I've consumed. Maybe it's the gentleness, the kindness, the purity of her embrace. Maybe a combination of everything.

The moment I open my mouth, the words pour out like vomit.

"Jessica and I were together for five years. Her ex left her with their newborn son and took off. When we met, we were just friends. But there was a spark there. And her kid." I smile despite the ache in my throat threatening to break into a sob. "God, he was amazing. The most chill baby ever. All Taylor did was sleep and eat. He was like a house cat." I let out a watery chuckle. I clear my throat. "We were a family. For five years, they were my everything. I raised Taylor like he was my own kid. He even called me Dad."

My voice breaks when I say that three-letter word—that word I’ll never hear Taylor say to me ever again. I close my eyes, taking comfort in the warmth of Harmony’s hands around mine.

“But six months ago, Jessica’s ex, Taylor’s dad, came back into the picture. He had a drug problem all those years ago and struggled to get clean, but he finally did. He now has a stable job, big house, savings, all that. He begged Jessica to give him another chance. And she did. So she left. With Taylor.”

It’s not till I stop speaking that I realize my cheeks are wet with tears. Fuck.

I don’t even look at Harmony when I wipe my face and stand up. “Sorry to unload all that on you,” I mutter as I head for the door.

“Wait, Lucas. It’s okay....”

But I don’t stop. I keep going till I make it to my bathroom, undress, turn on the shower, and stand under the steam, thankful for the scalding water burning my skin. It’s something else to focus on other than the stabbing pain in my heart.

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HARMONY

I stare at the spreadsheet on my screen, but the numbers are blurry. Ugh, my stomach is still quaking. No matter how hard I try to focus, I can't stop thinking about what Lucas told me last night. His anguish over losing the little family he'd created tore at my soul. When I blink, the image of his pained face appears. Those tears tracking down his tan cheeks. Oh, my god.

My heart aches even now.

And like the winner I am these days, I didn't even say the right thing. I didn't know what *to* say at first. The man had bared his soul to me, and all I could say was, "Wait, Lucas, it's okay...."

Making it even worse, his heartbreaking confession reminded me of the wave of relief I'd felt when I found out I wasn't pregnant. God, I can't believe I even thought such a selfish thing in that moment, when he trusted me enough to open up about the heartbreak of losing his ex and her kid.

Am I some kind of monster for not going all gooey over parenthood? I thought I wanted to be a mom. But now, I'm just not sure. When I think of having a child, I don't feel happy. When I think of how it feels to have the dogs run up and sit at my feet, then go bounding away at my command, I feel absolutely lit up.

Lucas knows how to do both. He's a wizard with the dogs, and clearly he loved being a parent, too. Why don't I want both? What's wrong with me?

My stomach rumbles again. *You deserve to feel icky. Where is your soul?*

I can't look at these numbers right now. I need air.

The pups in the pen all perk up as I stride past. I cluck my tongue in greeting but head straight for the barn, back to the rehab kennels. Phantom is in the last cage. I suck in a breath and sit down in front of his door.

“Hey, boy,” I coo.

His ears perk up, but then, on cue, the teeth flash. Even though his eyelids are sewn shut, he turns his head in my direction. A low growl comes from his throat.

But then he whimpers.

My heart leaps. I've sat here for ten minutes every day since I got here. At first, Phantom would growl and bark. Once or twice, he lunged at the door, and I had to leap back. But in the last week or so, he's remained lying down. He shows his teeth, then sits, alert but not on guard. I sit with him and talk about whatever I can think of.

He's never whimpered before.

I toss some treats to him and get another first. He goes right for them, gobbling up all three in moments. Releasing a shaky breath, I nod. “Good boy. I'm not scary, I promise. I might be a little scary on the inside, but I swear it's not on purpose. I wouldn't intentionally hurt anyone. Well, I mean, not now. I did when I was younger. Did you? Ever hurt someone, I mean? Out of anger? Out of not knowing what else to do?”

He sniffs and takes a few steps forward. Then a few more. I hold my breath as he walks all the way to the door and sits with his nose against the wires. Slowly, I hold my hand out close enough for him to sniff.

“It's me, Phantom. I'm Harmony. And I swear I won't hurt you, baby.”

He whimpers again. Tears leap to my eyes.

“It’s okay to be scared. To not know who you are. To think you have to be tough. But you don’t. You’re safe.” Slowly, slowly, I inch my fingers toward the gate. He lifts his head. His fur is silver-gray, short, and sleek like a classic Pit Bull. His paws are enormous. Lucas told me he’s about a year old, and that he’s not done growing even though he’s already sixty pounds.

Lucas also told me that they removed his eyes when he got to the facility because they were infected. Congenital disorder and neglect compounded into severe infection. The procedure and his early life left him confused, but it’s been clear that he’s been in less pain since they were removed.

A pink tongue flashes out and drags across my fingertips. Now it’s me whimpering as Phantom gives my hand a tongue bath. “Good boy, good boy,” I croon. Those tears escape and roll down my cheeks. “I can be good at this. Maybe I’m better with dogs than with humans.”

“What does that mean?”

Lucas’s soft question startles Phantom and me. He cocks his head instantly, but he’s not on his feet growling. Instead, he sniffs the air and then seeks my hand again. I pop some treats between my fingers and hold them out to him. He takes each happily. I’ve never seen him like this before.

Lucas plops down beside me. “Holy shit, Harmony,” he murmurs as Phantom polishes off another round of treats. “Look at him go.”

“I know,” I sniffle.

“You should open the cage.”

Shaking just a little, I lift the latch and sit back down. Phantom takes two steps out. I cluck my tongue—and he comes and sits right in my lap.

“Oooft,” I groan as Lucas chuckles.

Phantom lays his head on my arm and begins to snore in a matter of seconds. Finally, I look up into Lucas’s hazel eyes. He smiles, but then his brow furrows. “Why would you say you’re better with dogs than people?”

Queasy quaking is right back. Phantom stirs, but my energy change isn't enough to disturb him. I bite my lip and wipe my cheeks. "Damn tears. I'm not supposed to be weepy on the job, right? It's nothing."

I catch the start of a smile before his guard goes up. "Yeah, well, listen. I shouldn't have unloaded on you last night. I'm sorry about that."

"No, *I'm* sorry. I should've said something. I couldn't think of the right thing."

Lucas twists his lips. "Sunshine, sometimes people don't need words. They just need to be heard."

"Well... well..." I'm lost. I hadn't thought of that. I'd only thought that I should've fixed the situation. "Well, I could've listened better, then."

"Stop that," he scolds softly.

God, I want to kiss him. I've been crushing on him for a while, but after raving about him with Lily and Morgan, I *really* want to. I wet my lips. As predicted, his gaze darts to my mouth.

You cannot, I repeat CANNOT, kiss your employee.

Lucas seems to hear my thoughts. He flashes his trademark smile and stands up. A treat in his hand rouses Phantom, who trots back into his pen.

"In a week, I bet Phantom will be sitting in your office while you work," he chuckles.

"We'll see."



It's actually a week and two days before Phantom is ready to walk on a leash into the office. But once Lucas said it, I was determined to make it happen. I spent time in his pen, then got him to let me brush him. On the Friday that Lily and Morgan arrive, Phantom is playing with a peanut-butter stuffed Kong under my desk.

The phone rings, and I grab it as I sign off on an invoice. “Fido’s Farm, Harmony speaking.”

“Harmony, it’s Rita with Forever Homes. Thanks for calling me back last week. Sorry I missed you; I was on vacation.”

“Oh, Rita, hi! Yes, I wanted to know more about what you’re thinking for a collaboration.”

Rita gives a little cheer, then laughs. “I’m so glad to hear you’re interested. Beth was adamant that the dogs remain at the farm. But our program is committed to pairing pups with their right-fit families. We use an extensive process and a thirty-day trial period wherein the family can return the dog, no questions asked. I know Beth was suspicious, but we don’t do this halfway. Our commitment to finding dogs homes has paid off. We have a return rate of less than one percent.

“And we’d love to work with Fido’s farm to get your pups with families. You would receive thirty percent of the adoption profits. It’s not a lot of money, but our costs need covering, too.”

“No, I understand,” I murmur as I scribble notes on the post-it beside me. “So, you want to partner with us?”

“Exactly. Your trainer, Lucas Mallender, is a first-rate dog handler. With the quality care your animals receive, they’d find homes easily.”

Pride swells in my chest for Lucas *and* our pups. I just have to convince Lucas that this partnership is a good idea. I still remember how he balked at the idea of doing anything with Forever Homes when we talked about them on my first day at the rescue.

“I love it,” I say. “I’m trying to put together a benefit gala with the sponsorship of my father’s firm next month. Send me a proposal, and I’ll send it to our lawyers. If it’s a good deal, maybe we could use the event to announce our partnership.”

Rita cheers again. “I’m all about moving quickly, Harmony. I’ll send it over on Monday.”

“Lovely,” I say just as my cell vibrates. Rita and I disconnect, and I put the cell to my other ear.

“We’re here!” Lily and Morgan shout in unison.

“Phantom, come on,” I squeal as I tear out of the trailer. He bounds out with me, nearly knocking me down the stairs with his big puppy body, but stops as soon as I call him to wait.

Lily and Morgan shriek as they step out of Lily’s car, but that makes Phantom growl and lunge. They both pale as I grip his leash and dig my heels into the ground. He pulls but doesn’t fight too hard, so I jog away to put him back in his kennel. When I run up, I swoop them both into a hug.

“Sorry I’m a mess,” I gasp as I’m smothered in their shoulders. I know I’m sweaty and smell like grass most days, but I’ve kind of quit caring about it.

“Shut up, you’re wonderful,” Morgan insists with one more squeeze.

We grin at each other, then dissolve into a hug again. And, with that, the weekend begins.

By the time Lucas’s boots thump on the front porch, the girls and I are drinking iced tea and catching up on our lives. He knocks on the screen door and then does that lazy saunter into the room that makes him look like a porn star. I swallow the drool in my mouth as Lily and Morgan go silent.

“Evening, ladies,” he drawls.

I can tell he’s eating this up. Neither of my friends is subtle about checking him out. I know it’s completely harmless, but it makes me blush because I’m not supposed to think such things about this guy. We’re pretending pretty neatly that those mornings when he stumbles out of his room shirtless are completely boring. He’s doing a decent job of keeping that glint in his eyes at bay, too.

So, yeah, the ladies aren’t helping.

“Hi, uh, Lucas,” Morgan stutters, then mumbles about pregnancy hormones.

“Morgan. And you’re Lily, right?”

She nods, speechless.

“We’re just hanging out tonight. Is that going to bother you?” I ask.

“Nope, I was going to crash with my brother till Sunday. I’ll stay out of your hair.”

“But the rehab dogs?” I ask.

Lucas cocks his head, and instantly I realize my silly mistake. “It’s the weekend. Frankie’s got ‘em, Sunshine.”

Dammit. I practically hear my friends’ jaws drop at the nickname.

“Right. Well, um, cool. Have fun.”

As soon as he’s gone, duffel bag in hand, they bombard me with questions. But I stop this nonsense. “Come on, guys. Lily, sure Calder was your form model, but that’s not the same as an employee. I *can’t* talk about him like this, okay?”

“That is the opposite of fun,” Morgan pouts.

“Well, this job isn’t about fun.”

They let the subject drop, and we begin the great debate of what to watch on Netflix.

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LUCAS

I walk down the porch stairs, chuckling to myself.

Part of me is disappointed to be missing out on seeing what that trio gets up to this weekend. I'm sure it'd be a hell of a good time.

But the other part of me is relieved to be leaving. I could hear them cackling and chatting all the way from the end of the driveway. After an exhausting week of work, I know I couldn't keep up with that crew. They'd eat me alive.

Besides, Harmony deserves some time alone with her friends without me hanging around.

I think back on the other night when I spilled my guts to her. It's a weird mix of raw emotion and relief that flows through me. It's not that I'm ashamed of crying in front of her—I'd like to think I'm more advanced than that, some stereotypical male who thinks expressing emotion is a weakness. Fuck that. I know it's not.

It's that she's the one person who made me feel comfortable enough to be raw and honest about the most painful thing that's ever happened to me. She didn't judge. She didn't lecture. She didn't pity me. She just held my hand and let me speak. It was exactly what I needed. It was all I've needed, and she's the first person who's given it to me.

I could've listened better.

Her words from the day we talked about it echo in my mind, causing an ache in my chest. She still doesn't think she's

enough. This living goddess who's as sweet and hardworking as she is stunning still doesn't think anything she does is good enough.

As I walk to the driver's side of my truck, I silently make it my mission to show Harmony Daniels that she's more than enough.

I'm reaching for the door handle on my truck when I hear the sound of tires crunching against the gravel driveway. I twist around to look and see a dark blue Mercedes pull up to the house. A tall guy with dark hair wearing aviator sunglasses, a button-up, and dress pants climbs out of the car. He's got what looks like a small futon cushion clutched under his arm. Weird.

"You need help with something?" I ask.

He whips off his sunglasses and aims a relieved smile at me. "Yeah, actually. I'm looking for Morgan. She forgot her pregnancy pillow."

Well, shit. This must be Marco, Morgan's husband... and Harmony's ex-fiance.

It takes a second for me to realize I'm frowning at the guy. "Uh, yeah. She's in the house."

When I move to lead him toward the porch, he sticks out his hand. "You must be Lucas."

I shake his hand and nod. "And you're Marco."

"In the flesh." He glances down at the pillow. "Morgan can't sleep without it this far into her pregnancy."

When he smiles, I have to blink twice to avoid being blinded. Jesus, this guy. He looks like a model bred with an actor on a daytime soap opera. No wonder Harmony was engaged to him. Every woman I know would drool over this guy.

When I open the screen door, the pitchy chatter dies down immediately. Morgan beams at Marco.

"My pillow! I can't believe I forgot it. Pregnancy brain fog for the win."

Harmony and Lily help her stand up from the couch so she can walk over to Marco. They hug and kiss, and Marco sets the pillow next to the couch.

“I can’t believe you drove all the way out here to bring it to me,” Morgan says. “Especially with all the Friday afternoon traffic.”

Marco shrugs like it’s no big deal. “Anything for my girls.” He presses a kiss to her forehead while palming her belly. “How’s baby Sofia doing?”

“Good. She’s taking a break from kicking my ribs today.”

Marco leans down to kiss Morgan’s belly. Harmony makes an “aww” sound. I glance at her. She’s smiling, not an ounce of discomfort or annoyance in her expression as she looks at them. I notice the same with Lily, too.

Damn. This group of friends is something else. It’s weird as hell that this dude dated every woman in this room, and yet they all seem perfectly fine. I’d expect a Maury Povich-level showdown right now.

My phone rings just as I’m about to say goodbye again. I step a few feet away and turn around to answer it.

“Hey, Levi. What’s up?”

“Fuck,” he mutters against what sounds like a million little kids screaming.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“You’re not gonna fucking believe this.”

“Levi James Mallender, you watch your goddamn mouth!” Our mom’s shrill voice pierces my eardrum. I hold the phone away from my face and rub my ear.

Levi scoffs. “You’re one to talk, Mom.”

“You know the hierarchy of swear words I operate under. No f-bombs around the kids.”

“But blasphemy is a-okay,” Levi mutters.

“You’re goddamn right it is.”

Another wave of kids screaming and laughing. They're clearly working at a children's birthday party.

"Dude, what are you calling me for? I'm not in the mood to listen to you and Mom yell at each other."

A sigh rockets from Levi's end of the line. "Mom's usual Prince Eric just got into a fender bender and called in. She needs a replacement for tonight's party."

"You do it, then."

"I can't. I'm Tarzan. The parents paid for two princes at the party. I can't be two characters at the same time, Lucas."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, little brother, but I look nothing like Prince Eric." I scratch along my jaw, which is covered in thick dark stubble. "Besides, I haven't shaved."

"Come on, man," Levi whines. "You gotta help me out. She said she'd pay you five hundred bucks for taking this gig at the last minute. That's double the normal rate."

As much as I'd love the extra money in my wallet, I'm done working for my mom. I spent my teens and early twenties working as a prince at her Princesses and Princes Party Pals company. The pay was great, and even hanging out with the kids was fun, but working for my mom was hell. As much as I love her, she's a tiny tyrant who expects perfection at all times. She used to chew me a new asshole if I didn't stay "in character" from the moment I put on the costume, even when I was on a break.

"Levi, I'm exhausted. I'm not dressing up as a Disney prince, no matter how much money you throw at me."

When I glance up, Harmony and her friends are staring at me wide-eyed. Harmony muffles a giggle. Heat crawls up my neck. They must think my family and I are weird as fuck. Great.

Levi continues to rant in my right ear. That's when I zero in on Marco. He's basically a Disney prince in the flesh.

"Hang on, Levi."

I squint at Marco. “How’d you like to make five hundred bucks?”



“You sure I can’t hire you full-time?” My mom asks Marco, who’s dressed in the spare Prince Eric costume she had in her work van. “You’re better than my regular Prince Eric. So charming and handsome. And that smile.”

I roll my eyes as I watch my mother practically swoon over this guy who’s gotta be half her age. She’s right, though. Marco was a champ tonight. He did an impressive Prince Eric impression, smiling almost nonstop while playing and taking photos with the kids.

Marco flashes a grin while shaking his head. “I’m flattered, but I have to decline. I work full time in the city with a baby on the way, and I just don’t think I’d have the time for this. This was fun, though.”

Mom makes a flustered noise while chuckling. “Well, all right. Thanks again for helping at the last minute, Marco.”

My eyes bug out. This woman has never taken “no” for an answer. Not from me, Levi, my dad, authority figures, teachers, local governments—anyone. Except ridiculously good-looking and charming strangers, apparently.

“But if you ever change your mind, call me. You’re a natural. Better than my seasoned professional.” She gestures to Levi, clad in a loin cloth and long brown wig, who’s posing next to a tree in the backyard we’re in. A dozen kids crowd around him, chattering and laughing.

“Jesus, Mom. What gives?”

She glares at him. “Language!”

Through his scrunched scowl, he huffs a breath right before schooling his features into a perky smile when one of the parents at the party directs her toddler daughter to stand by him for a photo.

“Okay, Mom. I think you’ve taken enough of Marco’s time.” I motion for Marco and us to leave.

She frowns at me. “Fine. Thanks for coming by, Lucas. Maybe next time you’ll help your mother out and dress up like a prince for old time’s sake?”

“Don’t count on it.”

She gives me a playful smack on the arm before we leave. Marco opens the door to the side of my truck and pulls out his street clothes.

“Hang on,” I say before snapping a photo of him decked out in blue clingy spandex pants, black boots, a red belt, and a flowy white pirate-style blouse. I text it to Harmony.

Marco tilts his head at me. “Really, dude?”

I shrug. “Harmony’s orders. She’s my boss. Sorry.”

He shakes his head and laughs as he changes.

My phone blows up with texts. I see that Harmony included me in a group chat with Morgan, Lily, Marco, and Calder.

Calder: *Fucking hell...*

Morgan: *Oh la la*

Harmony: *Aww look at the pretty boy prince*

Lily leaves a string of laughing emojis.

Lily: *You’re a good sport, Marco*

Calder: *You couldn’t pay me enough to do that*

Marco: *I’m \$500 richer*

Calder: *Christ, \$500? For \$500 I’ll dress up like Princess Jasmine.*

I laugh at the text exchange. Maybe the way this bunch met each other was weird as hell, but they seem to be on good terms now. I respect them for working past whatever issues they had to get to the place they are today.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Marco asks.

I spin around to him.

“How’s Harmony doing?”

Seeing the concern in his expression throws me. “What do you mean?”

He hesitates for a second. “Look, I don’t know how much she’s told you about us....”

“I know your history.”

He huffs out a breath, nodding once. “I just want to make sure she’s okay. I know that must sound weird, given what an asshole I was to her.”

“It does.” I tried not to sound too hard when I spoke, but judging by how Marco looks off to the side, his expression on the edge of sheepish, I didn’t do the greatest job.

“Maybe you don’t believe me, and I don’t blame you if that’s the case. I’m not the most likable person.” He lets out a breath. “Things didn’t work out between Harmony and me obviously, and that was for the best. But I care about her. She’s a wonderful person who deserves nothing but good things. I want her to be happy. We all do.”

“I’m trying to make that happen.”

A look of understanding flashes across Marco’s face. “I hope you do make her happy, Lucas.”

“Yeah, me too.” I exhale.

Our phones buzz in unison, and we look down at our screens.

Harmony: *I’ve been told I’m a dead ringer for Sleeping Beauty. Where do I sign up??*

Marco and I laugh.

“You ready to head back?”

He says yes, and I drive us back to the rescue.

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HARMONY

“No, listen, see, it’s just that... just that... I love you guys.” Tears spring to my eyes as I lift my champagne flute.

“We love you too, girl,” Morgan says. She raises her sparkling water to clink with mine and Lily’s champagne.

Lily flashes Morgan a grin. I know what it means. It means Harmony is a weepy drunk. Well, so what? I know I am. But it feels like a long time since I last had reason to celebrate. And when my besties take the trouble to drive all the way out into the country to visit me, I say that’s cause for celebration.

Lily and Calder are in the “not *not* trying” phase of getting pregnant, so she’s stuck to one drink so far. I’ve had... four, I think. Enough to know I’m not going to be the one driving home. Enough to know I should probably stop, but just one more is in my future.

Morgan squeals when she glances up at the TV behind the bar. “My turn. Ladies, be right back.”

We whoop and applaud while she carefully makes her way to the karaoke stage. Our girl is a karaoke queen. She slays the room with the ‘60s tune, “Be My Baby,” hamming it up by singing to her swollen belly. If this were a contest, no doubt she’d bring home the trophy.

By the time she’s back at the table, I’m halfway through my last drink. She sits down, and I grin and say, “You two really are the best ever. Seriously, I’m so lucky. Why should I get friends this great?”

“Uh, because you *are* great?” Morgan snorts.

I shake my head so that my hair dances on my shoulders. “Nu-uh. Not even. Look at you two. So happy, so in love with your soul mates. You deserve all that. I’m just glad I know you. Glad you didn’t tell me to piss off, Lily, after... everything.”

They wince. I know I’m not supposed to talk about the shitshow that ended my engagement with Marco, but I can’t help it. It’s not about him. It’s about us.

I barrel on. “What’s it like? Being in love? For real, I mean. Not, like, thinking you’re in love because it’s supposed to be the right time.”

Lily shrugs. “It feels like... a yes. Just a very certain yes.”

My eyes water again. “That’s awesome. So awesome. I’d like to feel that someday.”

It hurts my heart to admit this. I know I’m drunk, but it’s not the champagne talking. I would like to know that yes someday. I know that I never have.

“The dogs are a yes for me. Does that count?” I giggle and hiccup all at once.

Morgan smiles. “Yes, it does. It’s so freaking cool how much you’ve done at the farm, Harmony.”

I beam. “Thank you. I really am kind of in love with it.”

Her smile turns sly. “And Lucas? We haven’t discussed him in far too many hours.”

A blush paints my cheeks. “I’m not in love with him!”

They laugh at me, but my face won’t cool down. I splutter futile attempts to explain that it’ll never be like that with Lucas until Lily holds up a hand.

“Okay, we hear you, but *if* things were different, *would* you want to explore things with him... *Sunshine?*”

I grow quiet, contemplating this for a long time, not even caring that they’ve been teasing me about the nickname all weekend.

I think about my type of guy and how opposite Lucas is. He's rugged, weathered, and no-nonsense—so different from the charming and rich pretty boys I usually go for. I think about that night on the porch. I think about the way he makes me want to claw his face off when he calls me Princess.

But I'm quiet for so long because as soon as Lily asked the question, a little voice in my head screamed *yes*.

"I don't know. He could be fun. I'll admit that."

"Mmm, he looks like he knows how to have fun," Morgan says, her tone so full of suggestion that I blush all over again.

We finish our drinks, talking about silly stuff and nothing at all, but Lucas stays stuck in my head. As soon as I stand up, I know that the fifth glass was a mistake. Damn champagne, it's a sneaky bastard. So tasty and easy to sip, but it rushes straight to your head and beats your brains like a hammer. I stumble toward the exit, my arm linked with Lily's. We sing along with the latest karaoke number being belted out until the door closes behind us, and night air hits our cheeks.

"Wow, it was warm in there," I mumble, gulping fresh air. Summer is dwindling now, and nights out here in the country are cooler already. Still, I leave the window open on Lily's car for the ride back home. I need Diet Coke and aspirin. Hopefully the hangover tomorrow won't be too brutal.

By the time we're back at the house, my eyelids are lead. I wish my friends goodnight and leave them in the downstairs bedroom, then swing by the kitchen and go upstairs.

While I wash my face and change into my nightie, I can't stop thinking about that *yes* that Lily triggered.

Would you want to explore things with Lucas?

... What kind of things?

My body tingles all over at that question. I'm not someone who thinks much about sex. It's fine, good even, but it's not the first thing on my mind when I go out on a date. I'm very strict about not going to bed with someone until after the third date at least.

But when I think about Lucas...

I shiver again. I can see my nipples through the pink silk nightgown, but who cares? Lily and Morgan are downstairs. It's just me up here.

Just me.

My heart thuds because I'm about to break rules. I feel wicked and so very inappropriate, but for some reason, that's just more fuel on the fire inside me right now.

I tiptoe down the hall to his bedroom door and knock on it softly.

"Lucas? Oh, Lucas? I know you're not home, so it doesn't matter if you're asleep. But I wanted to say that I'd like to explore things with you, Lucas. See, I know you think I'm a goofball who can barely keep her feet underneath her. And I guess you're right, but I am trying. Anyway, I know I'm your boss and all that, but... fuck that. I'd like you to rip my clothes off, please. Could we explore that, maybe?"

I giggle and rest my head on the door. *You are so silly.*

But then the knob turns, and I almost fall into the room.

"Holy sh—" I clap a hand over my mouth to keep from shrieking as I stumble into his bedroom. Adrenaline numbs my body. *The door wasn't latched. You fell. You—*

Warm hands catch me before I faceplant on the floorboards, and I crash into his chest.

"What was that, Princess?"

Fuck.

His voice is gravel, partially from sleep but definitely something else, too. My free hand is gripping his bicep, not even close to wrapping around that mass of muscle. I tip my head up and slither my other hand off of my mouth to gape at him in the dark.

"You're not home."

He chuckles like a low rumble of thunder. "I definitely am."

“You didn’t hear that.”

His hold on me constricts for a moment. “I definitely did,” he growls.

I know I should be puking with regret, but instead, my throat is dust. My heart is pounding. Between my legs, I’m getting wetter by the second.

“You want me to rip your clothes off, Princess?”

“Uh... uh... uh-huh.”

He hisses and pulls me closer. I sway into him, moaning when I feel his erection against my hip. God, I want him inside of me. *Now.*

“You know... we can’t, though.”

His sexy growl makes his words hard to process. But when I do, I step backward and cross my arms over my chest. “Of course I know,” I mumble. “Not like you want....”

Another rumble of thunder vibrates from his throat. Lucas drops to his knees in front of me and palms my waist. He pulls me closer and buries his face in my abdomen, right above my pubic bone. “I want, Harmony. I. Fucking. *Want.*”

My body wails to have him hitch up the nightie and use his tongue to clean up the mess I’m making on my thighs. I am burning to feel him, thirsty in a way I’ve never been before.

And I can’t have him.

So much adrenaline is in my system that I’m shaking as I step backward. “I... I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“I’m fucking not.”

“Well, well, but... we can’t, so I should... go.”

“You should. And I’m still very glad you decided to use my door as a confessional booth tonight.”

“Ugh.” I clap both palms over my face. “You were supposed to be at Levi’s.”

Just like that, some of the intensity dissipates. It’s more our usual banter when he gets to his feet and laughs. “He brought a

date home.”

I frown. “From the kids’ birthday party?”

He nods. “He has a thing for hot single moms. He’s shameless.”

“Oh.”

“I had nowhere else to be. Didn’t you see my text? Or my truck in the driveway?”

“Blame it all on champagne.”

“Sneaky bastard.”

“Thank you,” I cry, but then bite my lip. “Um, so.”

He steps closer again and hooks my chin. His thumb skims along my lip, and I’m aching all over again. “So, goodnight Princess Harmony. Sweet dreams, Sunshine.”

Before he can step away, I reach out and drag my own thumb across his mouth. He freezes. The sensation makes me shiver, but I force out, “Sweet dreams,” and then bolt to my own bedroom and dive under the covers.

Three minutes later, I have to cover my face with a pillow. The muffled moans of my orgasm ring in my head as I shudder and clench around my own fingers. It’s powerful, but it doesn’t satisfy like I imagine Lucas could.

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LUCAS

I grip the base of my cock and bite back a groan.

Fuck.

I curse out loud this time as I give myself a hard pull. Heat surges through my cock, and I press my head against my pillow so hard that my neck aches.

My hand is the last thing I want on my dick right now. But the actual thing I want—Harmony’s hands, lips, pussy, literally any part of her body—I can’t have. Hooking up is off-limits. First off, she’s been drinking. No way would I do anything unless she’s sober. And second, third, fourth, and fifth: she’s my boss, we live together, and no matter what—no matter the instant attraction we’ve felt for each other since the moment we met, no matter the countless times we’ve flirted, no matter the one time in the barn when we almost kissed—we shouldn’t cross that boundary. I know it. She knows it.

Because she’s a sweet girl. A good girl. She follows the rules.

Good girl.

Christ, just the thought of saying that to her while she’s writhing on my bed, her blonde hair splayed over the sheets, her limbs shaking, her gorgeous tits and ass bouncing every time I thrust into her, her perfect skin dotted in sweat...

I’m hard as titanium.

I close my eyes and give myself another tug, careful to go slow. I inhale and remember the sweet scent of her soap when

I breathed her in moments ago.

So sweet.

I inhale again, and this time the sweet scent of *her* fills my lungs. I think back to the moment when I was on my knees in front of her, my lips skimming her skin, my mouth just inches from her pussy—her soaking wet pussy, judging from how the insides of her thighs glistened.

So fucking sweet.

I stroke myself hard while gritting my teeth. Pain rockets through my skull at just how hard I'm biting down. Good. The pain is a distraction I desperately need right now if I want to make this jerkoff session last longer than a minute.

Because just imagining Harmony has me crazed. This fucking woman. I haven't even kissed her, and this is how worked up she gets me.

I have no doubt every part of her tastes so fucking sweet. Would she be sweet in bed, too? Or would my good girl get feisty? Would she be rough as she worked me in her silky hands? How hard would she ride me? Would she be loud?

Behind the darkness of my eyelids, I imagine Harmony screaming while she bounces up and down on my dick.

My spine turns to liquid heat. Pressure builds from my abdomen, growing hotter and more intense by the second. I work my hand faster. My jaw falls open for a split second, releasing a ragged breath.

Be loud, Princess. Shatter the fucking windows when I'm inside of you...

"Fuck," I mutter before clamping my mouth shut.

With a muffled groan, I spill all over my stomach. I must blink a half-dozen times before I stop seeing stars.

My chest is aching, heaving like I've just jogged up a mountain. My skin feels like it's on fire. I still can't see straight.

Holy fuck.

I grab tissues from the table next to my bed and do a quick clean-up. The entire time my head is buzzing. This woman, this woman I haven't even kissed, is gonna destroy me.

And as I drift off to sleep, I quietly admit that there's nothing in the world I want more than for Harmony Daniels to wreck me.



Soft padding footsteps sound behind me. I spin around, mug of coffee in hand.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” I say over the rim of my cup.

Her eyes go wide at my bare chest. A split second later, she scrunches her face like she's embarrassed before offering a flustered smile. It's the smile she normally offers when she catches me without a shirt. God, it's adorable as hell how the emotions play out on her face.

“Morning,” she murmurs.

I give her a once-over, taking in her long-sleeve top and shorts. I have to bite back a groan of disappointment. I was hoping she'd still be in that sexy-as-fuck, practically see-through nightie thing she was wearing last night when she fell into my room.

“Coffee?”

She shakes her head. “No, thanks. I had some when I went to breakfast with Lily and Morgan before they left.”

“Sorry I didn't get to say goodbye to them. I slept in a bit. Guess I was pretty tired.”

That's an understatement. I slept like the fucking dead last night. My body was completely wrung out after jerking off to the thought of Harmony... to her saying she wanted me to rip her clothes off and do filthy things to her while she stood outside my bedroom door when she thought I wasn't there.

“That's nice that you got some rest.” Her tone is pitched, like she's attempting to sound perky. She walks to the sink and

fills a glass of water. She glances out the nearby window as she sips. “So, um, I was thinking of doing a grocery run. If you want anything, just write it down and I’ll grab it from the store.”

I let out a chuckle before downing more coffee. “So we’re really not gonna talk about last night?”

Her shoulders rise with the breath she takes. She downs the rest of the water in her glass before stepping over to me so that we’re standing just a few feet apart. “I was working up the nerve.”

“There’s no need to work up anything.” I inch closer to her, holding her gaze. “What you said was hot as hell.”

“But Lucas, we—”

“Work together? Live together? You’re my boss? Sunshine, I don’t know if you remember what I said last night, but I’m into you. I want you.”

My gaze falls to the top of her chest. Her fair skin flushes.

“I want you too, Lucas.” Her voice is barely above a whisper. “But remember what else you said? We can’t. Boundaries, remember?”

I take another step toward her, closing the space between us. Her mouth parts, and she lets out a breathy, strangled noise.

“I remember,” I murmur. My lips hover over hers. We’re not kissing—we’re not even touching—but I can feel the effect I’m having on her. The heat radiating from her skin, her shaky breaths, the way her eyes have turned into pools of ink with a faint circle of baby blue around them.

“Tell me you don’t feel the same way, Princess,” I growl, pinning her with my gaze. “Tell me you don’t want me. Tell me you didn’t touch yourself when you left my room last night.”

“Of course I did,” she says, her breath shuddering.

“How was it?”

“So good. But not as good as it would have been with you.”

The corner of my mouth hooks into what I’m certain looks like a smug smirk.

“D-did you touch yourself too?” she asks.

“Of course I did.”

She bites her lip. My dick is steel.

“Show me,” I grunt.

Her brows hit her hairline. “What?”

“Show me how you touch yourself.” When she exhales, her hot breath tickles my skin. I lick my lips.

So fucking sweet.

“Lucas, what do you mean?”

“We don’t have to deny ourselves completely. If you’re willing to get a little creative.”

Her mouth hooks up into a smile. “Okay.”

With my heart punching against my ribcage and my dick aching in my sweatpants, I take her hand and walk her into the living room. I lay her on the couch and stand at the end, looking down at her. Her gaze falls to the front of my pants. I palm my rock-hard erection outside the fabric before threading my thumbs through the elastic waistband.

“You want me, and I want you.”

She nods her agreement.

“We want boundaries too? Totally fine.” I thumb the waistband of my sweatpants, tugging them down slightly. “Show me how you touch yourself when you think of me. I’ll do the same. You’ll lie down; I’ll stay standing. We won’t touch each other. But it’ll still be hot as hell.”

Her jaw drops. She’s shocked, clearly. But a second later, there’s that lip bite, the corner of her mouth quirking up, that cloudy stare in her eyes.

“Afterwards, we can go back to business as usual,” I say to reassure her but also me, too. “Housemates and colleagues—you’re still my boss, and I’m still your employee.”

“Okay, yeah. I want that.” She unbuttons her shorts and slides them down her thighs, revealing a pair of hot pink panties soaked at the crotch. A choking sound rips from my throat.

With her gaze glued to mine, she slides her hand down the front of her panties. A breathy moan falls from her lips. “I’m so hot for you, Lucas.”

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HARMONY

Harmony Calista Daniels, what in the everloving hell are you doing?

I know what I'm doing. I just can't believe it.

But as I slide two fingers along my lips, barely skimming my clit, all my inhibitions and what-are-you-doings short circuit.

My eyelids weigh a thousand pounds, but I force them to stay open. No way am I missing the show in front of me. I never really got the big deal about watching porn. I've always preferred erotic stories.

That was before I was seated inches from the hottest man gripping his cock through those sinful sweatpants. Before I got hazel-colored lasers pinned on me, flickering from my face to my crotch as he groans and strokes himself. Before I heard that growl of pure lust rip from his throat. For *me*. Because of *me*.

I was wrong. Porn is amazing. It's just the kind of thing you really want front-row seats to.

"Don't stop," he rumbles, and I realize I've stopped stroking. I'm too distracted by him.

I bite down on my lip and glide my fingers forward and back, teasing myself again. I'm in a trance. I don't want to think about anything right now. Later, I'll scold myself for being so reckless. Later, I'll have a freak-out about what this means and how it might mess up this delicately balanced

situation we've worked out. I'll have a hundred mental conversations with Lucas about what a mistake it was and how we can agree to go back to how we were.

Later, I'll wonder what on Earth possessed me to let another human being see how I touch myself.

But not right now. Right now, there's only one question on my mind.

"Can I see?"

The words eek out, and somehow my face is hotter. But it makes Lucas's eyes go totally black. A devilish smirk curls his lips.

"You want to see my cock, Princess? You want to see what you do to me?"

My heart is beating on every square inch of my skin, but I feel my head bob in a nod.

"Keep touching yourself, then."

My fingers pet this crazy ache I have, offering no relief but somehow making it even better. I can already see Lucas's v-cuts with how he's got those pants slung low. Dark hair trails below his navel. It might as well be a freaking red carpet: "Right this way!" *Oh, god, gladly.*

He takes a deep breath, arches a single brow, and drops those sweatpants to his ankles.

Oh, god.

A little cry falls from my lips. I'd be ashamed, but we're too far gone for that. Why is his cock so freaking beautiful? Why can't I stop staring? Why am I *drooling*?

He's long and curved and clearly as hard as I am wet. "I. Fucking. Want." His words from last night are the only thing in my head as I thrust both fingers inside of me.

"Oh, oh fu—"

Lucas's eyes blaze when he realizes what I'm doing. "Christ, Harmony, yes. Plunge those fingers in for me, Princess. Think about me filling you up."

He's so filthy.

“Lucas.” In my head, his name is a reprimand. Aloud, it’s a moan because, yes, I am thinking about nothing like I’m thinking about him thrusting deep inside of me.

I fall back against the sofa so I can gaze up at him and work my pussy at the same time. His hand starts a rhythmic stroking, and I try to match his tempo. I want to use my left hand, too, but there’s only so much room in these panties.

He showed you his.

Lucas pauses when I withdraw my hand. His brows tick like he’s going to ask if I’m okay, but I just hook my thumbs in my waistband and slide the soaked silk down.

“Open your legs, Harmony.”

Again, my pulse pounds all over my body. I’ve never played this kind of game before, and I’m not at all comfortable displaying my vagina for someone. But in this moment, I don’t want to think about all the things I always think about with a new lover. I’m not *with* a new lover. I’m touching myself. It can be that easy. So, I spread my knees wider.

Lucas’s eyes aren’t flickering anymore. They’re zeroed in. I squirm a little, but then his lips fall open. He finally walks his gaze back up. When our gazes connect, his tongue flicks out and drags slowly across his bottom lip.

“You are the most beautiful woman in the fucking world.”

“I’m so not.”

That makes him grin. “Hush that nonsense and make yourself feel good.”

“It’s um... easier for me to come if I... oh, I can’t say this.”

Lucas’s voice rolls out of his throat like water pouring over rocks. “It’d be easier for me to come if I took those soaking panties off the floor and rubbed them on my dick. But I’m not sure if that’s crossing a boundary. It would also be easier for me to come if I was lying down, but I’m not budging from this

spot until we both finish. There, that wasn't hard. Just say what you like, Harmony."

"My nipples. It's easier if I play with my nipples, too."

For a second, I think he's going to pass out. Lucas's eyes fall shut, and he kind of takes a stumbling step backward.

"Sorry, are you okay?"

That makes him chuckle. "No, I'm fucking wrecked. And just when I think I can't want you more, you go and say something like that." His eyes open again. "Whatever feels best. That's what you do, okay? I want to watch you touch yourself like you did last night. After you left my bedroom. After you told me you wanted to explore things. After you had me on my knees in front of you...."

He trails off because just listening to him has blanked all thoughts from my mind. I dive two fingers deep inside of me again and use my other hand to rub my clit, just like I did last night after I left his room.

"You can use my underwear," I gasp. My gaze is glassy, but I can't let my eyes close.

Lucas groans and snatches my underwear off the floor. Hot pink silk slides up and down his cock while I work myself closer and closer to orgasm. When my clit is throbbing and pleasure pools in my abdomen, I yank my fingers from my pussy and slide them into my shirt and under my bra. My nipples could cut glass right now—they're almost as hard as his cock, which has turned a deep, purplish red.

A couple light strokes on my nipple, and that pleasure winds up. "Lucas... Lucas," I pant.

"Come, Harmony. Come for me, you fucking gorgeous princess."

Only when my orgasm hits do I let my eyes shut. Waves of pleasure roll over me while I moan his name. I can hear his growls of approval, but I yank my eyes open when I hear, "I'm gonna come, Harmony."

Aftershocks have my skin electric, but I smirk and nod. “Come for *me*, Lucas. Only for me.”

His eyes pinch shut. “For you,” he hisses.

“Right now. I wanna see right now, Lucas,” I goad him.

It works. He explodes, hips thrusting forcefully as he unloads into my underwear. “Harmony, *fuck*,” he gasps with his head thrown back.

I bite my lip. *Fuck* indeed.

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LUCAS

“So... fucking... hot.” It’s a struggle to catch my breath. I’m not an eloquent man normally, but I’m especially not when I’ve got my dick in my hand, Harmony’s soaked panties wrapped around me, my breath ragged and my vision blurry from the most intense orgasm I can ever remember having.

I glance down at this goddess splayed out naked in front of me, looking wrecked as fuck and sexier than I’ve ever seen her.

She bites her lip, barely containing that shy smile I love so much. “Did we really just do that?”

I nod, chuckling. “We really did, Sunshine.”

For a moment, we just look at each other, catching our breath, processing everything. Those sparkling blue eyes scan the ground and land on our clothing scattered around us.

She clears her throat. “So I guess we should...”

Finish this in the bedroom. Take this into the shower. See how good it would feel for me to bend you over the back of the couch and fuck you into oblivion.

“...get dressed.” She says it with a hesitant look on her face.

I nod once and bend down to pull up my sweatpants while she grabs her clothes and puts them back on.

When we’re dressed, she looks at me. “Boundaries.” Her eyebrow ticks up. She says it like she knows it’s utter BS.

“Boundaries,” I reply. I’m frowning, but I can only hold it for a second before I’m grinning, too.

I’ll play this game as long as she wants to. Despite everything we’ve said about boundaries, I think we both know we just crossed a line we can’t come back from.

And I know without a doubt that this woman is worth crossing every line for.

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HARMONY

When I look at Lucas standing in my office, my stomach flips. That familiar ache starts between my legs, and I have to hold my breath until it fades.

This is how my body has reacted every time we've been around each other since that Sunday afternoon over a week ago.

It was hands-down the hottest thing I've ever done with a guy, and we weren't even physically together.

Don't think about this now. Save it for later.

It's the silent command I've told myself every day since then. Just get through the work day as cordial colleagues, like we've done every day since that Sunday, and save the naughty thoughts for later when I'm alone in bed or in the bathtub, and I can relive that filthy moment over and over.

"You wanted to talk to me about something?" Lucas asks, jerking me back to the present.

"Oh, right." I clear my throat and take in his cool expression as it morphs into a smirk.

I'm impressed that he's been able to remain so composed over these last several days. He really meant it when he said that after our little tryst we could go back to business as usual. He's been his normal self, playful and teasing, calling me Princess and Sunshine, but also getting serious and down to business whenever work demands it.

Does he battle the urge to rip our clothes off on a near-hourly basis like me? Is he spending his nights quietly cranking one out in his bedroom, too?

I shake my head.

Damn it, Harmony, get it together.

“I finalized everything for the fundraising gala. It’s scheduled for next Saturday in the city. Dad’s company is hosting it at the country club. My parents have invited all of their friends and work colleagues. It should be a big money maker. If things go really well, all of the rescue’s expenses should be covered through the end of next year.”

Lucas blinks. “Damn. That’s great.”

I take a breath and brace myself before I say the next part. “Also, I met with Rita from Forever Homes this morning. I’ve decided to partner with her organization so we can start adopting our dogs out through them.”

His hazel eyes become storm clouds quickly. That beautiful smirk that’s been a key feature of my fantasies nightly for the past week-plus flattens into a scowl.

Not that I’m surprised. I knew he was going to react this way. He and I don’t see eye-to-eye when it comes to Forever Homes.

“Hell no, Harmony. No. No. No, no, and no again.” His arms are crossed like he’s shielding himself from me, preparing for a battle. I answer with a raised chin, my lips in a line. I’m the boss, and this is my decision.

Keep reminding yourself of that, Harmony. You’re doing this for the dogs.

“We’re doing it. I’ve already signed with Rita.”

“You *what*? Without telling me? What the fu—”

I slice my hand across my throat before he full-on curses me out. “Excuse me, Mallender, but this falls outside your purview. You train and rehab our dogs. I’m in charge of this place, and it’s my job to find them forever homes. And I’ll

thank you not to curse while we're having a professional conversation.”

He pulls his lips into his mouth like he's catching himself. “Apologies, *Daniels*, but I'm a little floored is all. I told you when you brought them up that our dogs don't need to be shipped off to god-knows-what kind of homes, just to be bounced back here. Or worse.”

And that's when I get it. The first time he talked about this, I didn't know much about Lucas. But now that I've heard how gutted he was by losing the family he'd created, I get why he's so guarded about rehoming our dogs.

He doesn't want them kicked to the curb just because something else comes along.

My heart twists despite his shuttered expression. I have to ball my hands into fists to keep from reaching out for him. Touching is definitely off-limits in our boundaries at any time—certainly during work.

Instead, I clear my throat and shake my head. “You're jumping to conclusions. Forever Homes is all about rigorous screening and careful selection. Rita walked me through the whole process candidates go through before they ever take a dog home. They're not going to ship our dogs off to someone who drops by on a whim. Yes, the pack is happy here. But would you really deny them the chance to find a home? A family to love?”

I can see the pain in his eyes. It turns them the color of a lake, greenish-brown and glittering. He has to clear his throat twice before he croaks, “Of course I wouldn't.”

“The point of a rescue is to help dogs in need and find them a permanent home. You know that. We can't house them forever, especially not when people regularly drop off new abandoned strays. We only have so much room for the constant flow of dogs we get.”

I think back to the other day when the weekend groundskeeper brought in a box of puppies that had been left on the side of the road. Then, a day later, Lucas brought in an

injured older dog that his brother found wandering the street he lives on.

“I know you want the best for them. And I know you give them the best. But the decision is made. And I think it’s a good one. Plus, Forever Homes has in their adoption contracts that if a dog can’t be kept, they’re returned here.”

He bites his lips in a line and nods.

“Thank you for respecting my decision.”

I swallow hard, trying to force down the impulse to ramble on until I’ve convinced him my plan is good and that I’ve done the best thing for everyone. I’ve not hurt his feelings. I’m not being callous. I’m sweet and acting thoughtfully, not barreling over his heart for the sake of my own success.

God, I really hope I’m not. This time, it’s a lot harder to swallow.

Lucas scratches the back of his head. “Anything else, or can I go check on Buddy?”

“Go, go.” I wave my hand toward the door. My voice is feeble now, and I really just want him out.

Lucas doesn’t look at me as he turns and stomps out of the trailer. I collapse in my chair and peek under the desk. Phantom senses me and lifts his head, his pink-and-gray nose wiggling curiously.

“I don’t like being the boss,” I whisper, then bite down on my wobbly lip.

Phantom nudges me with his nose. *It’s okay, Mom. You’re doing your best,* he seems to say. Or at least that’s what I choose to interpret.

I smile. Being Mom to this sweet soul doesn’t flip me out like that afternoon in my bathroom with the pee sticks. This is a role I’m comfortable in. Somehow, I’ve grown to know that this is where I’m supposed to be.

A deep breath sends my icky emotions away while I pick up the phone. *I can do this.* “Rita? It’s Harmony. I love the idea of showcasing three adoptees at the gala. Why don’t you

and the families come get the dogs this week? That'll give them a few days to get settled before the event."



Lucas's truck rolls up to the house later that evening. I'm on the porch with a glass of rosé that I hide behind while he stomps up the steps. On cue, his brows hit his hairline.

Phantom raises his head and sniffs curiously.

"What's Phantom doing here?"

"I'm, uh, adopting him."

Lucas shakes his head. "Beth never—"

"I'm not Beth. And I've been working with him for weeks. I want to try having him stay with me tonight." I get to my feet and square to him, ready for another argument.

But he doesn't cross his arms. Instead, Lucas moves slowly, lazily, until he's toe-to-toe with me. This is a game we've played a lot lately, standing so close but not technically touching. But now all I can do is smell him. He smells like grass and sweat and cedar and sage—like a day of work and him underneath—and it is divine. His breath comes in short puffs through his nose, and all my hair stands on end. I gaze up into those eyes, surprised to see the mischief there.

"Look at you, taking up all the space and being such a boss," he murmurs.

"Someone, uh, told me to take up more space and do whatever the hell I want."

That delicious smirk appears. "And cause trouble, if I remember right. And you're causing me heaps of trouble today, aren't you, Princess Sunshine?"

My heart hammers in my chest. I'm split between confused why he's not mad and ready to throw myself on him. "Not intentionally."

“Mm, but even so.” He sucks in a deep breath. “Christ, I want your hands on me.”

My palms burn to oblige, but I shake my head. “Against the rules.”

It’s a tease. It’s also true. And it’s clear by his expression that Lucas appreciates both. He groans and chuckles as he steps away, breaking the spell. “So much fucking trouble.”

“You’re not mad?” I ask as I pet Phantom and plop back on the swing.

He drops to sit beside me, brows knitted. “Why would I be mad? It’s definitely against the former rules, but there’s nothing illegal about having Phantom here.” He grins. “And I like how you called them ‘our dogs’ this afternoon.”

“Well, uh, I meant about the other part.”

“Oh. No, I don’t like it. I mean, I didn’t when you first told me about it. I think I was just shocked. But then I thought about what you said, about the point of even having a rescue. About how you made sure that Rita’s adoption process was legit. You’re right. It’s what’s best for the dogs, and that’s what matters.” He huffs out a breath. “I’m sorry I reacted the way I did when you first told me about it. It’s just hard. These dogs mean everything to me.”

“I know they do. They mean everything to me, too,” I say. “But I promise, this will work out. You’ll see. Forever Homes is coming to the rescue tomorrow to see which dogs would be good to adopt out first. Then, at the gala, the dogs will be there as a showcase of what we’re doing. It’s going to be great.”

“I’m sure it is. Tell me how it goes.”

I whip to him. “What? You’re coming, of course.”

Lucas snorts. “The hell I am. Dress up like a penguin and pretend to like all those stuffy people? No thanks, not my scene—and not in my job description, so don’t try it, boss.”

My nose scrunches up, but Lucas is impassive. Finally, I blow out a hard breath and look away. “I didn’t want you to come as an employee,” I mutter softly.

There's a long, heavy pause. "What did you want, then?"

I glance at him and let my eyes answer. Even without words, the admission makes me blush. Why did I assume we'd go together, that he'd want to go with me? Even though it's clear that we're wildly attracted to each other, me asking him to come as my date to the gala changes things. Yes, we flirt and tease, and yes, we took things in a fun and filthy direction by touching ourselves in full view of one another.

But I'm essentially asking him to be my date. To be out together in public.

That's more than just flirting and physical play. That's actual feelings. That's asking Lucas to care about me more than just some fun distraction. That's something I'd expect of a guy I'm dating—of my boyfriend. My former boyfriends were always ready to go to an event where they could schmooze and make connections, not to mention get in my father's good graces. All those guys never hesitated to don a tux and glad-hand corporate moneymakers. Lucas has made clear from our first meeting that he's none of those things.

But, god, no doubt he'd be an incredible boyfriend.

I stamp out the thought as soon as it sprouts in my brain.

Lucas's brows raise again. "Well, shit, Princess," he mumbles.

My stomach drops at his hesitation. Clearly, he doesn't feel the same way about me. "Forget it. You're right. You definitely don't have to go. I'll send you pics."

I hop up and take Phantom out to the yard to pee, then walk straight past Lucas into the house and retreat to my room for the night.

For the next week, there's a lot of me avoiding common areas in the house and a lot of Lucas staying later at the farm. He's stoic and answers in single grunts when Rita and the couples adopting three of our dogs come out to visit, but at least he's not hostile.

By Friday, I've blown things totally out of proportion in my mind. I've gone down so many holes of embarrassing

thoughts about what he must think of me and how ditzy I was to picture us having fun together at the gala. I've invented conversations in my head where he tells me, "it's not like that, Princess," and I have to smile and assure him that I know that, I know how he still cares about his ex and her son, I know we're not a thing. I've shamed myself more than once over how reckless and inappropriate I've been, putting my body on display for him. And of course, I've promised myself all that nonsense is over.

When I'm heading to my room after work Friday, Lucas is leaning in the hallway, waiting for me. "We aren't speaking, huh?" he asks as I try to nod and hurry past.

"I... didn't have anything to say?"

He snorts. "Sunshine, you haven't had that problem since I met you. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He chuckles as he threads his fingers in his hair. "I don't buy that for one second, but fine. Can you promise you won't give me the cold shoulder when we go to this damn gala tomorrow?"

"I'll... Wait. *We*?"

Lucas steps back and jerks his thumb toward his bedroom door. "Got my penguin suit delivered this afternoon. Thought about just borrowing the Prince Eric costume from Mom, but I figured I shouldn't try and show up Marco."

I nearly drop my purse. My fingers squeeze the strap just in time, but not fast enough to keep one of Lucas's brows from twitching. "You said you weren't going," I blurt at last.

"Well, you know. Boss's orders and all."

Any excitement I felt drains away at that sardonic comment. My shoulders slump, and I shake my head and step around him to my bedroom. "I don't want you to go because you feel like you have to."

Lucas grasps my wrist and gently spins me around before I can escape. I jolt, but his fingers stay clasped on my arm. His

thumb rubs circles on the soft side of my wrist, and suddenly my heart is hammering.

Those dangerously tempting lips part in a soft smile. When he speaks, his voice is uncharacteristically shy. “Harmony, hush. Don’t you know all you gotta do is say how high, and I’ll jump?”

“You... you want to go with me?”

He laughs. “No. I’d rather go just about anywhere else with you. But you’re going, and you want me to go. So I’m going because I want to go for you.”

My heart is thudding a funny rhythm. Half of me wants to drop my jeans and do filthy things with him right here in the hall. But the other part of me is trying to reason through the very real feeling that we just crossed some kind of boundary—an emotional one.

Besides, he’s still touching me.

Before I can figure out what to say or how to move, a car horn blares from outside. A hard swallow moves along the thick length of Lucas’s neck as he gazes at me. His hand feels like fire against my skin.

“Levi wants to grab a beer. You’ll have to fend for yourself for dinner tonight, Sunshine. Sorry.”

I make a laughing noise. “I’ll manage. Have fun.”

His cloudy stare drifts to my lips, and for a second, I’m certain he’s going to kiss me.

His gaze moves back up to my eyes, and his hand falls away from my body. “Have a good night.”

He walks down the stairs to the front door and reaches for the doorknob, but then he stops and twists around to look up at me. “Can’t wait for tomorrow,” he says through a half-smile.

LUCAS

I tug at the collar of my button-up shirt and fight the urge to pull my truck over, rip this suit off, and toss it in the nearest dumpster. God, I hate dressing up. It's uncomfortable as fuck. There's a reason I work a job that has me in jeans and t-shirts every day.

But I'm wearing this ridiculous getup for a good cause. Tonight's gala will keep the rescue running and keep the dogs I care so much about fed, sheltered, and safe.

And for Harmony.

She busted her ass to make tonight happen, to help the rescue. The least I can do is show up dressed properly and support her.

As I follow the navigation on my phone to the country club, I think back to when she asked me if I'd come with her to the gala. I know I came off like a massive prick with my response.

Well, shit, Princess...

I cringe even now just thinking about it. I could tell just by the look on her face and the tone of her voice that if we went together, it was gonna mean something—and that thought both excited me and scared the shit out of me.

I like Harmony. That's no secret. But it's more than the obvious attraction between us. It's the fact that every day I wake up thinking of her, and every night, I fall asleep to the thought of her. Every time I see her smile, my chest swells.

Every time I see her scraped or bruised from work, worry surges through me.

I've got major feelings for this girl, and that scares me. Because the last time I caught feelings for someone, it ended in me losing everything. And if I act on them, I'd better be ready to flip my whole world upside down.

You know you're ready. You'd do anything for her.

My phone buzzes with a text. I shove aside the thoughts whirring inside of me and pull into the first free parking space I find, between a Bentley and a G-wagon.

"Jesus," I mutter. I try not to think about how my Toyota pickup sticks out like a sore thumb. I smile when I see it's Harmony texting me. She's been here since this morning, setting up for the gala while I took care of things at the rescue.

Harmony: *Hey!! I'm walking to the front of the country club, see you soon? I'm in a white dress.*

Me: *Great, just parked. I'm in assless chaps.*

Harmony: *Oh my god you'd better not be!*

Me: ;)

I hop out of my car and walk to the front of the massive brick building that looks more like a European estate than a country club. But what the hell do I know what a country club is supposed to look like? I've been a working-class punk all my life, and I've never been in one.

I round the corner to the entrance and nearly choke on my tongue.

"Holy shit." I trip over my own feet as I walk up to Harmony.

She's stunning in a white dress that looks tailored to her figure. It's like a fancier, shinier, longer, slinkier version of the dress she wore the first time we met. Her long blonde hair falls in perfect waves down her shoulders. Those plump lips of hers are shellacked in red lipstick. She beams at me, and I swear my heart stops beating.

She bites her lips, and her cheeks go pink. “I look okay?”

“Okay? Sunshine, you look....” My jaw practically unhinges as I drink her in. God, I’m a caveman. “Holy hell.”

She giggles. “You look pretty holy hell yourself.” Her blue eyes dazzle as she gives me a once-over. Her gaze settles on my face, and I pick up that hungry look I know well by now. She likes what she sees, and that makes me feel like I could fucking fly.

When she reaches up and cups my cheek with her palm, I have to clench my jaw so I don’t growl at her touch.

“You shaved.” She licks her lips.

“Trimmed. I’m not much for a clean shave. Short stubble is the best you’ll get out of me.”

“Good. I like you a little rough.”

The low purr of her voice combined with her actual words have me aching below the belt. I lean my mouth to her ear. “Sunshine, if you keep talking like that, I’m gonna throw you over my shoulder and take you someplace private so I can show you just how rough I wanna be with you.”

Her eyes practically ignite. “Promise?”

Another choking noise rips from my throat. She takes me by the arm and leads me inside, where a few dozen people in tuxes and gowns are milling around. As I follow her, I take in some fancy-as-hell decor. There’s a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling at the entrance and marble statues along the wall.

“Wow. This is, uh...”

“A little over the top?” Harmony giggles. “This place is bougie for sure, but that means the people here have money to burn. And I want them to give it to our dogs.”

Our dogs.

God, I love hearing her say that.

We end up in a crowded ballroom that’s so massive there’s an echo. I could fit the house I grew up in in this space, easy.

Harmony points out the silent auction happening at the far end for a bunch of luxury items donated by local businesses. I glance to the other side, where there's a raised platform. Three of the dogs from the rescue—Tuco, Paul Bunyan, and Bruno—sit with the lady from Forever Homes and their new families while well-dressed folks pet and play with them. I don't realize until Harmony gently squeezes my arm that I'm tense.

“Hey,” she says, her voice soft. “It's okay. The dogs love the attention.” She hesitates for a second. “And they love their new families. Did you realize Paul Bunyan's now got a family with three children to play with?”

The tension in my shoulders eases. “That's what I was hoping for. Paul needs some high energy kids to keep up with him.”

Harmony's smile reads relief and joy. Just then, Morgan and Marco walk up to us. Harmony pulls Morgan into a hug and kisses her cheek hello.

“Harmony, this is incredible! I can't believe how many people showed up. You're gonna raise, like, ten million dollars,” Morgan says as she palms the blue fabric surrounding her belly. She's rounder than when I saw her almost a month ago.

Harmony laughs. “Oh gosh, not even close. I think the final number will be high, though. My dad pretty much strong-armed all of the execs at his hedge fund to come tonight and donate. Mom did the same with the partners at her law firm.”

“Lily's dad's firm is here, too. And a bunch of her mom's interior design clients. Cha-ching!” Morgan nods and waves to someone in the crowd.

Lily walks over, holding hands with a tall-ish guy with dark blond hair. She smiles hello at me while the guy she's with greets Morgan and Harmony with kisses on the cheeks. He gives Marco a nod.

“I'm Lily's husband, Calder,” he says, his Scottish accent pronounced in a sea of American ones. He shakes my hand. I

notice he's a pretty boy like Marco. Damn, Harmony's friends definitely have a type.

The three ladies start chatting excitedly about how close Morgan is to her due date.

"Fucking hell, lads," Calder mutters while tugging at his tie. "I feel like a bit of a pleb. Did you see how many G-wagons were in the parking lot?"

Marco scoffs. "I counted twenty when we walked up to the building. And eight Bentleys. And one Aston Martin. I felt like trailer trash rolling up in my seven-year-old Mercedes."

"Mate, if you're trailer trash, I don't even know what that makes me. My car's in the shop, so I'm driving a bloody Kia rental for now."

I chuckle. "Toyota pickup over here."

Calder fist-bumps me. "Good man."

Marco laughs before flagging down a server. He asks what we want. Harmony requests champagne for her and Lily and sparkling water for Morgan.

"Water for me, too," Marco says before winking at Morgan. "Solidarity."

She gazes lovingly at him.

"Whisky for me, please, if you have it," I ask.

Calder clutches his hand to his chest. "Man after my own heart. Make that two."

Conversation flows easier than I thought it would. As I sip my whisky and chat with Harmony's friends, I begin to relax. I get the sense that Marco and Lily come from money, just like Harmony. And it sounds like Calder and Morgan's modeling careers earn them a good bit of cash. But they're all friendly and welcoming and willing to joke and tease. They're a cool bunch for sure.

Just then, a tall, distinguished-looking older guy walks over to Harmony and pulls her into a hug.

Marco's eyes go wide. "Um, I'm gonna get a refill." He gestures to his nearly full glass and scurries away.

Calder chuckles. "I assume you're aware of Harmony and Marco's history."

I nod.

"They're past it and friends, which is what matters. Her dad, on the other hand." Calder makes a cutting gesture across his throat. "He's still not a fan of the guy who broke his little girl's heart, even if everyone else is over it."

"Ah." I hold back a laugh, straightening up when Harmony introduces me to him.

"Neil Daniels. Pleasure to meet you, Lucas."

I return his firm handshake. "Thank you for all that you and your family have done to help the rescue," I say to him. "Your daughter has single-handedly kept that place running. She's got an incredible work ethic. And the dogs love her."

Harmony beams at me before someone pulls her into a nearby conversation.

"That's good." Neil's gaze remains focused and sharp, like he's studying me.

This isn't the first time someone's dad has sized me up. Every girlfriend I've had, I've had some version of this conversation with their dad or stepdad. This will either veer into "you're not good enough for my precious little girl" or "hurt her, and I'll murder you." It's always awkward as fuck, but survivable.

I will myself to stand up to my full height and keep steady eye contact.

"You know, this dog rescue is quite the departure for my daughter. She's normally into more glamorous pursuits. She's made her career in the beauty business, after all."

I nod and tell him of course.

"It's inspiring to see her succeed in a venture like this. Something totally different from what she's... accustomed to."

It takes a second for me to pick up on his pointed tone. Harmony is rich, beautiful, and high class, and her dad isn't used to seeing her slum it.

“Well, sir. I can assure you that whatever Harmony puts her mind to, she'll succeed. She's one of the most tenacious and hardworking people I've ever known.”

He nods, his expression softening.

“You're quite right. I love my daughter more than anything, but I know her well. She's got a taste for the finer things in life. I just wonder how long her interest will hold in this current venture. Hopefully for a while. But you never know. It was good to meet you, Lucas.”

He leaves, and I silently mull over his words while I sip my whisky. It's no surprise Harmony's wealthy hedge fund manager dad wouldn't want her slumming it at a dog rescue for the rest of her life... or with a guy who gets covered in dirt and dog fur for a living.

I think of how happy Harmony is at the rescue, rehabbing the dogs, running the office, and solving every problem that pops up. She loves this work. Yeah, she's a glamour girl who's used to high-end everything, but it doesn't mean that's all she's about. Fine if her dad can only see her as his privileged daughter. I see her for who she really is.

She finishes her conversation and moves back next to me, the most beautiful smile on her face. She starts to say something, but a loud shriek drowns her out. We look up and see a tiny woman with curly black-gray hair, wearing what looks like a fancy dark velvet robe, pull Lily into a hug.

“Anak!”

“Auntie Mayla!”

There's squealing and hugging and hurried chatter while Mayla hugs Harmony and the rest of the group.

At last, Harmony turns to me. “Lucas, this is Lily's aunt Mayla. She's the one who adopted Tuco.” She turns to Mayla. “Lucas is the dog trainer at the rescue.”

I move to shake her hand, but she yanks me into a hug. Damn, she's strong for being so small.

"I've wanted a dog since my beloved Precious passed away, and Tuco is the perfect little baby. So sweet and friendly," she says when she finally releases me from her death-grip hug. "I have a soft spot for rescue pets, and it's wonderful seeing people like you and Harmony take such good care of vulnerable animals."

She turns to Harmony and pulls her aside, saying something I can't hear.

Harmony's eyes go wide. "Oh my gosh, Mayla. That's so generous of you."

She cradles Harmony's hand in both of hers. "It's my pleasure, hon."

They're interrupted when a waiter walks over to Harmony and whispers something in her ear.

"Oh, right! My speech." She grabs my hand. "Come on."

Before I can ask her what's going on, Harmony pulls me to the area where the dogs are. The young guy hands her a microphone.

"Everyone!"

The entire ballroom falls quiet.

"I just want to say thank you so much for coming tonight. Seeing you all turn out to help these pups is so touching. Thank you."

Applause erupts. Paul Bunyan joins in with a few enthusiastic barks, and the crowd laughs.

"I know the idea of me, prissy Harmony Daniels, running a dog rescue is the last thing you'd ever expect." She chuckles and glances down at her feet before looking at the crowd once more. "But honestly? This is the most fulfilling work I've ever done. These dogs have changed my life. And to know that you all showed up to support them means the world to me."

I take in the sight of Harmony, equal parts vulnerable and strong in this moment. This woman is not afraid to get in front of a crowd and say exactly what she feels. She's not afraid to be herself, to own her passion in front of all these people, a lot of whom probably pegged her as a high-maintenance rich girl and nothing more.

I think back to the day we met, when I made that assumption about her. She proved me so wrong. She proved everyone wrong.

As I gaze up at her, I'm in awe.

Sunshine. Princess. Goddess.

This woman is beyond incredible.

"I couldn't do any of this without the amazing Lucas Mallender. He's the groundskeeper and dog trainer at Fido's Farm and has kept that place running for the past few years." She leads the crowd in a round of applause.

She pins me with that crystal blue gaze. There's something behind those beautiful eyes that I haven't seen before.

"I don't know what I'd do without him. I'm so lucky to have him."

Another round of applause, but all I can focus on is what Harmony just said and the way she's looking at me like I'm the only person worth looking at in this room.

The young guy hands Harmony a piece of paper, breaking our trance. Her eyes go wide. She blinks twice.

"Okay, well, it looks like, so far, we've raised five-hundred and fifty thousand dollars for Fido's Farm."

Deafening cheers echo across the room. Even I'm clapping and shouting. Holy fucking shit, that's a lot of money. The rescue's gonna be okay.

Harmony drops the microphone and jumps into my arms, cheering and squealing.

"Oh my god, we did it! Lucas, we raised so much freaking money."

“Sunshine, *you* did it. I’m so proud of you.”

I move to put her down, but before I can let her go, she kisses my cheek. I freeze, I’m so caught off guard, but I fucking love it. I love the feel of her in my arms. I love the feel of her mouth on me.

Her gaze is expectant as she looks at me.

“Sorry, I guess I got caught up in the moment.” She shakes her head, her smile flustered.

“Don’t be sorry. I liked it. A lot.”

She beams. “Let’s celebrate.”

“I’ll get some champagne.” I glance around for a server, but Harmony tugs my arm. I look back at her.

She shakes her head. “Not here. I wanna do something wild to celebrate. Something away from the crowd, just the two of us.”

The gears in my brain kick to high gear. I take her by the hand.

“I know just the place.”

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HARMONY

Lucas's hand is warm and dry, and I'm tingling all over. The gala is winding down and emptying out, so there aren't many people to smile and wave at as we near the doors. Yet again, this man has my heart thudding a strange, excited rhythm. I don't know where we're going, tonight or tomorrow or next week.

And I kind of love it.

But before we can make an escape, a wall of humans blocks our path. Normally, seeing my friends makes me grin. Right now, though, I have to swallow a groan at the interruption.

Lily, Morgan, *and* Marco's gazes all shoot straight to our joined hands. Calder's does, too, just a little delayed as he drains his final drink of the night.

"Sorry, you guys look like you're escaping," Lily says, her lips twitching.

"Ah, you know. Figured now that the party's over, we'd get a little wild and celebrate," Lucas replies casually.

One of Marco's dark eyebrows lifts. "Harmony getting wild? That's new."

My cheeks heat, but I toss my hair. "People change. Besides, it's not like we're going to hold up a liquor store or something. Are we?"

Lucas chuckles and squeezes my hand. That makes me realize that neither of us bothered to disentangle when my

friends showed up. My heart flutters as I admit to myself that I'm glad. I want to be holding this man's hand in front of my closest friends. We might be headed for trouble, but it seems like we're going there together.

And I really love it.

"Not unless things get really off the rails. But something other than champagne might be nice," Lucas replies.

Calder smirks. "Well, I'd suggest we join you, but I sense that you two prefer to be on your own?"

"Yeah, not tonight."

"Maybe some other time."

Lucas and I speak simultaneously, which makes every one of them laugh. I'm pretty sure my face is going to melt off, but Lily and Morgan just kiss my cheek and shoo us toward the door.

"They're cool," Lucas says as we step into the evening air. "Even Marco, and I can't believe I'm saying that."

"Why?"

"Kind of thought I'd want to punch the guy who broke your heart right in the nose, Sunshine."

I have to stop walking as I double over laughing. Maybe it's the champagne combined with the adrenaline in my veins, but his words are just too perfect. "Calder already did that on Lily's behalf," I giggle finally.

Lucas's brows hit his hairline. "Oh, that's right. I think you told me that a while ago. Means a little more now that I've met them, though. Damn, that makes that whole bunch even cooler. That you all can be such good friends after so much drama. Respect."

"Yeah, well, I might worry too much about rules and appearances sometimes, but I guess we all kind of redefined normal together in some ways."

We're at his truck. Lucas comes around to the passenger side, pops the door, and faces me. "You redefine a lot I thought

I knew, if I'm being honest."

"Such as?"

His hands go to my waist, and my breath hitches. Before I close my eyes for the kiss I'm dying for, he squeezes me and lifts me up into the cab. I'm left speechless as he tucks my dress in and slams the door shut.

But as he fires the engine and backs us out, he says, "Strong. Capable. Determined. And," he glances at me while we wait for a chance to turn onto the road, "you fucking redefine the meaning of beautiful. But I think you already know that."

I flutter my hand and bite my lip. "Oh, hush."

Lucas just laughs.

The cab of this truck is too warm. I buzz the window down and let the wind hit my face, relieved to get some fresh air and finally stop blushing for a moment.

"Surprised you'd want windows down with your hair all done up," Lucas says as he lowers his side, too. "I don't mind putting on the air."

"No, I like this. Besides, who cares about my hair now? The party's over."

"Right. We're getting wild."

Lucas cruises along the highway back out toward the farm. On the way, he searches the map for a liquor store, but they're all closed out here at this time of night. "Might have to call an audible here, Princess," he says over the whipping wind.

"What does that mean?"

He just laughs.

We roll into a gravel parking lot in front of a bar with a neon sign out front that says "The Rusty Hinge."

"Sounds like a country dating app," I mutter, trying not to fall on these heels in gravel.

"Or a tetanus shot waiting to happen," Lucas chuckles.

“Lucas!” the man behind the bar roars as soon as we walk in.

I blink in the dim yellow light. Two couples are electric sliding on the dance floor. A few other patrons are littered among the tables and at the bar. There’s literally sawdust on the floor.

Does this place double as a workshop during the day?

“That’s Rocky,” Lucas explains as he leads me to the bar, again slipping his hand into mine. “How’s it going, man?” he says to Rocky.

“Move it, Bobby. Lucas wants his seat,” Rocky says to some guy on a stool. I’m not sure why—there are plenty available. But then he stops and lets out a low whistle. “*Damn*, man. You on a date?”

Lucas shrugs off the question. “This is Harmony.”

“Ma’am,” Rocky says. His eyes gleam as he looks at me, but he has the decency to keep his gaze on my face.

“Hello,” I say because I’m not sure what else is appropriate. Besides, I’m busy mentally preparing to try and line dance in this sheath dress and realizing it’s not going to be pretty.

“Damn, man,” Rocky mutters to Lucas again.

This is why I don’t get wild.

But just as I’m about to twist out of Lucas’s grip and flee back to the truck, he leans one elbow on the bar and says, “Need a little help. My lady and I are on an adventure, but we can’t find a drink to go. Can you hook me up?”

Rocky shakes his head. “Buddy, you know that’s against the rules.”

Lucas doesn’t speak. He just drops a \$50 on the bar. The men engage in a stare-off that doesn’t seem at all hostile.

Finally, Rocky puckers his lips. “What was that, Lucas? Six beers, and you’re gonna go sit by the window over there? Sure, man. Whatever you say.” He lines six bottles up on the

bar and swipes the bill for his pocket. “Now, I’m just gonna turn around and wash some glasses while y’all go find your table inside this bar.”

He hums a loud, tone-deaf tune while Lucas chuckles, scoops the bottles into his arms, and jerks his head toward the door. I scurry behind him, nearly fall on my ass from how slippery the sawdust makes the floor under my heels, and leave the swinging saloon doors flapping behind us as we return to his truck.

There’s a cooler in the bed, and Lucas jumps up and drops the bottles in before helping me back into the cab. He hands me one and gets us cruising again.

“Oh, my gosh.” I burst out in giggles again. “This is insane. What was that place?”

“My favorite dive bar.”

“That place redefined dive, of that I am sure.”

I grin harder at the sound of his laugh. “I realize it’s no place for a princess, but I figured Ms. Harmony Daniels doesn’t mind getting herself a little dusty for a good cause.”

“Beer is *not* a good cause.”

“Blasphemous. Besides, pretty sure Rocky’s never even heard of rosé.”

“I’d take that bet.” We’ve both got a case of the giggles by now. Lucas is grinning like I rarely see him do, and the elation of the moment is going straight to my head. I don’t need alcohol tonight.

I need him. I want *him*.

Does he want me? Is this going anywhere?

I bite my lip and give my head a shake. *Just enjoy the ride, Harmony. It doesn’t have to be a happily-ever-after fairytale. It can just be two people having fun. Even if I wish that fun was naked and dripping and...*

Just enjoy the ride, Harmony.

The tires crunch on gravel again, and I blink as we roll to a stop among a cluster of trees. “What now?”

Lucas turns to me and leans in. He crooks his finger for me to do the same, so I unbuckle and lean until his lips are at my ear. “Now, we see how wild you really want to get tonight, Princess.”

He inhales deeply and lets his cheek brush mine. Tingles race from my face straight down my spine. Without thinking, I reach up and skim my fingers along the close-cropped stubble on his jaw. “I’m not really good at getting wild,” I confess—but then I let my touch run over his bottom lip.

Lucas hisses. “Now that’s a bet I *wouldn’t* take. Come on, follow me.”

He pulls back, and I give an involuntary whine. His cheeky smirk flashes once before he’s out of the car and coming around to help me out.

It’s silent except for the wind in the trees. It’s pitch dark except for the full moon hanging overhead. I step out of my heels and leave them in the truck while Lucas grabs the cooler, then takes my hand and leads me along a soft, well-worn dirt path into the trees.

We emerge on a dock over a lake glittering in the moonlight.

“Beautiful,” I murmur.

“Yes, Princess, you are,” Lucas breathes in my ear. He’s standing behind me, and I feel him bend to set the cooler down before his palms rest on my shoulders. But his next words are serious and open, not sexy and teasing. “Is this okay, Harmony?”

“It’s good, Lucas,” I say with a nod. I trust this man. I want this moment. It is very okay.

He steps around me and shrugs out of his jacket. “Good. Then drink a beer with me and toast all the hard work you did.”

We sit on the dock and clink bottles. He laughs when I choke on the bitter suds and admit that beer is not my thing, but this is a celebration. I sip until it's gone. When we're nearly empty, Lucas turns to me with an arched brow. "Wild enough for you?"

"I'm having fun, but it, uh, feels kind of tame."

"Was hoping you'd say that. Good. I'll race you to the water."

I choke on my final sip. "What?"

But Lucas is on his feet. All I can do is gape as he strips out of every article of clothing he's wearing, stands in the moonlight like a marble statue for just a moment, then throws himself into the lake.

"Holy fucking shit," he gasps when his head breaks the surface.

"Cold?" I manage to ask.

"Fucking fr—uhh, no, not at all. Come on in. You'll love it."

I laugh and shake my head. "Lucas, if you think I'm going to..."

"Strip out of that pretty dress and bring your ass into this lake? If I think that, then what?" he growls in a delicious dare.

With a shaky breath, I reach for my zipper. "Then I guess you'd be right," I say once I'm out of my underwear. Not the naked and dripping I was hoping for, but I'm still going for it. Lucas is treading water and gazing up at me. He's seen me naked before, I know, but in the moonlight, it's a different kind of thrill.

"You're staring," I murmur.

"Goddamn right I am. Get in here."

With a deep breath, I leap off the dock.

"Holy fucking shit," I gasp as soon as my head is above water.

Lucas howls with laughter.

I splash water at him. “You liar, you said it was warm.”

“You knew I was lying.”

I giggle and bob under again, trying to acclimate. We swim out several yards and back, talking about the gala and the dogs in the same comfortable way we chat on the porch in the evening. If it weren't for the cold water invigorating every inch of my naked skin, it would be like any other conversation between us.

But it's not. Not for me, at least.

Back at the dock, I hold onto the ladder and tread lazily. He holds on to the opposite side so we're facing each other. “Lucas?”

“Hmm?”

“I, um, really appreciate you coming to the gala.”

“Anything for you, Princess.”

That makes me scowl and shake my head. “Don't say that, please.”

He cocks his head. “Why?”

“Because it makes me sound like a spoiled little princess, getting my way on whatever I want. Like I forced you to come. Like—”

“No, Harmony.” Lucas's voice is low but insistent. “I know you're worried about that, but it's bullshit. You don't get your way. You *make* your damn way, girl. I've gotten to watch you blaze a trail with the farm and all you've done—you're a fucking force of nature. And you should be proud of that.”

I'm a force of nature?

“Hell yeah, you are,” he says, and I realize I've spoken aloud. “You gave up a cushy job to get your hands dirty and rescue our dogs. Before that, from what I've heard, you broke off an engagement and threw aside everything you thought you'd wanted for the sake of finding your true happiness. What's so hard to believe?”

I blink. I never looked at it that way. “I couldn’t marry him after... Well, I could’ve. But it would’ve been wrong.”

“Exactly. And you could’ve gone and got yourself another suit to fill his place, easy. But you didn’t. And now look at you: skinny dipping and drinking beer with a busted-up guy like me.” He rolls his eyes and flashes a sarcastic smile.

“There is *nothing* busted about you.” I put my palm on his cheek and shake my head.

Lucas hums. He gently grasps my wrist beside his face. “And there is *nothing* that I wouldn’t do for you... Princess.”

I’m not sure how, but it feels like we’ve gotten closer. I’m still holding the ladder and so is he, but our bodies are inches apart now. Despite the cold water, I’m suddenly warm. “Don’t call me that,” I breathe.

“No?”

“I hate it.”

“I don’t think you do.”

I smile. “I don’t,” I admit. My body brushes against his, and Lucas’s eyes roll back in his head. He’s not hard, but that quick jolt has me aching.

Aching—and remembering reality.

I suck in a breath and grab the ladder. I know my ass is basically in his face, but I don’t care. I scuttle up and scoop up my dress. Before I can try to step into it, Lucas is on the dock, too. “What was that?” he grumbles.

“We... we can’t... we can’t—oomph.” I topple over and land on my hip in a failed attempt to get back into the sheath gown. I’m wet and shivering, and this bodycon number isn’t having any of my clumsy efforts.

Lucas makes a strangled sound that’s clearly a smothered laugh. I cover my face with the cloth in humiliation, then reach for my panties instead.

But my hand freezes when Lucas kneels in front of me. His gaze flicks over me, and then he leans into his palms,

bringing our faces closer. “We can’t what?”

“Um, do... things.”

“What kind of things, Harmony?”

The things I’m dying to do with you.

I chew on my lip.

Then, I say it aloud.

A low growl rumbles in his throat. “I don’t care about boundaries or rules. I don’t give a *fuck* about them, actually. All I care about is what you want.”

Deep in my belly, it’s like something erupts. It shoots heat and fire and a boldness I didn’t know I possessed through my bloodstream. My gaze flicks from his eyes to his lips.

And then, I lean forward and press my mouth to his.

Lucas jolts as I slide my fingers into his hair, but then he groans and softens his mouth. His tongue finds mine as one hand slides to my jaw, angling me up. He kisses like he’s thirsty for me, but it’s a measured amount of intensity that keeps me chasing more. I crawl forward to get closer, and Lucas sits up on his knees. He wraps his arms around my body and pulls me to him, rubbing his cock against my pelvis. Stars explode behind my closed eyelids. Our skin is cold, but our blood is hot. His warm mouth sends sheets of goosebumps across my body.

“Lucas,” I gasp when he rips his lips away from mine and drags them down my neck.

“Christ, Harmony,” he groans between biting kisses. “Tell me what you want. It’s fucking yours. *I’m* fucking yours.”

I don’t know how to ask for what I want because what I want is everything. I want everything, every inch of him, every kiss his mouth can deliver. Every touch those fingers can muster. Every *thrust* that cock can give. I want it, I want all of it, and I want it to last until I forget my own name and can’t walk anymore. The depth of my desire is deeper than this lake for sure.

The realization makes me dizzy, and I fall back to lie on the dock, pulling him over me. He plants his palms beside my shoulders and lowers his body until he's grinding against me while we kiss. I wrap my legs around his calves and lift until his cock bumps against my aching clit.

"Oh," I groan as he growls.

"You want to come right now?" he hisses in my ear. "Look how needy you are, Princess. Getting so wild."

"I'm sorry," I whimper—but I'm rocking against him shamelessly as I say it.

His fingers plunge inside me and press against my front wall, and I have to sink my teeth into his shoulder to keep from literally howling in the moonlight.

"Lucas... Lucas, please."

He pumps his fingers steadily. With his cock bumping my clit, it doesn't take long until I feel myself clench. Lucas dips his head and flicks his tongue across each of my nipples. "Come for me, Sunshine," he murmurs. "Come all over my hand, out here on this dock in the middle of the night, you fucking goddess."

And I do.

Waves of pleasure hit me. I swallow my moans and try to keep quiet at the blissful pleasure. When I go still, Lucas slowly pulls back. My eyes are hard to open, but when I do, I find him sitting on his heels, waiting.

"You good?"

"You're not," is my answer.

He laughs. "I'll be alright."

I swallow hard. The next words I say don't belong to me. They're borrowed from a wild, selfish version of me I'm only now meeting. "Well, I won't. Take me home, Lucas. We're just getting started."

His jaw bobs over several hard swallows. Then, he tosses me his dress shirt. "Put that on. We'll be home in ten minutes."

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LUCAS

It only takes seven minutes to make it back to the house. My foot is heavy on the gas pedal. I've got a raging hard-on that's as painful as it is pleasurable and a nearly naked goddess in my passenger seat who's as wet as she is turned on.

I screech to a halt in the driveway, throw my truck in park, kill the engine, and force myself to take a slow, silent breath before I hazard a glance at Harmony. I'm so fucking turned on right now that if I don't take a second to calm myself, I'm certain I'll explode at just the sight of her.

When I look at her, an explosion happens alright. It's in my chest. My heart races like I've swum a hundred meters on a single breath.

Christ.

It's not just that she's stunning. That's the most obvious thing I could say about Harmony, even now. Here she is, makeup smeared, hair wet and messy from our little skinny dipping excursion, and she's still the most beautiful woman who's ever walked this planet.

It's the look in her eyes that hits hard. Her gaze is cloudy with arousal, but there's a vulnerability underneath it too. It's as clear as their crystal blue hue. My chest aches. I'm willing to bet not many people get to see her like this—stripped down, her inhibitions gone, giving in to the wild-as-hell streak it's clear she possesses underneath that prim and pretty exterior.

But she's letting *me* see. She's letting *me* see her get wild. She's letting *me* be the one to touch her, to kiss her, to give her

an orgasm on the dock minutes ago with just my hand.

As she stares at me, she starts to smile, then bites her lip. Something feral inside of me takes hold.

Clad in just my boxers, I hop out of my truck, run to her side, open the door, help her out, and lead her into the house. When I shut the door, I move her so she's against the wall and bracket my arms on either side of her shoulders.

“You're right, Princess. We're just getting started.”

Those crystal baby blues go wide before she grins. And then I fall to my knees and do the one thing I've been aching to do for weeks.

I don't even bother to swallow back the grunt inside of me. As soon as I'm at eye level with Harmony's upper thighs, it rips from my throat. The hem of my button-up dress shirt covers the part of her I'm craving. I kiss the damp fabric over her mound, relishing the pitchy whine she makes and the way her inner thigh muscles shudder.

“Lucas, I... I...”

“You what, Sunshine?” Her skin feels like fire against my lips, even with the fabric barrier between us.

“I... want to do things to you, Lucas. Filthy things. I wanna ride your...”

Her shaky voice and trembling legs make me grin.

I kiss that quivering skin again. “Well, that's lucky because I'd like that, too.”

“Right, but...” She threads her hands through my hair and tugs so hard that my scalp stings. I growl. Fuck yeah, I knew my girl was a little rough.

I gently push up my shirt and drink in the beautiful view of her naked upper thighs. “But you already took care of me on the dock... oh!”

I run my index finger along her soaking wet slit. Harmony moans.

I stand back up, my hands on her waist. “What happened on the dock was barely a warmup. I haven’t even scratched the surface of what I’m gonna do to you.”

She’s stammering when I lead her upstairs to my bedroom. I sit at the foot of my bed and position her to stand between my legs.

When I look up at her, she licks her lips, gazing at me expectantly. She opens her mouth, then closes it with a shy smile.

“What is it?”

She starts to shake her head but then stops herself. “I’ve wanted to do this with you for so long.”

“You and me both, Princess.”

“No, I mean... I wanted to do this pretty much the day I met you.”

Those perfect teeth sink into that equally perfect bottom lip.

“And you think you’re alone in that?” I say as I unbutton my shirt that she’s wearing.

“Wait, you wanted to jump my bones too?”

“Wasn’t it obvious? I couldn’t stop staring at you.”

She grins wide. “I just assumed you were taken aback by the high-maintenance city girl who strolled onto your turf.”

“I was. I still am.” I gently pull the shirt off of her, about to say something. But then I go quiet. Because fuck, she’s beyond stunning. Before today, I’d only ever seen her naked once, when she was writhing on the couch, touching her sexy body. But I know without a doubt that it doesn’t matter how often I see this woman naked. Her beauty will always blow me away.

I press the palm of my hand against her flawless pussy, relishing how fucking warm and wet she is. Her chest rises the same moment her jaw drops. She’s panting as I work her in my hand.

“Tell me everything you want, Princess. I’m dying to give it to you.”

Her eyes flutter just before her head falls back. Her blonde hair falls over her shoulders in messy, damp waves. The dim light from the lamp and the moonlight streaming in from the window highlight the ample curves of her tits and hips and ass, the gentle lines of her back and arms and legs.

“I want all of you, Lucas. Your hands, your mouth, your cock.” She grips her tits with her hands, playing with her nipples.

“Fuck,” I say through a clenched jaw. My free hand aches to grip my cock to relieve the pleasure-throb surging inside me, but I hold off. If I do that, I’ll probably burst. And I want to last as long as possible for her.

I channel my focus and energy on bringing Harmony her second orgasm of the evening. Her pitchy wails are so loud, my ears ring. As of tonight, it’s my new favorite sound in the world.

She starts to wobble, so I steady her with my free hand on her hip. Then I stand and shed my boxers. When her eyes go wide and unblinking, I’m certain my smile turns smug as hell. Yeah, it’s some caveman bullshit, but I don’t care. I love that she clearly likes what she sees.

“You’ve already seen this.”

“I know, but not this close. And not in sexy bedroom lighting.” She licks her lips. “I knew you’d be huge.”

She starts to reach for me, but I gently wrap my hand around her wrist and stop her. “Not yet.”

She starts to protest, but I lie flat on the bed and pin her with my gaze. “Sit on my face, Princess.”

A fire ignites in her stare. She’s smiling as she climbs on top of me, positioning her legs on either side of my head before slowly lowering herself down.

“Is this okay?” Her voice is shy, tentative.

I run my fingers along her impossibly soft skin, relishing the curve of her hips. With both hands, I reach around and grab a handful of her luscious ass, coaxing her forward and lowering her onto my mouth. I can feel her hesitation in the twitch of her legs, in the slowness of her movements.

“Hey.” I gaze up at her. “Do you have any idea how hot you get me?”

I lean up and run my tongue along her slit, moaning as I savor her taste, her softness.

“So fucking sweet. Just like I knew you’d be.”

The shyness in her eyes disappears. She grins as she relaxes on my face, and I go to town.

I sound like an actual Neanderthal, the way I’m grunting and growling while I work her over with my tongue. But I can’t help myself. It’s beyond hot having Harmony work herself on my face. This prim and proper princess is currently dripping all over my beard. It’s the biggest turn-on knowing that I’m the one who brings this out in her. I’m the one she chooses to be this wild and free around.

Her thighs clench around my head. “Lucas. I’m so close.”

I tighten my grip on her hips, a silent urge for her to stop holding back, to let herself go completely. And she does.

She’s a shuddering, shouting mess when she comes, flailing on top of me. Her chest heaves as she starts to come down. With my hands on her waist, I move her down along my body. She settles on my stomach, her palms flat on my chest.

“Oh my fucking god,” she says with a smile, her breath shaky. Her expression is dazed, like she’s seeing stars. She tugs at her messy hair. “It’s never been like that with anyone I’ve been with. Ever.”

“Really? That’s a shame.” I hold back a laugh at how adorable and bewildered she sounds.

She shakes her head thoughtfully. “No, I just... Don’t get me wrong. I’ve had good sex before. But that was mind-blowing.” Her breathy chuckle comes off like she’s in

disbelief. “And I mean, that wasn’t even technically all-the-way sex.”

“Well, let’s get to it, then.”

I sit up and gently move her off me so that I can grab a condom from my nightstand drawer. Before I can put it on myself, she grabs my arm, stilling me.

“Wait.” She bends her head and licks the tip of my dick. My knees buckle, and I nearly collapse on the bed. Holy fucking shit.

With her hand gripping the base of my cock, she swirls that perfect tongue over and over. I thread my hand through her hair, groaning at how fucking good it feels to have Harmony’s velvet tongue work me slow and deep in her mouth.

“Baby,” I pant.

“Oh, so I’m ‘baby’ now?” She smirks up at me before gliding her tongue slowly down my length once more.

“Baby, princess, sunshine, queen, president, I’ll call you whatever the hell you want me to. Just please keep doing that with your mouth. Fuck.”

Heat ignites in my core, building and building until the muscles in my legs start to contract. She sucks me faster, causing another string of grunted curse words to fall from my lips. Now I’m the one seeing stars and rocket ships and unicorns and fucking mecha Godzilla. I can’t tell up from down, reality from fantasy, that’s how good Harmony is with her sweet little mouth and tongue. A surge of pleasure rockets through my dick, and I know this has to stop before I embarrass myself.

With my hand in her hair, I pull her gently away. “Fuck, that mouth... that tongue.”

She licks her lips, her smile wicked. But when I roll on the condom, move on top of her, and tease her entrance with my rock-hard dick, that smile drops. Her eyebrows crash together, and she gasps.

“All the way in. Please.”

Her breathy whine is like a drug coursing through my bloodstream.

“Say it again, Princess.”

“Please, Lucas. Please, I want you inside me.”

I push myself barely an inch inside her. Another whining sound. Now I’m steel. Nothing has ever felt as good as her.

She moves to grip my shoulders, scratching her nails against my skin. My entire body aches with want. I push all the way in. Her head falls back as she shouts my name.

“Claw the fuck out of me, Princess. Leave your marks all over me. That’s how wild I make you, isn’t it?”

I thrust into her and let out a strangled noise. Being inside of Harmony is heaven. I move, my rhythm crazed but steady while I try to take in the beauty beneath me. The way her skin burns hot, the way her entire body blushes in arousal, the way her tits bounce, the way her eyes glaze over... It’s all too much but somehow not enough. Because I know I’ll never be able to get enough of Harmony. I’m hooked. I’m addicted. I’m hers.

My name is a cry on her tongue. She digs her nails into my back and wraps her legs around my waist. The mix of pleasure and pain is heaven. Heat slingshots through me, pooling at my lower abdomen. My dick throbs with each passing second, my body begging for release.

I tense my entire body until the sensation is at bay. No fucking way. Not till she gets hers.

I pause to hook her leg on my shoulder to deepen the angle.

“Oh my god,” she sobs as I slow-thrust into her. I lick my thumb and gently circle over her swollen clit. Her eyes are starry again, like she’s never experienced this kind of pleasure before.

I kick things up a notch—faster, harder. Just seeing that look of ecstasy on her face has me at a whole new level of

determination. I'm hell-bent on being the best lay she's ever had. I'm going to fucking ruin all other men for her.

"No one fucks you like me, Princess."

She shakes her head. "No one."

"Say it."

"No one fucks me like you, Lucas." Her eyes roll back for the millionth time, and she claws at my skin like it's all too much.

I'm on the verge of losing it, so I thrust harder and deeper. Seconds later, she thrashes against me, screaming herself hoarse. I'm right behind her, coming with a growl. My orgasm hits so hard, so intensely, that my vision blurs. The first thing that comes back into focus is her face.

She looks drunk with her sleepy eyes and smile. She leans up and kisses me. "You've ruined me. Nothing will ever be that good."

I pump my fist in the air, and she laughs.

I hop up and run to the bathroom to get rid of the condom. When I come back to bed, Harmony's curled under the covers, eyes closed. She opens them and smiles when I climb next to her in bed and cuddle her to me.

"So much for boundaries," she says.

"Boundaries are overrated. Good sex, however, is never a bad thing."

"Ah-ah." She raises an eyebrow. "Mind-blowing sex."

I laugh and kiss her before we fall asleep.



When I wake, I'm greeted by Harmony's blonde hair scattered across my stomach. She's hugging her arm around my waist, eyes closed, breathing softly as she sleeps. I smile and stifle a yawn. I don't want to wake her up. God, she looks cute as fuck when she sleeps. Like a sexy but innocent angel.

I replay last night in my head, how hot it was. I smile to myself, my skin heating at the memory of every filthy thing we got up to—and how we officially annihilated those flimsy-as-hell boundaries about being coworkers and housemates that we set up all those months ago. I guess that’s how strong our attraction is. We like each other too much to play it safe.

A few seconds later, she starts to stir. When she opens those big blue eyes, she yawns, then smiles up at me. “Morning, Sunshine.”

I tuck a chunk of her hair behind her ear. “That’s my line.”

She chuckles before muttering about having to pee. I realize I’ve gotta go too, so I slip into the hallway bathroom. We crawl back into bed, cuddling and kissing.

“As much as I’d love to spend all day in bed with you,” I say between kisses. “I can’t. I gotta look after the pups.”

“Oh, right,” she says against my mouth before pulling away. “How about a quickie before we grab breakfast and check on the dogs?”

“Sounds perfect.” I reach across Harmony for the drawer with the condoms when I notice her stare turns focused. She’s looking at my arm.

“What’s that?” She points to the underside of my right bicep. It dawns on me what she sees.

“Taylor,” she says, reading the small cursive script on the meaty part of my underarm. It takes a second before recognition flashes across her face. “Oh. Your ex’s kid. That’s really sweet.”

She smiles like she’s not sure if she should have said it.

“Is it?” I shift to sit up against the headboard and cross my arms over my chest.

Harmony leans back, probably at the defensiveness in my tone, but I blurted it out before I could stop myself. I sound like an asshole right now.

I drop my hands to my sides. “Sorry. I just... I’m not used to people thinking it’s sweet that I have a tattoo of a kid who’s

not even mine. Most people think it's weird. Or pathetic."

When I look at Harmony, her mouth is open, like she can't believe what I just said. "What? Who in the world would think that's pathetic and weird? That's awful."

"Most people I know."

She makes a disgusted noise. "It's absolutely not weird or pathetic. Lucas, you were Taylor's dad. Lots of parents get tattoos of their kids' names."

"Well, I'm not his dad. Not anymore."

I take in the pained look on her face, and for a second, I wish I hadn't said that. We were having a hot and fun morning together, and now I've killed the mood.

"Lucas." Harmony's soft voice compels me to look at her. "I know you don't like talking about your past relationship, and I get that. I'm not going to even try to imagine what you went through, but it must have been so painful. There's nothing wrong with you getting a tattoo to remember Taylor. You love him, and he loves you. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks or says."

There's a conviction in her tone that hits me deep. She gets it. She's not like everyone else who pities me or thinks I'm a dumbass for getting attached to a kid that was never mine.

"Everyone else in my life—most of my family and friends—thought it wasn't my place to help raise Taylor. To let him call me Dad," I say after a long pause. "And when Jessica left me, a lot of them thought it was a good thing. They told me I had my freedom back. I didn't have to take care of some other dude's kid." A bitter laugh falls from my mouth. "God, hearing that pissed me off. You know, when my brother said that to me after Jessica left me, I punched him. I was so pissed. He didn't get it. Taylor was everything to me. I loved him. I still do."

Harmony grabs my hand with both of hers and nods, like she gets it, even though I know she doesn't. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that she empathizes with me and understands how difficult this is for me.

“I’ll always love him. I’ll always think of him as my first kid, even when I have kids of my own someday.”

It’s not till a few seconds later that I realize what I’ve said.

When I have kids of my own someday.

Harmony doesn’t know if she want kids. That’s probably why she’s looking at me with that freaked-out, unsettled look on her face.

We just took things to the next level by sleeping together, and now I sound like a weirdo who’s obsessed with kids. She probably thinks I want to have kids with her now, which must be terrifying. We’ve known each other for a total of three months, and she’s not even sure she wants to have kids.

What the hell? What am I saying? What am I even thinking? Why am I putting Harmony and kids in the same thought? God, why can’t I just focus on the moment, on the amazing woman in my bed? That’s all that matters right now.

“Not that I want to have kids anytime soon. Or ever.” I make sure to look her in the eyes when I say it.

She nods and smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. I’ve weirded her out with all this talk about kids. Great.

“You were an amazing dad to Taylor, Lucas. I know it. I’m sorry that you can’t be in his life anymore. That’s so unfair.” She touches the spot on my arm where his name is before shifting to get out of bed. I gently grab her hand, stopping her.

“Wait. I made things weird, and I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.”

She frowns. “Lucas, it’s okay. I’m the one who started this.”

I shake my head. “No, you were right. It’s good for me to talk about what happened with Jessica and Taylor. But all I care about right now is you. Truly.”

There’s hesitation in her expression, but it fades after a second. “All I care about right now is you too.”

She scoots closer on the bed, and then moves to straddle me. Her gaze drops to my mouth, and she licks her lips. That's her tell. She's turned on. I pull her into a kiss and run my hands all over her, settling on her ass. As I squeeze that perfect swell of flesh, she moans into my mouth. I'm hot and hard all at once. We go crazy on each other.

For the rest of the day and the rest of the next several days, aside from the dogs, Harmony is all I think about.

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HARMONY

I pop open the back door of my Land Rover, and Phantom hops right out. No more ramp for my fella; this pup doesn't need eyes to get around. Dr. Wheating, our vet, said that before the surgery, his eyes were superinfected, and he'd paw at them all the time. So even though everyone we pass makes an aww-poor-baby face, I know that Phantom is happy and healthy.

Besides, he's got his momma looking out for him. Phantom can get around on his own, but it's funny how protective I feel over him. I don't think I've ever loved a being as much as I love this dog. I don't know if that makes me pathetic, and I really don't care.

My former friend, Brittney, flashes into my mind. Her mother had a teacup dog, some tiny thing she used to carry in her Birkin bag. We used to gush over how cute it was, like a little toy. It didn't matter that he peed on the rugs and bit us if we got our fingers too close.

One glance at this sleek gray mass of muscle walking beside me, and I break out into a goofy grin at how much life has changed. I had to break up with Brittney after the whole Marco debacle. She tried to persuade me that Lily was lying about what happened. She wanted me to marry a rich guy, have kids, and have the life we'd both dreamed of. She wasn't trying to be horrible or anything, but watching her throw someone as genuine as Lily under the bus for the sake of appearances really woke me up to a lot of things.

And look where it got me. Walking to meet my amazing friends with the best dog in the world... After waking up next to the best, most genuine man in the world.

A wave of affection hits me, first in the chest, but it trickles down to my thighs quickly. I picture Lucas this morning, lounging in bed and reading on his phone while I got dressed to meet the girls for brunch. He'd asked about Morgan's due date and everything. Not because he had to. Because he actually freaking cares about people.

He freaking cares about me.

Another wave hits me, this one even sweeter than the first. Lucas and I have been in a bubble of sex, laughter, and dogs for a week straight. It. Is. Amazing. I've never felt this free with someone. This open and vulnerable and yet totally powerful with someone. Lucas makes me feel like a freaking goddess.

And when he puts those lips on me, *holy fuck...*

“Over here!”

Lily's shout jolts me out of my reverie, and I scan the patio tables to find my friends in a far corner. It's a perfect fall day, and the restaurant's outdoor section is full.

It takes me a second to configure the best route to them, but then I roll my shoulders back and palm a treat from my purse. Holding it to Phantom's lips, I say, “Follow.”

He munches the treat and walks in precise step with me. I want to punch the air as the leash dangles loosely from my hand. Getting him to walk in heel was a move that Lucas and I have worked on with him for weeks now. It took some work—on his *and* my part—but the day he nailed it was another moment where I felt 100% like I'm finally just where I'm supposed to be. Lucas had laughed while I leapt around shrieking after the drill was over.

He'd threaded his fingers into my hair and kissed me when Phantom heeled all the way to the car this morning.

I shake my head out of my steamy thoughts and finish winding through the tables. Lily and Morgan squeal and pet

Phantom, who wags his tail and pants happily at the attention. We kiss cheeks hello, and instantly fall into our usual catch-up on life.

Morgan goes first, praising Marco's law practice and grumbling about how ready she is to give birth. Lily grins and hums.

"Yeah, you say that, but you only have a couple more weeks, and then she's out in the world. This is a special time."

"You just say that because you've got baby fever. Talk to me when your ankles are swollen, and you have to pee all the time," Morgan replies, but then she smiles softly and rubs her belly. "I guess you've got a point, though."

I watch Lily eye Morgan's baby bump with a glittering expression. With a sip of my mimosa, I bend down and drop Phantom another treat. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Lucas: *Know I should be leaving you alone, but damn girl. Just thinking about you's got me...*

Lucas: *Sent an image.*

The photo loads, and my eyes go wide. It's a photo of his lap, covered in the bedsheet, his broad hand wrapped firmly around his hard cock.

"So, Harmony, your turn. I don't have news, really. Calder's out in New York on official whisky business, the semester started last week, and otherwise—" She opens her palms to the sky.

I nearly feed Phantom the phone, I'm so flustered. It takes three long sips of water before I can clear my throat and say, "Well, the farm is good. Did you see how Phantom walked with me all the way over here?"

Morgan beams. "You're amazing with him, Harmony. That is so cool."

"Thank you." I bite my lip. "I love him so much."

It's nice having true friends. The sentimental, joyful look that Lily just gave Morgan is now aimed at me from both of them. These women care about my passions. After friends like

Brittney, where everything was appearance and status, it means the world to know how there they are for me.

Which is maybe why I blurt, “And, um, Lucas is... good.”

Instantly, my face floods with heat as their brows hit their hairlines. Morgan’s lips curl in a smirk. “Just how good is he, Harmony?”

No, I meant he’s doing fine. You know, at his job. And life. And...

I palm my blazing face, think again of that photo, and sigh. “So fucking good.”

Their shrieks pierce my ears and shatter the general din of the restaurant. Several people look over at us, so I hiss at them to shush. The shrieking stops, but they are helpless with giggles as they high-five each other.

“I *knew* it was a matter of time!” Lily crows.

“Uh, duh. You could smell the pheromones through our first Skype session,” Morgan agrees with another high-five.

I keep my face in my palms and shake my head, but I’m laughing too. “I hate you both,” I say at last.

“You do not,” they chorus.

“Fine, I don’t. I’ve kind of been dying to tell you, but...”

“You’ve been a little busy?” Lily says with a salacious wiggle of her brows.

“You could say that.”

They shriek again, quieter this time.

“Oh, my god, I am so happy for you,” Morgan says once she stops her freak-out.

“Well, I mean, it’s not like, official, or serious or anything.”

They trade a look. “Uh-huhhh,” Morgan drawls. “I’m sure you’re telling yourself that, hun. But we’ve seen you two together. There’s nothing casual about the way that man looks at you.”

“He looks at me like I’m...”

“Dinner,” Morgan says.

“Breakfast,” Lily says at the same time.

“Stop it,” I giggle, but there is something nice about third-party confirmation. Not that I need it with the amount of worship Lucas does to my body. We’re *not* officially anything, but I’m not sure if you can have sex that intense without there being some feelings involved.

There are a lot of feelings on my part, that’s for damn sure.

Lucas is another place where I feel like I’ve finally found something that *fits*. Something that feels real and true and aligned to who I really am. Being in his bed, being totally consumed by the passion we share—it’s realer than any sex I’ve ever had. It makes me feel more alive than I knew I could.

Phantom. Lucas. The farm. All of it feels like a life I want to live.

I swallow hard as I admit it to myself. No, I won’t get over my head and start asking for a commitment from him, but hell yes, I’ll enjoy every single second we have together.

I lift my mimosa in a toast. “Here’s to Lucas being good and my friends being the *best ever*.”

As we lower our glasses, Lily puts her hand on my arm. “It’s cool if you two aren’t official, Harmony. You deserve to have fun and let it be whatever it will be. But it’s also fine if you want it to be more, you know? You can ask for that, too. If you decide you want to.”

I bite my lip. “Doesn’t feel like a me thing to do.”

“I’m just saying. You’ve gone out on so many limbs in the last few years, but putting your heart out there can be damn scary. Just know that it’s worth it if you decide it’s what you want to do.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that this might be another place where I’ll have to throw everything up in the air. I’m not ready now, but I have done a hell of a lot, haven’t I?

Maybe I could do that part too.

Maybe.

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LUCAS

“I can’t believe you wanted to come here tonight,” I say as I open the door to the Rusty Hinge. We’re greeted with a blast of music, some honky-tonk jam I’ve heard before but can’t remember the name of.

Harmony giggles when I take her hand and lead her to my usual seat at the bar. “Well, we didn’t get to spend much time here the first time we came. I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.”

I flag down Rocky and order us two beers. “Unless you want something nicer?” I say to Harmony.

Rocky makes a grumbling noise that I ignore. Harmony just smiles. “Nope. Beer is great.”

“The perfect woman,” Rusty says. I frown at him, and he lumbers away to grab our beers, dropping them off without another word.

Harmony holds up her bottle. “To the perfect woman.”

She winks, and I laugh, tapping my ice-cold bottle against hers. “Damn right, Sunshine.”

I know she’s joking, but I’m not. Harmony *is* perfect. It doesn’t matter what we’re doing: waking up in bed together, working together, sharing a meal, watching TV on the couch, fucking like animals. It’s heaven. I’ve never been happier than these past few weeks with Harmony. Sure, past relationships have been fun. I’ve been happy. But not like this. Nothing compares to that searing sensation on my skin when she

touches me, that ache in my chest when she cuddles into me half-asleep, the way my heart races when she smiles or bites her lip, or the way my mouth waters for her taste.

I watch her sip her beer through those beautiful bee-stung lips. She nods her head to the beat of the song playing through the speaker system. Even just sitting next to her in this shitty bar is bliss. Nothing else compares. You could offer to trade me my spot in this dive bar for anything in the world right now—a million bucks, tickets to the World Series, eternal youth—and I’d choose sitting on this ratty bar stool listening to the most godawful country music because she’s here.

God, I love this woman.

The thought catches me off guard when I realize what I’ve silently admitted to myself.

Damn, dude. Getting a little ahead of yourself there?

I shrug off the thought as she looks at me. “I think I like it here.”

I make a scoff-laugh noise. “Really?”

Some twangy song starts up. She winces, and the bridge of her nose crinkles the slightest bit.

With my index finger, I gently tap that tiny perfect wrinkle. “Cute. As. Fuck.”

She chuckles. “Is it really that hard to believe I’d like a place like this?”

I shake my head. “Not at all now that I know you.”

“I know I look more like the type to go to some trendy spot where I end up dancing on the tables after one too many.” She laughs, almost to herself. “I probably wouldn’t have wanted to check out a place like this before coming here and meeting you.”

Her gaze falls to her beer bottle as she traces the frosted exterior with a finger. When her eyes cut back to me, there’s a flash of something. It’s fiery and soft all at once. “But I can’t imagine being anywhere other than here with you, Lucas.”

Her softly spoken words are all I hear, even past the noisy chatter and obnoxious music. I slide my hand over the bartop, lacing her fingers in mine. “I feel the same way about you.”

Just then, my phone blares. When I see it’s my mom, I let it go to voicemail. But she calls again. I groan.

“Hang on,” I say to Harmony. “What’s up, Mom?”

“Hey, hon. Say, is your friend Marco available to dress up for a kid’s party tomorrow by chance?”

“Um, probably not. Why? What’s up?”

She explains that a parent made a last-minute request for Rapunzel and Flynn Rider for her daughter’s birthday party.

“Can’t Levi do it?”

She exhales sharply. “No, Levi can’t do it. Your brother, in his infinite wisdom, thought it would be smart to hook up with the mother of the kid having the party. And her husband walked in on them. And chased your naked brother out of their house with a baseball bat. I can’t have him within ten miles of this party.”

“Mom, come on,” Levi groans in the background. “It was months ago. She said she and her husband were getting a divorce. How was I supposed to know they were still together?”

“Would it kill you for once to keep it in your pants? Good god, Levi. Think with your brain and not your dick. I raised you better than that! Your unrelenting horniness is gonna cost me my business.”

I hold the phone away from my ear as she screeches at him.

“Mom, I’m sorry, but I can’t help. I don’t know anyone who’s free to work.”

Harmony mouths, “what’s wrong” at me. I tell Mom to hold on and explain the situation.

“Oh. Damn,” Harmony says before her brow raises slightly. “Actually. Why don’t we do it?”

I almost choke on my sip of beer. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious.” She runs her fingers up my forearm so lightly that my dick starts to ache. God, how can just the lightest touch from her drive me this wild?

“Come on. Your mom needs help, and we’re free tomorrow. Let’s do it. It’ll be fun. Plus, that’s an extra grand in our pockets, right?”

“You sure? You’re gonna have to meet my mom. She’s... a lot.”

“I can’t wait.” Harmony beams. “And I can’t wait to live out my dream of being a real-life Disney princess. I’ve got the perfect Rapunzel hair.” She smooths a hand over her long, blonde waves.

I chuckle and tell Mom we’re on for tomorrow.

“Really? Oh, thank you, honey. And I can’t wait to meet Harmony and thank her in person, too.”

I hang up and slide my phone back into my pocket. “You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

She giggles, but then gasps as the song changes to something slow and moody. It sounds familiar. “Strawberry Wine! Oh, I love this song!”

She hops off her stool just as Rocky drops off two shots of bourbon.

“On the house.”

I toss down a few bills anyway. She beams at him before downing one of the shots. “Dance with me?”

I quirk my eyebrow. “As long as it’s not on the table.”

She giggles and pulls me to stand up. I gulp the shot and let her drag me to the dance floor, which is crowded with slow-dancing couples and one drunk guy grooving on his own. Harmony slinks her arms around my neck; I glide my arms around her waist, pulling her body flush against mine. We sway to the slow, melodic twang of the guitar riff echoing through the bar.

For a while we just stare at each other, not saying a word. I'm mesmerized by the look in her eyes. She's looking at me like I'm the only person on this dance floor.

"I haven't danced in a while," I say, my voice gruff.

"Yeah?" She smooths her finger along the edge of my jaw. "Well, you're doing pretty great."

I close my eyes, relishing the feel of her firm yet delicate fingers as she traces her way down my throat. She dips her fingertips beneath the collar of my t-shirt. I swallow and grit my teeth, my lower abdomen throbbing.

I pull her even tighter against me. She quirks her eyebrow before leaning her mouth to my ear. "Lucas Mallender, do you have a hard-on right now?"

She scrunches her lips as she looks at me, but that doesn't hide her smile.

I let out an embarrassed chuckle and shrug. "Busted. Sorry. Haven't done this in a while, either. Gotten a boner in public, I mean. Hasn't happened since high school... which was the last time I slow danced, coincidentally."

That giggle that drives me wild falls from her lips. "Wow. Well, I guess we'll have to do something about that."

Harmony leans forward and lightly presses her lips to mine, skimming my bottom lip with her tongue before pulling away. It's barely two seconds of contact, but it does the trick. I'm straining against the zipper of my jeans.

"Fuck, Harmony." My head falls back, and I let out a pained laugh. "We're in public. What are you doing to me?"

The song ends, and some up-tempo tune takes over. She spins around quickly, like she's just pulled some slick dance move. She leans her back into my chest, turns her head to the side, and reaches back to pull my face to hers.

"Follow my lead."

She shimmies forward, her hands over mine, which are gripping her hips. We end up in the darkened hallway by the

bathrooms, right next to the back exit. Harmony pushes it open, and we walk into the parking lot.

She spins around, beaming, arms in the air. “Ta-da! Smoothest exit ever!”

I’m grinning so wide my cheeks hurt. “Sunshine, you are something else.”

She throws her arms around my neck and plants a kiss on me that’s so filthy and sloppy, my knees buckle and my dick throbs.

I hiss a breath when I break our kiss and cup her face in my hands. “If you keep that up, I’m gonna take you right now, right here in this parking lot.”

Something fiery blazes in those blue eyes. She bites her lips. “Do it.”

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HARMONY

My back slams against the driver's side of Lucas's truck. Blind with lust, I reach out and fist his button-down, pulling his rock-hard body to mine. He's so broad and strong, and the way he holds me makes me feel so small and precious. It's beyond addictive. His touch slays me every time with how powerful and reverent it is all at once.

I'm drunk, and it has nothing to do with the whisky or beer.

Those fingers work under my skirt while his lips and tongue leave a wet streak down my neck. "Wild little Princess," he growls in my ear before nipping my lobe.

"No, not me," I breathe. Even as I say it, my lips curl into a smirk. My fingers tug his hair.

I'm rewarded with another growl in my ear that sends tingles down my back. "Yes, you, Princess. Filthy fucking girl, daring me to take you right here."

Heat ignites my face *and* my pussy. I love it when he teases me like this. "Mm-mm, not me. I'd never do that—*Lucas!*"

My innocent purr dissolves into a moan when he plunges two fingers deep inside me and draws one slow circle. He bites my neck, and I quake all over. "What were you saying?"

"I... I..."

"You drive me so fucking wild, Harmony. That's right, baby, move those hips. Fuck my fingers."

My eyes flutter open as I realize I'm grinding my hips against him. My body responds to him on such a primal level that I don't even have to think about what to do. It's part of why sex with Lucas is so mind-blowing. I don't think. I don't wonder if he's enjoying it, or if I'm going to get off, or if he loves me like he says he does. None of that old stuff from my old life. I just let myself go, let myself be in the moment, and know that he wants this just as much as I do.

So I throw my head back and let myself be shameless and brazen right here in the parking lot. I ride his fingers until my thighs quake, and Lucas's breath condenses on my neck. And, as soon as I start to tremble, my perfect man lets out a rumble deep in his throat and taps his thumb just where I need it.

As I shudder and swallow moans, he hisses in my ear about how good I am, how gorgeous I am, how much he loves making me come. Those gravelly vows and the tickle of stubble on my cheek draw out every sweet drop of pleasure from my climax until I collapse against the truck.

"Well, fuck," he murmurs as he pulls away.

I open one eye. "Get in the truck, Mallender. Pants at your ankles."

Those hazel eyes go wide for just a beat before lust makes his lids droop. "Yes, ma'am."

I stumble around and climb into the passenger's side. Lucas opens his mouth to make some sexy comment, I'm sure, but I don't wait. I lean forward and wrap my lips around his cock, moaning at how warm and hard he is in my mouth. Lucas fists my hair with one hand and punches the truck's ceiling with the other.

"Goddamn, woman, why is everything about you so fucking perfect?"

I giggle and shrug without lifting my head. I know what he wants, how he likes it best. I flick my tongue over his head, then slurp as I take him to the back of my throat, alternating between teasing licks and hard sucks.

And, I know when he's close. I know how his thighs tense and his stomach jerks with ragged breaths. When I get his tells, I press two fingers just under his balls.

“*Fuck!*” Lucas roars as he unloads.

Finally, I sit up, gasping for air, and flash him a brilliant grin. Lucas is catching his breath, one hand over his eyes. He spreads his fingers apart to peek at me. “Wow. Didn't see that move coming.”

“You liked?” I ask sweetly.

He just laughs and fires the engine. “I loved, Sunshine. I love everything about you.”

My heart flutters. While he drives, I reach over and squeeze his fingers. “I love everything about you, too, Lucas.”

We trade a glance.

Lucas pulls into the driveway and cups my face, pulling me in for a gentle kiss. “I'm gonna take you inside and worship you the way you deserve now, okay Princess? Fucking in the parking lot is fun, but I need that pussy tonight. What do you say?”

I bite my lip. “Please, Lucas. I need it, too.”

We walk inside in silence. Something has shifted between us. That wild, lusty haze from the dance floor is more like a sweet simmer now, but it's more potent, too. *I love everything about you... It's not the L-word, but it's close.*

This is getting real.

The thought doesn't scare me. If anything, it's like I've known it for a while and am just now letting myself fully admit it. I swallow hard and let him lead me upstairs.

Lucas's eyes are like lakes again in the dim light. He kisses me slow and sweet, but still with so much fire underneath it. I run my fingers up his neck and into his hair, answering with all my heart—and all my fire. Our hands are everywhere. We explore each other's bodies like they're unfamiliar territory. They're not, not at all, but something in my heart whispers that I will *never* get tired of touching this man.

Something else inside of me dares to hope that he feels the same.

Lucas undresses me gently. Usually it's rough and carnal, but not tonight. My dress floats to the floor; he's down to his underwear in moments. We tumble backward onto the bed as the last articles of clothing disappear. He brackets me with his strong arms, and I practically melt into the bed. I feel so sheltered and safe—and loved.

“Everything about you, Harmony,” he murmurs like he's reading my mind.

I don't blink as I gaze at him. “Everything about you, Lucas.”

And with that, he thrusts inside of me.

I cry out and dig my nails into his back, but Lucas freezes. “Shit, condom. Forgot for a sec—”

“No, it's okay. I, uh, have an IUD. I want it like this,” I pant, wiggling underneath him, dying to feel his bare skin move inside me.

“Well, fuck, then,” he grits before lifting up and thrusting in again, harder this time.

We both shout in ecstasy.

Lucas moves slow and steady for what feels like hours, his gaze trained on me the whole time. He doesn't speak. No teasing growls or filthy commands. He just takes me. And I surrender to him in a whole new way.

Pretty sure I surrender my heart.

“This is intense,” he mumbles at last with a cute twist of his lips.

“I know,” I hiccup against his rhythmic thrust.

That wicked grin flashes. “Enough of all that. I want to see you come.”

I yelp as he pulls out, flips to his back, and pulls me over his face. But I am *not* complaining—I lower down and let that tongue drive me absolutely wild again. His kisses are wet and

noisy, like he's devouring me. The sound fills my ears and makes me blush every time, but it also turns me on like crazy. His tongue knows just where I want it and refuses to go there too fast. I grind on his face and let his beard tickle my thighs.

"Lucas, stop teasing," I whine with a grin. "Make me come, pretty please."

He slaps my ass so hard that I yelp. I feel more than hear his chuckle, but then—

"Yes, yes, oh, fuck, yes please pretty please Lucas I love I love I love...."

I fall apart in a rambling mess and wind up whimpering and shaking all over his lips and tongue. When I finally collapse and roll to my side, Lucas sits up and wipes his face. "Damn, I like hearing you say please."

I slap his arm.

He laughs, but then his hands are on my waist again, pulling me back on top. This time, he guides me down to his cock. "Ride me, Princess. *Pretty please.*"

"Hmm, I like that too." I plant his hands on my breasts and start to grind slowly. It's like it always is, hot and filthy and perfect, but there's still that hum of sweet intensity too. My eyes slam closed as another wave of orgasm starts to pool between my legs. "You've ruined me. It will never be this good again," I mutter because it's true.

He rasps a laugh. "You've ruined me right back."

"Good. I hope that's true. I never ruined anyone before. It's... nice... to..."

But just as I throw my head back in climax, my knees are lifted off the mattress. Through my moaning bliss, I wrench my eyes open to see Lucas fisting the pillow, his back arched high. There's a wildfire in his glassy eyes as he stares at me and rides his own wave.

We go slack at the same time. I slump forward, then push myself to sit up and open my eyes.

Lucas's eyes are closed. A light flush colors his cheekbones. "Wow. Feeling your pussy clench around me like that sent me over the edge a little too fast. Did you finish? I'll make it right if I ruined yours."

Oh, god, I love him.

I bite my lip and try to calm my thudding heart. "Oh, no need. It was amazing, feeling you at the same time."

His lips curl. "Hell yeah, it was. Come here and let me hold you."

I tumble to his side and am instantly snuggled in his arms. With my cheek resting against his shoulder, I gaze up at him while he dozes.

Thank you for seeing things in me no one ever saw. Thank you for making me feel like a goddess and not laughing at me when I went out on about a thousand limbs with this whole farm thing. Thank you for your kiss. For how you tease me. For how you respect me enough to be that careful.

For loving everything about me.

Lucas pulls me even closer, kissing the top of my head like he does practically every night these days. I snuggle into his woodsy scent and let my eyes close while he flips out the light.

"Everything, Princess. I mean it," he says in the darkness.



"Well, let me see," I call through the door.

"Usually I like it when you're saying those words," Lucas replies. "But usually you're gasping and staring at my crotch."

I laugh and jiggle the doorknob. "Hurry up, silly. I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Again, a phrase that normally has a much better association," he grumbles as he twists the knob. The door swings open, and Lucas heaves a sigh. "Ta-freaking-da."

My gaze sweeps over him twice before a giddy laugh erupts and bursts from my lips. It's halfway between turned on and childishly delighted. Lucas's hair is moussed and combed into a side part, one lock deliberately kissing his forehead. He's rocking brown pants, boots, a white shirt, and a green vest. Apart from the beard, which he refused to do more than trim, he really is the perfect Flynn Rider.

"You're incredible," I say at last with a shake of my head. "Perfect."

"Princess, you keep throwing out all those lines, and I'm gonna rip this pretty dress right off you and throw you on the bed." He flashes a wicked smirk when my eyes go wide. I clamp my lips shut, but he saunters toward me and slides one hand to my waist.

"But on that note: damn, Rapunzel. I'd have burned that tower to the ground to get your beautiful ass out."

"And into your bed?"

"You read my mind." He chuckles, then cocks his head. "You look great, but then you always look great. Thanks for doing this for my mom."

I smooth the pink dress and adjust the cap sleeves. The corset effect is fun and gives my boobs a little lift, but the material is cheap and scratchy. Still, I have no regrets. This means something to his family, and it'll be a silly way to spend a few hours.

With a peck on his cheek, I grab him by the vest and lead him to the car.

We arrive at the party and are greeted by a mob of shrieking children. They circle us, blurting questions that seem related to the Disney movie. As I've not seen it, I have no idea how to answer them. I didn't even know Rapunzel's prince was named Flynn. When I'd told Lucas this over breakfast this morning, he'd laughed. "Clearly, you've not spent much time with kids—or in the world of cosplay children's parties," he said.

Clearly not, but I could make this work.

I plaster on a toothy smile and say hello to the children. A woman rushes up, trying to corral them, and I get the sense she's the host.

But then we hear, "Okay, gang, the bouncy house is open!" And, suddenly, the mob evaporates. I spot a woman with short, dark hair and eyes the color of Lucas's.

She blasts me with a full-watt smile as soon as we make eye contact. "You're Harmony! Oh, dear, come here and give me a hug. I won't wrinkle you, I promise."

I squeeze Lucas's hand and let his mom fold me into a hug. She gives me a light pat on the back and steps away.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Mallender."

She makes a pshht sound. "It's Debbie, dear. And the pleasure is mine. Lucas has mentioned you at least two times in our chats. For him, that's practically gushing."

Her eyes twinkle, and she winks at her son. It makes me laugh. They clearly share the same sly sense of humor.

"Well, I'm very honored."

Debbie nods. "We'll have dinner soon and catch up. For now, let's get you into the party. All you really have to do is smile and ask the kids questions about themselves. They'll ask you all kinds of things like did it hurt to have Flynn climb your hair, but you can just redirect them to talking about the party or school. Got it?"

"That sounds doable." I let out a shaky breath and glance behind me, but Lucas is already sliding to my side. He places a reassuring hand on the small of my back, and I remind myself that, one: I really do love children, and two: I really would do anything for this man.

Being Rapunzel is easy after that.

We glide around the backyard arm-in-arm, doing just what Debbie instructed. More than once, we both have to swallow laughs at a kid's innocent-but-inappropriate question. It just adds to the fun.

About an hour into the party, kids are eating hot dogs, and we're taking a short break at a table in the corner. A car door thuds out front. I don't think much of it while I nibble on a chip until—

“Lucas!!”

Our heads snap up at the child-sized bellow from across the yard. Beside me, I feel Lucas freeze. The brown-haired little boy flies to him so fast that Lucas is barely on his feet before the boy's arms are wrapped around his knees. Slowly, Lucas reaches one hand out and places it on the boy's head.

“Hey, Taylor,” he croaks.

My stomach had already bottomed out. There was really no question about who this was, but hearing the ache in my man's voice as he says Taylor's name brings a lump to my throat. My eyes burn as I watch Lucas gaze down at him. He strokes his hair gently, and I can see the muddled pain and affection in his eyes.

Lucas kneels down. “How you been, buddy?”

“Good. School is fun. I miss you, Da—uh, Lucas.” He looks over his shoulder, but I see Lucas flinch like he's been stabbed. “Mom and Dad are talking in the car. They have a lot of talks,” he says with a wrinkle in his brow.

Lucas reaches up and smooths the crease—just like he'd done with me at the bar last night. Bile builds in my stomach.

“I'm sure they're talking about how awesome you are,” he murmurs.

My heart kicks up into an anxious gallop. *He loves this kid so much. He deserves to give this kind of love to a child of his own. Oh, my god, I'm going to be sick.*

And then, we hear the inevitable: “Hello, Lucas.”

A woman with light brown hair and caramel-colored eyes stands with her arms crossed, but her expression is gentle. Her red-lipsticked mouth is twisted in a sad smile as she gazes at them.

Lucas clears his throat. “Jessica.”

I want to run away. I want to be the princess fleeing the scene, not caring that people are shouting after her to stay. I want to be so far away from this moment that everyone forgets about Harmony/Rapunzel.

I want to be someone Lucas could make a life with. And, gazing at this scene, I know that I'm not.

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LUCAS

I breathe through the pain in my chest, the ache in my throat, the churn in my stomach, and try like hell to hold it all together.

I glance at Taylor, still gripping my hand, still grinning at me, those big brown eyes happy and bright. I give his soft hand a gentle squeeze in return and smile at him.

My heart is split into two warring factions right now. Happy as hell that I get to see Taylor, get to hear his voice, get to see how happy *he* is to see me even after almost a year of zero contact—that he even still remembers me.

But my heart is shredded, too. Because this little visit is just that—a visit. After he leaves the party, who knows when I'll get to see him again... *if* I'll ever see him again.

“Dad.”

I blink at Taylor, stunned at what he's just called me. Yeah, it's messed up, the raw joy that courses through me. He's not supposed to call me Dad anymore. I figured Jessica and Scott must have had a talk with Taylor when they reconciled, explaining how Scott was Dad and I was just Lucas from now on. That's probably why he called me by my name when he first saw me. That's probably why he corrected himself when he accidentally started to call me Dad a minute ago.

I glance at Jessica for guidance on what the hell I should say or do, but all I get is a pitying stare.

I turn back to Taylor and try to smile. “Yeah, buddy?”

“How come you don’t live with us anymore?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Harmony flinch. My entire body feels broken from the inside out.

“Buddy, I—”

“Taylor, honey,” Jessica says, her tone patient and sweet. “We talked about this, remember? Lucas and Mommy aren’t together anymore, so that means we can’t live together. We live with Daddy now.”

Taylor glances between us, his angel face pulled into a confused frown. I can practically hear the gears grinding away in his five-year-old brain.

“But, why can’t we?” he asks, mystified.

“Because Mommy and Daddy live in our own house, and Lucas lives in his house. We have our own separate lives. It wouldn’t be practical to try and combine them.”

“Well, can I have two dads then? Peyton from my class has two dads instead of a mom and a dad. So does Bailey. And Nora has a mom and a dad and a step-dad.”

I’d laugh if I weren’t on the verge of choking on my own tears. This kid. So damn bright and innocent and pure.

I ruffle his hair. “If only it were that simple, buddy,” I say to him.

Jessica closes her eyes and takes a breath before looking at Taylor. “That’s great for Peyton, Bailey, and Nora, but this is different. Okay?”

Taylor glances down at the ground, clearly unsatisfied with his mom’s explanation. He nods anyway. Then he moves to hug my neck.

“Don’t tell Mom, but I’m still gonna call you Dad,” he whispers.

I hug him, blinking back tears. I swallow hard and hope my voice isn’t too shaky when I whisper back to him. “Works for me, buddy. I won’t tell a soul.”

When I release him and stand up, Taylor's still got me by the hand. I glance at Harmony, who's gazing at us with tears in her eyes.

"Who's that?" Taylor asks.

"This is Rapunzel," I say.

Harmony blinks for a few seconds before stepping over to us. "Hello, Taylor. It's lovely to meet you."

He reaches up his hand to her. "You're so pretty."

Harmony laughs as she takes his tiny hand in hers. "Aww thank you, sweetheart. And you're quite adorable."

She cups his cheek with her other hand. The ache in my chest fades as I look at the two of them. My stomach feels like it's bottoming out, but in the best way. Because this is an image I'd love to see—Harmony with Taylor.

Our own little family.

Scott appears, bursting my ridiculous fantasy bubble. He walks over to Jessica and slides his arm around her waist. A few seconds pass before I realize I'm gawking at the guy. Holy shit.

The last time I saw Scott was when Taylor was a baby. He had just gotten out of jail and had a supervised visit. It was one of the handful of times he bothered to show up to the scheduled visitations. He was scrawny, scruffy, and strung out. He left after holding Taylor for a few minutes, mumbling something about being late for an appointment.

I think back on that moment, about how pissed I was that this drug-addicted ex-con couldn't keep his shit together for one hour to see his son.

But the guy standing in front of me is a totally different person. His blonde hair is neatly styled. He looks like he's gained a healthy amount of weight—he must have kicked his drug addiction. He must be eating and sleeping regularly, too. Shit, even the outfit he's wearing—a blue polo and khaki shorts—screams doting dad.

He flashes a strained smile before reaching out his hand to Harmony and introducing himself.

He turns to me. “Hi, Lucas.” I shake his hand when he offers it to me. When we let go, I notice Taylor’s beaming at the two of us.

“See? Two dads.”

Harmony’s eyes go wide. Jessica purses her lips. Scott and I stammer. A second later, my mom walks over.

“Taylor.” Her eyes practically pop out of her head before she quickly reins in her expression and smiles at him. She pulls him into a hug. “Oh, sweetie pie, so good to see you!”

Taylor chatters excitedly to her.

“Did you see the bouncy castle?” Mom asks.

Taylor’s eyes go wide, and he shakes his head.

“Why don’t you go check it out? Hurry before it’s time to eat the birthday cupcakes.”

He darts off to the other end of the yard, leaving the five of us to stand around in awkward silence.

“Well. I think we can all agree this is one hell of an awkward reunion,” Mom mutters. Her gaze on Jessica and Scott borders on the edge of cold.

“Mom, don’t start.”

She holds up a hand at me. “That’s all I’ll say. Flynn and Rapunzel, you’re up in five minutes. So whatever’s going on here, wrap it up.”

She walks off, and it’s just the four of us.

Scott’s the first to break the silence. “We didn’t know you’d be here.”

“I was a last-minute fill-in as a favor to my mom,” I say.

That sad smile tugs at Jessica’s lips. “I forgot you worked for her sometimes.”

She turns to Harmony and shakes her head, her dazed look disappearing. “Sorry, I guess I should explain. Lucas and I

used to...”

Harmony waves a hand. “It’s okay. I know. Lucas told me.” She’s smiling softly, but there’s a strain in her face, like she’s in pain and trying to ignore it.

I step closer to Harmony and scoop her hand in mine. Jessica looks at our joined hands for a long second. “Oh.”

This time when Jessica smiles, she actually looks happy. She turns to me. “I’m happy for you, Lucas.”

Scott clears his throat. “So, um, that two dads comment. Pretty wild, huh?”

He lets out an awkward laughing noise that I have no idea how to respond to. I just look at him. I’m not even mad at the guy, surprisingly. It’s more that I’m so emotionally drained from what just unfolded here minutes ago that I don’t have the strength to be polite or put on a front.

“I don’t think it’s wild at all,” I say, holding Scott’s gaze. “I think, in Taylor’s mind, it makes perfect sense to want to have two dads. And given what an unstable shitshow the beginning of his life was, I’m thrilled he can have such a wholesome take on it.”

Scott stammers while Jessica frowns at me.

“Look, man. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for us to come here and make things uncomfortable,” Scott says, holding up his hands at me. “It’s just that...”

He hesitates, glancing off to the side. He shakes his head before looking at me. “I just meant to say that I’m sorry. I know it must be awkward as hell for you to hear him call you Dad after all this time, after everything that—”

A weird, crazed energy jolts through me. I step forward so that Scott and I are just a couple feet apart. “It wasn’t awkward as hell. Hearing him call me Dad meant the world. I’ll love that kid forever.”

I stomp off toward the crowd of kids. Somehow, I make it through the rest of the party, smiling, laughing, and posing for pictures. Yeah, it’s fake as hell. On the inside, I’m a wreck.

My heart's eviscerated, and my entire body is throbbing in pain. But I've got a job to do. And I don't want Taylor to see me upset.

When the party ends, he runs up to hug me one last time.

"Promise we'll see each other again soon, right, Dad?" he says.

I bite my cheek to work up the nerve to lie to him. "I promise."

"I love you, Dad," he whispers into my ear.

"I..." My voice breaks, but I quickly clear my throat while squeezing him tight. "I love you too."



Harmony holds my hand the whole way home. I don't say much, and she doesn't press. It's clear she can tell that seeing Taylor did a number on me, and I need some time to quietly process it.

When we walk into the house, I run upstairs and shower. When I come back downstairs, Harmony's sitting on the couch, a mug of tea in hand, a faraway look on her face as she gazes out the nearby window. Phantom is curled in a ball at her feet, snoozing away. I plop down next to her, swipe her mug, and take a sip. Her mouth curves upward slightly, but I can tell she's upset.

"Hey." I take her hand in mine. "I'm sorry for what happened at the party. If I had known they'd be there, I wouldn't have asked you to come. I know that must have been awkward as hell to watch."

She shakes her head. "There's nothing to be sorry for. Except, I mean... I'm sorry for how painful that must have been for you. To have to see Taylor leave like that. I'm sure it was awful."

She drifts off, her crystal blue eyes misty.

I kiss her palm. “Sunshine. There’s not a thing in this world that *you* have to be sorry about, okay? It was just a shitty situation. I’m just happy I got to see Taylor again.”

“He’s such a great kid. He was over the moon to see you.”

There’s that squeeze in my chest again. I sigh, resigned to the fact that I’ll always feel a jolting, visceral pain when I think about Taylor.

Harmony nods, her gaze on me turning focused. “I need you to be honest with me, Lucas.” She swallows like she’s quietly amping herself up to say what she’s about to say. “I know us getting together wasn’t expected. I know that it took us both by surprise. But being with you is the happiest I’ve ever felt.”

I cup her face and pull her mouth to mine, kissing her until she’s moaning.

I lean my forehead against hers as we catch our breath.

“You make me so fucking happy, Sunshine.”

She lets out a breathy laugh. We pull apart, our hands still joined.

“Do you really think you could be happy without kids, Lucas?”

The question, combined with her serious expression, catches me off guard. “What?”

“Seeing you with Taylor today was beautiful. You’re meant to be a dad. I can see it so clearly. And I can tell just how happy being a dad to Taylor makes you. And I...” Her trembling voice trails off. “I don’t want to take that away from you. I don’t want to be the reason you can’t be a dad.”

“What? Harmony, what do you mean? You’re not the reason I’m not a dad. I told you, I’m not even thinking about kids right now. I don’t even know if I want kids.”

Harmony’s angelic face turns serious. “Lucas. Please don’t. Don’t lie to spare my feelings. I want you to be honest right now. Do you want to have kids someday?”

My heart rattles in my chest. It feels like my body is racing toward something I can't quite see. And then it hits me. Harmony is trying to decide if we have a future together.

Every muscle inside of me tenses. The truth sits on the tip of my tongue, in my heart, my soul. I know my answer. I've known it all along.

"Yeah. I do want kids."

She nods, but that dazed look is back on her face. This time when her eyes go watery and she blinks, tears tumble down her cheeks. She smiles at me through trembling lips. "You're an incredible dad, Lucas. I just can't be the woman who makes you one."

My lungs feel like they've been stomped on and lit on fire all at once. I try to breathe but end up coughing. This can't be happening. I can't lose her.

I can't lose the woman I love.

When I catch my breath, I cradle Harmony's tear-streaked face in my hands.

"Harmony. Please don't do this. We can try to work something out. We can—"

She shakes her head, cutting me off. "I wish there was a way to compromise on kids, but there's not. I know I'm not meant to be a mom. You're meant to be a dad. There's no way this can work. I'm so so—"

My mouth is on hers before she gets her last word out. It's a long and sloppy kiss we share. When we finally break, she lets out a sobbing noise. My eyes are blurry with tears of my own. I hug her tight against my chest.

"This is for the best, Lucas." She hiccups, and it's such a cute fucking sound that I let out a sad laugh.

"Fuck the best. All I want is you."

This time, she's the one making that sad laughing noise. "I can't. I'm sorry."

When she pulls away from me, I fight every muscle in my body that's twitching to grab her, to hold her, to kiss her. Because she's right. I want kids. She doesn't. Dread settles like acid in my gut. There's no way to work this out.

She stands up, aiming her watery gaze at me. "First thing tomorrow morning, I'm going back to the city. I think it's probably best for us to be apart for a while."

I nod even though my vocal cords are aching to scream hell no, it's not for the best, it's the worst fucking idea ever for her not to be here every day, lighting up my world.

She says she'll be able to do all the office work for the rescue remotely. I nod along even though I don't hear half of what she's saying. I'm too shocked and dazed.

She walks to the staircase, Phantom following closely behind her. She stops at the base of the stairs and turns to look at me.

"I love you, Lucas."

Her words land somewhere deep in my chest, the sensation a mix of agony and bliss. These are the words I've been aching to hear from her, delivered in the most heartbreaking moment I could imagine.

"I love you, Sunshine."

When her lips tremble, she turns her head away and runs up the stairs. The sound of her bedroom door squeaking shut echoes throughout the house. I hunch over, cradle my head in my hands, and rest my elbows on my knees.

This is supposed to be for the best. Why does it hurt like hell?

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HARMONY

I tiptoe down the stairs in the dark, praying that Phantom's nails don't clatter too much. It's 5:15 a.m., and I'm in a hurry.

If only I were hurrying anywhere else.

But no. Leaving "first thing tomorrow" was a promise blurted in the moment. Choked by so much emotion, I completely forgot that Rita was coming to rehome two more of our dogs on Monday. No way can I be the princess fleeing the scene when I have a farm to run and dogs to say goodbye to.

So instead, I'm the princess fleeing the house before her would-be prince charming wakes up.

I imagine Lucas in a deep slumber, dressed in a Princess Aurora costume. A giggle escapes my lips at the same time two tears brim over from my eyes. *Dammit, I'm on the verge of hysterics.* With a quick wipe at my cheeks, I shut the door behind Phantom and hurry to the car.

"I usually get to the farm around six. I assume you'll be there before me?" Lucas's words from when I first arrived echo in my ears as I fire the engine of my Land Rover and cruise over to the office. Except now, I hear them in his tender growl, the one he'd taken to using with me when we were cuddling in bed or on the sofa after a long day. I can barely remember the version of us when we were practically strangers.

"Just like I barely remember the version of me who didn't get up before dawn as a habit," I mutter with a prideful smirk.

“They’ll never say I got it all wrong, will they, Phantom?”

Phantom lets out a snore in response.

When we’re parked in front of the office, I sit behind the wheel and take a deep breath. My heart is bruised. Each thud is painful. Old me would be under the covers with a pint of ice cream and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* on loop in the background. But new me has a job to do, and that job doesn’t stop for a personal disaster.

“You can do this. Big girl panties, Harmony. It’s just a day. Then, you can go back to the city and crack open the Jeni’s Salted Caramel.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m at my desk when the sound of Lucas’s truck rolling up makes my stomach clench. But he doesn’t stick his head into the office like he had been doing for the last month. Instead, I hear his footsteps crunching toward the pen while he whistles for the dogs to wake up. I set my jaw and blow out a breath, but before returning to work, I can’t resist opening my messages from yesterday.

Me: *I’m still here. In the house, I mean.*

Lucas: *I noticed.*

Me: *Rita’s coming tomorrow to rehome 2 pups. Can’t leave yet.*

Lucas: *Don’t leave, then. Don’t ever leave, Princess. Come talk to me.*

That’s the end of our exchange. Of course I hadn’t thrown open my door and sprinted to his room. Of course I’d envisioned doing just that every hour of the day. Instead, I hid in my room and only ventured downstairs to grab food when I was sure we wouldn’t bump into each other. But yesterday hadn’t been a weep-in-the-covers day, either. Mostly I’d sat petting Phantom and staring into space. Thinking hurt too much. And as for feeling, the bruised thuds of my heart were about all I could bear. If I’d poked them, I’m not sure I could’ve kept my crying silent enough to prevent Lucas from hearing. The last damn thing that man needs is to be worried

about me. I've disappointed him, and he's going through so much heartache over Taylor.

"Not today, Harmony," I hiss with a strong headshake. "Not to-fucking-day."

Today is for the dogs. And, although the hours grind by, the dogs are indeed what matter. Rita arrives mid-morning with a couple who choose Buggy, our little Beagle mix. After lunch, she returns with a quiet man who leans on a cane. When I approach, I blink to realize he can't be older than me. He's got a scar on his cheek and a close-cropped haircut. The smile he flashes feels genuine but tired.

"Ma'am," he murmurs.

"Harmony," I say and shake his hand. "Do you know which dog you'd like?"

"I believe I have one in mind."

Rita walks him to the pen, and the three of us gaze at the dogs. When Lucas ambles over, my stomach hits my feet, but we don't make eye contact. He shakes the man's hand and turns toward the pups.

"That one." The man points, and my jaw drops.

"Buddy?" Lucas and I blurt at the same time.

Do not make eye contact.

"Yes, if it's alright?" he asks shyly.

Buddy's infection had cleared up weeks ago. He had gotten so strong that he was able to leave the rehab pens and join the pack in the yard. Over the weeks, he'd even gotten pretty fast for a three-legged dog, but never did I expect we'd be sending him to a new home.

The man lifts one leg of his pants. He taps at his prosthetic with the cane and flashes that tired smile again when I finally drag my gaze back to his eyes. "Two tours in the Marines. Was a week from going back home when my jeep hit an IED." He clears his throat quickly. "Reckon that fella and I would be a good match. We both know what it's like to go through it."

I bite down on my lips. At last, I clear my throat and beam at him. “I’m sure you two are a good match for many reasons. Buddy is loyal and cares deeply for his people. He’s just as strong and determined as any dog we have.”

Some of the fatigue clears from his face. “Sounds about right.”

Lucas’s voice is thick when he says, “Just a minute, I’ll get the leash.”

It’s a quick bit of paperwork, and then Buddy is in the back of his Jeep and on his way to his new home.

Rita and I look at each other. She throws her arms around me. “Harmony, the work we’re doing, it’s *so good*. And Lucas, you too. You two are such a team. I’m so glad we’re working together!”

Lucas’s brows fly up when she tackles him in a hug, too. I flash a smile and ignore the pain her words give. With another wave, Rita is gone.

Leaving Lucas and me alone, looking everywhere but at each other.

“Buddy is gone,” he says softly, then hacks a mirthless laugh. “Fuck, I’m not sure how much more I can take, and it’s only Monday.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

“Then don’t go. Stay, and let’s figure something out.”

“Like what? That we’re not right for each other? Pretty sure we already did.”

Lucas’s groan hits my ears at the same time I lift my head and see him stalk toward me. He doesn’t stop walking until I’m pinned against the side of his truck—just like I was Friday night, aka a million years ago. But this time, when his scent hits my nose, my heart threatens to crack open and leak out of my chest right then and there.

When his lips crash down onto me, though, all of my tumbling thoughts and aching feelings stop. Pure pleasure rushes from my hair to my toes, and I slide my hands along his

scruffy jaw. My tongue licks his, drunk on his taste for a fleeting moment before we break apart again.

“*How* can you say that we’re not right for each other?” he pants, inches from my face.

Pain comes roaring back, pressing at the floodgates again. “I... I’m not... I don’t... I love...”

“You love me, Harmony. And I fucking love you. Isn’t that enough?”

It’s hard to swallow over my thick tongue. Slowly, I shake my head and press his chest to back him up. “In princess stories, yes. In real life... I wish.”

His eyes shimmer like a lake. Lucas wipes his hand over his mouth and steps away. “I guess it’s not. It never was, huh.”

It’s not a question. And I hear the depth of pain this man has gone through. His love wasn’t enough to keep Taylor. And now, my love isn’t enough to give him the life he deserves. But he will find the right love, surely. I just need to get out of the way and stop being so selfish.

“I’ll leave tonight,” I whisper. “Give me twenty minutes, and I’ll be gone.”

He doesn’t stop me as I collect Phantom and drive away.



Phantom and I arrive at my apartment in the city around midnight. I give him some water and place his bed at the end of mine. Then, I stand in the middle of my living room and look around. Streetlights shine in from behind the shades. I pull up Instacart and order two pints of Jeni’s ice cream to be delivered tomorrow morning, but I know I’m not going to make it that long. Here, alone in my old life where I know I don’t belong anymore, the pain hits full-force.

I drop to my knees and cover my face with my palms.

Phantom gallops out of the bedroom at my sobs, but his tickly/rough tongue can’t lap up the river of tears rolling down

my face. "Lucas, I'm sorry," I wail and curl into a ball.

It doesn't matter. None of it does. Because I am Harmony, and I learned what that means. I learned what I want and what I don't. And I can't pretend to be the smiling happy girl just to keep the peace anymore. So I will have to be messy and deal with it. But I will *not* be selfish to the point of ruining someone else's chance at happiness.

I cry myself to sleep right there on the floor. When I wake up, my buzzer is sounding. Phantom sleeps with his head on my hip. I limp to the door, accept the ice cream, and go grab my quilt from the bed. It's 8 a.m., and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* and I have some feelings to eat.

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LUCAS

“How are you holding up?”

I glance up at Levi standing next to me in my driveway as I change the windshield wiper blades on his truck.

“Fine,” I bark through my clenched jaw.

He frowns as he looks at me and crosses his arms over his bare, oiled chest. He can see right through my bullshit answer, like every other time he’s asked me how I’m holding up since Harmony broke up with me a few weeks ago.

He shifts his weight from one foot to another. “You sure you’re okay? You look a little tense, big brother.”

“And you look like a dipshit.” I straighten up and nod at his bare chest, which is glistening like an oil slick in the sunlight. “What the hell is up with that?”

My little brother flashes a smug smile before dropping his hands at his sides. “The hot moms love it when I oil myself up every time I dress as Tarzan for a party. It makes my muscles stand out a bit more. Got a new loincloth, too. I’m pulling in phone numbers like you wouldn’t believe.”

I roll my eyes when he points at the suede material shrouding his crotch.

“God, you’re the worst,” I mutter before leaning down to tighten the wiper blades. “You’re also a manchild. How are you twenty-eight years old and still don’t know how to change your damn wiper blades?”

“Why learn when I can have you do it for me?”

He claps me on the back. I immediately shrug him off. When I look up, I don't miss the surprise on his face.

“Look, man. When are you gonna stop with this bullshit?”

“What bullshit?” I chuck the old wiper blades onto the gravel and turn toward the porch stairs, in no fucking mood to endure my little brother's interrogation.

“You did the same thing when Jessica left you,” he hollers after me. I stop halfway up the stairs. My jaw aches with how hard I'm biting down. I contemplate telling him to fuck off, but I stay quiet and keep walking.

Levi's footsteps sound behind me. He grabs my shoulder and spins me around. “Lucas. Just stop for a second, alright?”

A heavy sigh rockets from me. “What?”

“You're not okay. I know you're not okay.”

“Then why the fuck do you keep asking if you already know?”

He shakes his head, a joyless smile tugging at his lips. “Because I thought you'd come to your fucking senses. Guess not, though.”

“I don't know what you're—”

“You can't just quietly power through the pain of a breakup, Lucas. You can't just go back to life as usual, burying yourself in work and changing the subject whenever someone asks how you're doing.” He let out a shaky breath. “Look, I know I fucked things up when you and Jessica broke up. I know I said the wrong thing constantly. I was trying to help, but I didn't know how. I realize now that I made it even harder for you to deal with the breakup with all the stupid shit I was saying. I was trying to be supportive, but I did a shitty job of it. I know that now. And I'm sorry.”

His face twists like he's in pain. I think back to how I punched him when he made that quip about me having my freedom back when Jessica left, how I didn't have to play dad

to someone else's kid. He blinks, and I see the pain has shifted to his eyes. He's thinking of that moment, too.

"You clammed up and powered through when you lost Jessica and Taylor. Now, you're doing it with Harmony. How's that working out for you? Did it make the pain go away? Did it solve anything?"

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. He's right. Ever since Harmony left, I've been forcing myself to live life as normal even though I feel like I've been hit by a bus. I get up early, take care of the dogs, say as little as possible, think as little as possible, eat, sleep, repeat.

My muscles are in knots. I wake up with an ache in my throat and my chest. Hell, almost every day I've gotten a tension headache from clenching my jaw so hard. My body is screaming at me, telling me to stop holding it all in. And I'm not listening.

"You're hurting. I can tell," Levi says. "And you're not going to do yourself any favors by letting it fester. You need to talk about what you're going through. I know I'm a dipshit who always says the wrong thing, but I can listen better than I can talk. If you don't want to talk to me, fine. But you need to talk to someone."

All I can do is stand there and stare at my little brother. Damn. That was insightful as hell.

I swallow, noticing how even now my throat is raw. "You're right," I croak. My eyes start to burn with tears, so I press them shut. Levi's expression is pained as he looks at me.

"I'm a fucking disaster," I mumble. "I really fucking miss her."

Christ, just admitting that—speaking those five words out loud—feels like an invisible vise being loosened around my chest.

My legs suddenly feel like jelly, and I lower myself to sit on the steps. I rest my elbows on my knees and cradle my head in my hands. Levi sits down next to me.

“What happened between you two?” His voice is quiet, like he’s trying to tread as gently as possible through this conversation. “Was it because Jessica and Taylor showed up to the party you and Harmony were working? Mom, um, told me they were there.”

“Not really... But sort of, I guess.”

I take a breath and explain how seeing Jessica, Taylor, and Scott kicked off a conversation between Harmony and me about our future and kids.

“Harmony doesn’t want kids. I do. There’s no compromise for that.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Levi nod.

“So she said the best thing for us to do was to break up.” My entire torso feels like it’s blasted open. “I mean, she’s right. I just didn’t want it to end. She didn’t either. But I won’t ask her to have kids for me. And she won’t ask me to give up wanting kids for her. But I love her. I still love her. So fucking much,” I mutter, my eyes brimming with hot tears.

This time when Levi pats his hand on my back, I don’t jerk away.

“I’m sorry, man,” he says after a long moment. “Maybe this is a bad time to say it, but you seemed really happy when you were with her. I’ve never seen you smile so much.”

I sniffle before letting out a weak laugh. “Yeah, well. Harmony gave me a reason to smile a lot. She’s amazing.”

“Never thought a high-maintenance rich girl would be your kryptonite,” Levi says. I can tell he’s teasing, testing out the waters.

Another sad chuckle falls from my trembling lips. “I didn’t either.”

When I close my eyes, Harmony’s beautiful smiling face is the first thing I see. I see her hopping out of her Land Rover in that frilly as fuck white dress and heels the day we met. I see her struggling to walk half a dozen dogs at once. I see her cuddling with Phantom on the couch. I see her with dirt

streaked on her cheeks, that blonde hair wild and messy after a long day of working with the dogs. I see the joy in her face every time she played with them. I see that smile. That dazzling, gorgeous smile that always, always made me weak in the knees. She could have asked me to deliver the moon to her on a silver platter and I would have. All for a glimpse of that smile.

I let my hands fall away, sit up, and look over at Levi.

“You’re a surprisingly good listener,” I say to him.

His eyebrow quirks up, and he grins. “I’m way more than the handsome face and chiseled body that you see.”

I elbow him in the side. He groans and shoves me. We laugh before falling quiet. A garbage truck roars up the road, and two guys hop out to empty our bins. They both do a double-take when they catch sight of us.

“Guess it’s not every day that they see Tarzan hanging out on a porch, huh?” Levi says to me. I burst out laughing

They drive off. Levi stands up. “I gotta get to the party. If I’m late, Mom’ll kick my ass.”

I walk with him to his truck. He stops in front of the driver’s side door and looks at me. “I’m gonna keep asking you how you’re doing, you know.”

“I know. You’re annoying like that.”

“What are little brothers for?”

This time when I laugh, it’s from my belly. Damn, that feels good. Haven’t done that in weeks. I look at my little brother, the annoying and smug bastard who I’m thankful as hell for in this moment. I’m not alone. I’ve got someone to talk to. He’s been there for me all along, and I was just too proud and stubborn to see it.

“Try not to get your ass kicked by any jealous husbands, okay?”

He winks. “I’ll do my best. No promises, though.”

When he drives off, I walk back toward the house, immediately feeling the change in my body. The pain's still there, coursing through me like the blood in my veins and the air in my lungs. But it's dulled now. Like a wound that's been drained and is healing. Levi's right. Talking helps. I need to process what's happened instead of holding on to it, repressing it forever.

My phone buzzes in my pocket when I make it to the porch. When I read the text on the screen, I stop dead in my tracks.

Hey. I know I've got no right to ask this, but can we meet up? I made a mistake, and I need to talk to you. Please.

I'm frozen, unsure of what the hell to do or say. Never in a million years did I think I'd get this text.

After what feels like minutes of standing and staring, I force my fingers to type out a response.

Okay.

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HARMONY

“Ugh,” I groan and press the heels of my hands against my eyes. My laptop slides off my legs for the billionth time and lands sideways on the sofa.

Working from home is the *worst*.

I run a farm full of dogs who need rehabilitation and adoption. What am I doing, poring over spreadsheets from a laptop in an apartment downtown?

Hiding, of course. Hiding is exactly what I’ve been doing for the last couple of weeks. Thanks to the help of Dr. Wheating, the world’s best vet, and the weekend handlers Frankie and Kayla, I’ve gotten regular reports on the dogs without having to bother Lucas. Thanks to Dad’s ace accountant, I’ve got a handle on finances and expenditures. But none of it, none at all, replaces the feeling of accomplishment that I had from reporting to that dingy office each morning. And I’m convinced that one unexpected move is going to send Fido’s Farm up in flames. I’m not sure which will be worse: the crushing disappointment of having failed or the bitterness of admitting that Dad was right about me in the first place.

The dogs flash in front of my eyes, and I sigh again. *My failure is their lives. I can’t let that happen. I won’t.*

I grab the laptop and open a new tab to Google “best webcam systems for home.” If I can’t be there, if I’m in self-imposed exile, at least I can keep a literal eye on the place.

Maybe if I buy the most expensive kind, it'll come with software that will let me stamp out Lucas from the video feed. Just, like, put a human-shaped silhouette in the picture but not force me to look at that gorgeous face in HD.

But my search is interrupted when a knock pounds on my door. I jolt, and Phantom lets out a ferocious woof.

“Harmony? It’s Lily. Open up!”

“Shit,” I mutter. It was a matter of time.

The first week, I’d avoided my girls by ghosting the group chat and not mentioning I was back in the city. Last week, they’d demanded another Skype session, so I’d had to spill a few details. I kept it vague and flubbed some excuse about needing to attend to family business, super busy blah blah blah. But their requests for a meetup had grown in the last few days. And, since I’m a terrible liar, I knew my excuses weren’t sticking.

Lily throws a hug on me as soon as I open the door. Phantom gallops over with another woof, but he can tell by my energy that there is no threat. Before I can speak, she holds me at arm’s length and scans my face. Her eyes narrow thoughtfully, then go wide as her brows tick together.

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

I want to ask how she knows. I want to deny my shattered heart. I want to tell her I’m just fine, busy but fine.

But I can’t. Because my lip wobbles, and all the hours of work I’ve been doing dissolve as a thin barrier. An ugly hiccup sob burst out, first one and then another. I clap both hands over my face and shake my head no.

Lily shuts the door and guides me back to the sofa. There’s practically a Harmony-shaped outline from where I’ve spent so many hours sitting and working—and sitting and sniffing. But we’re way beyond sniffles now. I drop down and bawl like I haven’t since my first morning back while she rubs my shoulder and pulls my hair off my hot, messy face.

When I finally run dry, I lift my watery gaze to hers. “What do you mean you’re sorry? I’m fine, clearly,” I croak in

a lame attempt at a joke.

She smirks. “Clearly. What happened?”

I sniffle hard and cough. “Well—”

“Wait.” Lily’s attention whips to her phone. “I don’t know why I’m asking.”

My gaze falls to my lap. “You’re right. It’s not really important.”

She hits me with a hard side-eye. “It’s very important. Exactly why there’s no reason telling me when you’ll just need to tell Morgan all over again. And that woman, bless her, is fit to literally burst—and it’s making her crazy. Look.”

I peek at her phone.

Morgan: *I’m dying of suspense. Bring her here! What’s going on? I can’t drive wahhhhhh.*

Morgan: *WHY AREN’T U REPLYING IT’S BEEN 2 MINS*

Morgan: *Plllllease come over! And can Harmony make Bananas Foster? I’m fiending for some flaming nanners lol. YUM!*

Morgan: *Tell Marco it’s fake rum or he’ll have a fit. Pretty please xoxo!*

We trade a glance and start to laugh. “I can do imitation rum, but it won’t flame. The alcohol technically all burns off.”

Lily waves it away. “It should be fine. Marco’s been obsessed with knowing what foods are off-limits since day one. Pretty sure she’s demanded he feed her sushi from the birthing bed, she misses it so much. Come on, we’ll swing by Whole Foods on the way.”

Ten minutes later, I’m waiting in the car at Whole Foods with Phantom while Lily jogs in to grab stuff for Bananas Foster. Phantom licks my ear from the backseat, and I giggle. This moment and reading Morgan’s texts are the first times I think I’ve smiled at all since I got home.

My heart swells as I think of my friends. My true, real friends who love me for me, no matter what. These two

women are the least likely pair for me to have become besties with, and yet I'm thankful every day for them. It never gets old.

Lily hurries out of the store and holds up her bag with a triumphant grin, and I let another laugh slip out. Lucas was real love, no doubt. But these girls are too, and because of them, I know I'll be okay.

Morgan is bigger than just a few weeks ago when she opens the door to her house. She does just what Lily did at my place: takes one look at me and flashes a concerned frown. "I'm sorry, Harmony," she murmurs. "You're hurting bad, huh?"

"Is my aura that off?" I ask lightly.

Morgan nods, no trace of a joke. "But it doesn't take aura sensing to see those tear tracks and that pain in your eyes. Want me to get the tarot cards out?"

"Eh, maybe later. I heard there's a request for dessert."

We gather in Morgan's kitchen while I get to work. They catch me up on their lives first, but I know they're just buying time, waiting for me to spill my story. And so, when we're sitting at the table with Bananas Foster in front of us. I pick up a spoon and say, "So, I guess it's obvious Lucas and I..."

"Oh, shit!"

Lily and I jolt at Morgan's shout. "What? Is it too hot?" I ask as the spoon clatters from her hand.

"No, my water just broke!" she yelps.

Lily and I leap from our chairs so fast they flip over and clatter to the ground. "What? What do we do? Call 911? Are you okay? What?" is the general cacophony that we shout at her.

Morgan draws in a deep, shaky breath and flashes a placid smile. "First, let's all stop yelling. Including me."

We clamp our lips shut and trade a guilty look. Screaming at the woman in labor wasn't the *most* helpful thing, true.

“Don’t call 911,” Morgan continues. “Call Astrid. She’s my doula. Then call Dr. Flowers and tell her it’s time. Oh, and probably call Gram and Marco too,” she finishes with a chuckle.

Lily takes Morgan’s phone to call Astrid and the doctor while I dial Marco first, then Gram. Morgan stands, wincing at the puddle she’s left in the chair, and leans on us to hobble to the bedroom. She explains that she’s doing a home birth, and that her doula and OB have already prepared to come to the house.

Sure enough, Morgan has just settled in the bed when the front door opens. Feet come pounding down the hall, and Marco bursts into the room, wild-eyed. Behind him, two women appear. Their arms are full of supplies, and they get to work setting up the room in ways I can’t even understand.

“Breathe, baby,” Morgan murmurs at Marco’s panicked look. “We’re just beginning.”

Marco’s jaw opens and closes a few times, but then he blinks hard. “Right. Um, I’ll... put on music?”

“Good start,” she says with a grin.

Marco thumbs his phone, and Taylor Swift’s “Style” begins to play through the Bluetooth speakers in the bedroom. Lily and I trade another look while the couple grin at each other, but then Morgan’s face contorts in pain. Clearly, a contraction has hit. Marco slides her fingers between his and bends his head, murmuring into her ear. My heart melts to see them like this, working in what’s obviously practiced unison. They are so perfect for each other.

As the pain subsides from Morgan’s face, Marco sits on the bed beside her. The two of them are so sweet, but this is the most intimate thing I’ve ever witnessed. It calls into sharp clarity the fact that Lily and I need to leave.

Lily seems to read my mind. She clears her throat. “We’ll wait for your call.”

Morgan’s eyes are filled with joyful tears as she looks up at us. “As soon as baby Sofia is here, you better get back over

here, okay?”

“Promise,” we say together.

Gram is hurrying in the door when I collect Phantom from the kitchen. We hug her quickly and head to Lily’s car. But she doesn’t take me home. Instead, we roll to a stop in front of her and Calder’s house.

“You might as well stay the night. Who knows when we’ll get the call to go back over, right?” she says.

I give her a small smile. “Worried about leaving me on my own?”

“Not at all,” she says honestly. “I know you can handle anything. But I’m going to be antsy, so I figured you could suffer with me.”

Inside, Calder is sprawled on the sofa watching a soccer game. He raises his brows when we walk in. “Morgan’s in labor,” Lily bursts out.

He jumps to his feet and threads his hands through his hair before a grin breaks on his face. “Christ, Marco must be in pieces.”

“He seemed to be holding together okay.”

Calder wraps his arms around his wife and kisses her head. “I know I’ll be beside myself when our turn comes.”

I hang up my jacket and drift into the kitchen to leave them to their moment. Even though I know that Calder and Lily are taking a more relaxed approach to getting pregnant, it’s clear they want kids. And when they do, I’ll love it just like I’m going to love little Sofia.

It’s a long night. None of us want to sleep, and besides, we keep getting texts in the group thread from Marco. Calder and Lily snuggle on the couch and eventually doze off while Phantom and I take the chair/floor in the corner. We leave the TV on, sleeping fitfully.

I dream whenever I close my eyes. I dream of babies. They make me happy, but even in the dream, I know they’re not mine. I dream of the dogs on the farm. And, finally, I dream of

Lucas. Just us, in bed together, laughing and lounging in each other's arms. As we lay there, a pack of dogs run into the room and jump on us, but it doesn't hurt. It's just perfect. Happy.

Me.

I wake up feeling peaceful before the pain of losing Lucas hits me in the gut again. When I realize it was a dream, tears reflexively sting my eyes. But as I lie there, I have the sudden and certain feeling that Morgan's baby has arrived.

Just then, my phone lights up.

Marco: *BABY SOFIA IS HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!*

I hiss in a breath, and Lily and Calder stir. They take one look at me and scramble for their phones, twin grins growing on their faces. We take the time only to pee before we're out of the house and in the car again. Phantom has no idea what's going on, bless him. Four a.m. is extreme, even on days at the farm. He dozes with his nose on my lap in the backseat as we speed over to meet the new member of our group.

Marco opens the door. For a moment, I don't even recognize him. There is no association with the person I was engaged to. No familiarity that might come with having almost made a life with this man. Instead, I see an exhausted, proud father, beaming despite the bags under his eyes. "She's perfect," he rasps, and two tears track his cheek. He shakes his head, but even Calder is wearing a watery smile.

Lily goes back first, and then Calder joins her. I sit on the edge of the sofa, petting Phantom. Marco pours me a coffee and then excuses himself to the shower. When Lily and Calder emerge, I draw in a deep breath and head down the hallway.

Morgan is radiant and exhausted all at once. Baby Sofia is sleeping in the bassinet beside her bed. She grins up at me and pats the mattress beside her, so I gingerly sit down and peer at the perfect newborn. A sweep of dark hair coats her head—she got Marco's hair. For some reason, the thought makes my throat close, but it's not jealousy. It's just a little bit of everything.

"I'm so happy for you," I whisper.

But Morgan's smile twists. "What happened, though, Harmony?"

I wave that away. "We don't have to—"

She laughs. "I've been in labor for eight hours. I think I get to choose the topic of conversation."

"Fair point," I giggle, but then sigh. "Lucas."

"Mm-hmm."

"We were so close to perfect, Morgan. I never had that before. I never felt connected like that. Like he was my best friend. My counterpart. And like he... he... he loved me. Exactly for who I was. Because he *knew* exactly who I was. He took the time to know it. To see me and want me to be me in ways I've just never..."

I look down at my hands.

Morgan's cool fingers rest on top of mine. "So what made you call it off?"

I tilt my head back to keep the tears in and gesture to little Sofia. Morgan's brows knit in confusion.

"So, there was a guy I was seeing. He ghosted me, but then my period was late... Anyway, long story short, I had a close call earlier this year. And it made me realize that I, uh, I don't want kids."

Saying it aloud to a brand-new mother makes me feel more selfish than ever. But as usual, Morgan doesn't flinch. Her blue eyes just softly gaze at me, the depth of understanding almost eerily profound.

"That's fine, Harmony. Why do you look like you just confessed to a sin?"

"Well, it's just I... I thought I did, and I know it's a thing that most women want."

"No. It's a thing that some women want. And it's a thing that some women never want. *And* it's a thing that some women don't want until they decide they do. And all of those are very valid life choices."

“Did, um, you want?”

She shrugged. “I wasn’t at the place where I was thinking about it when we got pregnant. But as soon as I found out I was, I was happy. I had no question that I wanted to make a family with Marco—even if it wasn’t the timeline I would’ve chosen. But I didn’t think I *didn’t* want kids.”

My shoulders slump. “Yeah, well, Lucas does want kids. And that’s why I had to call it off. I can’t disappoint him like that.”

She squeezes my fingers. “Harmony. First off, you had a pregnancy scare from a douche who ghosted you. So while I totally respect and believe you don’t want children, I’d also say that one moment isn’t your whole life.

“When you love someone, there’s no sense in ending things because of an unknown future. You don’t want kids. He does. Who’s to say that one of you won’t change how you feel? Or that, together, you discover the thing you *both* want? Why destroy a beautiful love for what might be? If you love each other, you’ll make it work. And if you decide that you don’t love each other enough, then you’ll know that, too. The Universe doesn’t judge, but throwing away true love only leaves you hollowed out and empty. Even if you think the reasons are justified.”

I blink at her through a well of tears. “You think I might change my mind? If it’s not with a ghosting douche and instead with someone I love?”

She shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe not. I think you might change your mind as much as he might. My point is, that’ll work itself out in time. You have a chance at happiness now. What will be, will be. But life is short. If you love someone, you shouldn’t waste time.”

“But what if he...”

Sofia coos, and Morgan jumps to check on her. She picks up the baby and cuddles her close, then gives me a sly smile. “A wise woman once told me, when I was trying to tell myself I’d ruined everything with Marco *and* my best friends, ‘think

what you want. We'll show you how we feel.' Well, I'd say Lucas is definitely the kind of man who'll show you how he feels. Your heart's already broken, girl. Not much to lose from there, am I right?"

Hearing my own words come back to me, words I'd said to Morgan at Lily's wedding, hit me straight in the face. I gaze at my friend, the picture of serene maternal energy, and feel my heart surge. I've done so many brave things in the last few months.

I can do one more.

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LUCAS

When I walk into the coffee shop, Jessica is already sitting at a small table in the corner, frowning down at her mug.

As I stand there, my stomach churns like crazy. I have no idea what she wants to talk about. I didn't think to ask for more details when she sent me that cryptic-as-hell text yesterday, and it's driving my anxiety through the roof. I was too confused, too caught off guard, and too busy trying to mentally psych myself up for seeing my ex-girlfriend.

Can we meet up? I made a mistake, and I need to talk to you. Please.

Before I can change my mind and walk back out the door, she looks up and offers the smallest smile. I guess I have to stay.

I weave through the crowded space and sit down across from her. She gestures to a second cup of coffee sitting in front of me.

"You still take it black?" she asks.

I nod. "Thanks."

"Thank you for meeting me. I know it must have been weird as hell, getting my text out of the blue."

"It was," I mutter before sipping my coffee.

I catch eyes with her, and concern flashes in her light brown stare. The muscles in my neck and shoulders are so

tense. I take a quiet breath in and out. Slowly, my shoulders lower and loosen.

She opens her mouth before hesitating. And then, we just sit and look at each other, letting the sound of people chatting and the coffee machine hissing and dripping fill the silence between us.

“I owe you an apology, Lucas,” she finally says.

My hand freezes as I lift my cup up to my mouth. Wasn't expecting that.

“For what?” I ask, setting my cup back down.

“For how I treated you when I ended things.”

Her eyes pool with tears. It sends a shock of pain straight to the center of my chest.

“I know I gave you the world's shittiest explanation when I left.” She sniffles before dabbing the corner of her napkin at her eyes.

I think back to the night that ended everything. We were arguing, just like we had every other night over the past few months. Scott had been contacting her and asking to see Taylor, and it was causing major strain in our relationship. I was pissed he thought he could just waltz back into their lives after five years of being MIA. But Jessica wanted to let him visit Taylor, and that pissed me off even more.

“Scott has a right to see his son, Lucas,” she had said in a sharp whisper. It was nighttime after Taylor had gone to bed.

“Like hell he does,” I'd said. “He doesn't deserve to. He abandoned you both. And now he wants back in, like nothing happened? No way in hell.”

And then she went quiet and just looked at me. And I knew.

“I want to give him another chance, Lucas. To be a dad to Taylor. And to be a partner to me.”

I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was. Not at losing Jessica. To be honest, things between us had been fading long

before Scott came back into the picture. At least a year, now that I think about it. We weren't wild for each other like we used to be, trading sexy glances and dirty texts, waiting for the chance to rip each other's clothes off. But we stuck it out. Taylor was our glue. We could overlook the spark and the passion dying out between us when we had Taylor to raise together.

But when she said those words, when she admitted that she wanted Scott, not me, for her and Taylor, I couldn't ignore it anymore. We were done. And I was going to lose Taylor.

"Things between us haven't been working for a while," Jessica had said. "You know they haven't. I think it's time we stop pretending, Lucas. I care about you, but I'm not in love with you anymore. We shouldn't be together."

Her tone had been calm, measured. It occurred to me that she had probably been thinking about ending things for a while given how well-spoken she was in such a heated moment.

I didn't say another word to her. I just went upstairs to Taylor's room and kissed his forehead as he slept. They moved out days later.

I shake my head, dazed, as I pull myself out of that memory and back to the present.

I focus back on Jessica, how her cheeks shine with tears. "The way I took Taylor away from you..." Her voice starts to tremble. So do her lips. She stops to clear her throat. "I'll regret that forever."

I swallow around the rock that's suddenly lodged in my throat.

"I thought that would be easiest, making a clean break." She wipes at her face and blows her nose. "But I was wrong. That was so cruel of me, Lucas. I'm sorry. I know things didn't work out between us, but that was no excuse to take him away. Taylor loves you so much. He still does. He asks about you every day. He misses the hell out of you."

I blink, and two tears tumble down my cheeks. She hands me a napkin, and I wipe my face.

“I’ve thought about him every day, too. I love that kid. So fucking much.”

She nods like she understands exactly. “Who cares if we’re not together anymore? You helped raise him, and you deserve to be part of his life.”

For a minute, we just sit there, quietly sniffing in this busy coffee shop.

“Taylor’s birthday is in a couple of weeks,” she finally says. “You remember, right?”

Before I can say anything, she lets out a sad chuckle. “God, what am I saying? Of course you remember.”

“There’s no way I could forget anything about him.”

“We’re having a big party for him on that Sunday. I want you to come. So does Scott.”

“R-Really?”

She nods. “We’ve been asking Taylor what he wants for a birthday gift. Every time, he says you.”

My heart shatters. I feel it as it happens, as every single shard blasts through my chest, settling somewhere deep.

I blink. More tears.

“My family will be there. So will Scott’s. I know it’ll probably be awkward as fuck,” she says, playing with the handle of her mug. “But it would mean the world to Taylor. You’re the only gift he wants.”

The thought of seeing Jessica’s family and Scott’s families makes me want to crawl out of my skin. But there’s no doubt I’ll be there. Taylor means more than the discomfort, more than anything in the world.

“Of course I’ll be there.”

“And bring Harmony,” Jessica says. Her face is blotchy from crying, but she manages a genuinely kind smile. “Taylor

liked her a lot. He asked if the pretty princess would come to his birthday, too.”

This time, my heart shreds for a totally different reason. Walking into that awkward-as-hell party would be a piece of cake with her. She’d hold my hand and flash a beautiful, reassuring smile before charming everyone with her sweetness and humor. Because that’s who she is. She makes everything better just by being there. Every single thing.

“She can’t. Or, I mean, we’re not together anymore.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

I shrug. “It’s for the best.”

“What happened? I mean, if you wanna talk about it.”

I glance at Jessica, her face swollen from crying, her expression tender and concerned for me. We’ve come a long way to get to this moment, from exes who didn’t speak for months to exes who are trying to make things right between us.

“We realized we don’t want the same things. She doesn’t want kids. I do. There’s no way to find common ground on that.”

“Oh.” Jessica’s crestfallen expression is strangely comforting. Like she feels my pain and is genuinely sorry to see it. And in this moment, as sad and serious as it is, it doesn’t feel like we’re exes. It feels like we’re friends.

“I’m sorry, Lucas. Truly.”

I nod my silent thanks. Jessica gives me the time and place for the party, and we finish our drinks. Together we make our way out of the coffee shop. I walk her to her car, and we hug before she gets in and drives away.

I climb in my truck, feeling dazed and drained but happy. I get to see Taylor on his birthday. I can’t believe it. My phone buzzes with a text from my brother.

Levi: *How did it go?*

Me: *Better than I thought.*

Levi: *That's all you're gonna give me?*

Me: *Sorry, still processing it all. But I swear, it's good.*

Levi: *That's awesome, man. Drinks Saturday?*

Me: *Sounds good.*

I smile at how even in our typical to-the-point text exchange I can feel how much my brother cares. He's always, in his own way, cared enough to check on me and make sure I'm okay.

A beat later, my mouth is a straight line again. Because there's one more person I want to tell this to, but I can't.

I push away the thought as quickly as it appears and drive home. I need to stop thinking about Harmony. So I do the one thing that always serves as the perfect distraction. I pull in front of the kennel at the rescue, climb out of my truck, hop the fence, and tackle-hug the dogs when they come galloping toward me. It works—for a while. But Harmony's still at the back of my mind, embedded in my heart, where I suspect she always will be.

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HARMONY

I stare down at the street below my condo. Rain drizzles down the windowpane, but Phantom and I are cozy and dry on a quiet Saturday afternoon. A few sprinkles had started as I headed home from yoga this morning, but it had held off on pouring until we'd taken our walk and settled back inside. Now, cupping a mug of peppermint tea, I'm feeling pretty content to heat up dinner and spend the night vegging on the couch with my favorite furry boy.

But when I close my eyes, a picture of snuggling on the couch back at Aunt Beth's house with my favorite human boy flashes in my mind. I swallow hard. My first instinct is to shake the scene from my head. After a breath, though, I close my eyes tighter and envision it. Lucas, in his flannel shirt and those sinful sweatpants, and me snuggled under his massive arm. The way he'd stroke my skin or hair almost unconsciously as we sat together. The scent of him lighting up my brain. The sound of his laugh.

A tear slips down my cheek, but when I open my eyes, I realize I'm smiling. "My best friend," I whisper in the silent room.

Morgan's words have rattled in my head for the last couple of weeks. When she talked to me in those early morning hours after Sofia arrived, it had all seemed so simple. We should work it out. We were perfect together. Everything else would get sorted in its own time. Maybe we change our minds about kids, or maybe we don't. We'd figure out what we truly wanted together. The universe doesn't judge, she'd said. I

could do this. I've done so much more. Why not just lay my heart on the line?

But there must've been some kind of magic in that moment because once I'd gone home and finally slept, there had been a giant wall in my mind between that thought and reality. And so I've limped along in the same holding pattern for two more weeks.

I blink and focus on the rivulets running down the window. *Wash it clean. But even with a clean slate, how do I start over after so much time?*

With a sigh, I shuffle back to the sofa and join Phantom in a snuggle. My head starts to bob, and in a moment, I'm dozing somewhere between sleep and awake.

When my phone rings, it nearly jolts me off the couch.

Phantom sits upright and pants at my startle, but I just grab for my phone and tap accept.

"Ms. Harmony Daniels?" an unfamiliar male voice says. I affirm, and he continues by saying, "Ms. Daniels, this is Officer Barlowe with the Camden County PD."

I sit bold upright. The rescue. "What's wrong?"

"We've got a noise complaint of dogs barking on your property. We're short-handed tonight with this rain. I'm finishing a call, heading to another, and will head out to the property as soon as possible. You should know that animal control is on the way, too. We're assuming you're not on the premises?"

"No, I—I'll be there as fast as I can, though. In the meantime, can you call Lucas Mallender? He should be—"

"Nah, ma'am, tried Lucas first. He's not answering his phone. Neither is Levi."

It's clear by his tone that Officer Barlowe is familiar with the Mallender brothers. I shouldn't be surprised, but I don't have time to think about details. I'm stumbling into my jeans and jacket already. All I need are keys and Phantom's leash,

and I'll be out the door. I tell the officer as much and end the call.

Phantom and I race across the underground parking lot to my car. He can tell we're not going for any old ride, and he wastes no time leaping into the backseat. Every time he does that without the ramp assistance, I feel a small swell of pride at my blind, beautiful boy, but right now, even that dimly registers. Instead, I buckle him into his harness, throw the car into gear, and squeal the tires as we peel out of the lot.

Before we started officially dating, Marco took me out one night. He picked me up in his Mercedes, looked over at me calmly, and said, "Warning. I drive pretty fast." I'd grinned—but that grin had turned into a grimace of shock as we bolted down the road, gliding between cars like they were standing still.

It was one of the reasons I said yes to going out with him a second time.

The adrenaline of handling a car with expert precision has always fascinated me. Dad used to get boxed seats to Formula 1 races, and I was the only one in the family who wanted to go. So, over the course of our time together, I'd cajoled Marco into teaching me how to drive like he did.

In this moment, with the rain pelting down and the dim sun starting to creep down toward the horizon, I breathe a prayer of thanks for those lessons. I don't know what's going on at the rescue, but visions of animal control swarming our dogs armed with tranq guns—or worse— gives me chills. It also keeps my senses sharp as I grip the wheel at 10 and 2 and press the gas to the floor. The Land Rover roars, and I give a single nod like that makes this all better.

The drive to the farm is supposed to take an hour. Phantom and I squelch to a stop in front of the barn in forty minutes. I make a mental note to tell Marco I notched a new PR, envision him rolling his eyes and laughing at me, and grab the door handle. Phantom whines but then begins to bark in a deep, menacing pitch.

“It’s okay, buddy. Stay here.” I leap out of the car and realize why he’s on guard. A cacophony of barks and yelps hits my ears over the rain. It’s nearly dark, and my eyes take a second to adjust. I fumble to open the back and grab the flashlight. Phantom is still barking while I slap at the auto-shut button on the trunk’s door. I don’t bother to make sure it closes as I turn around quickly and scan the area.

The first thing I see is the fence to the pen. All six dogs are lined up, staring out with teeth bared and fur standing straight up. They seem to be taking turns barking furiously, so I aim the light toward where they’re looking.

A plastic box, like you’d keep holiday decorations in, sits in front of the barn. Between a round of woofs, I hear tiny puppy yelps. But I can’t take two steps toward the box before I see a flash of reddish-brown out of the side of my vision. I whirl and catch sight of a dog jogging away from me. *Who is that? Did we get a new intake?*

Four paws splash right behind me, making me drop the light. “Shit, Phantom, I—”

But my words die when I turn around. Phantom is still harnessed into his seat in the car. That reddish-brown dog runs around my front tires. I frown. He was just headed toward the office. How in the hell could he be in two places at once?

The dogs go nuts again, and I swear I’m going to have a heart attack. I scramble for the flashlight and spin back to the box. That freaking red dog is running toward it now. *Is it the mother? Where are my gloves and treats? I can coax her to... Oh. Oh, fuck.*

The dog moves square into the path of my light, and my blood runs cold. That’s not the mother.

That’s a coyote.

And it’s heading straight for the box of puppies.

“No!” I shriek at the top of my lungs. I run forward and brandish the light like a sword. “No, back, back, get fucking back!”

The coyote startles and runs around the right side of the barn. I stop and take a deep breath—and then, the dogs go bananas again. Light, quick feet scurry behind me at the same time I see a flash of fur on my left. And my right.

The flashlight's beam wobbles in my trembling hand, but I force myself to turn around slowly. One on my right. One on my left. One now facing me. Then, the one who'd run around the barn appears again, on my left this time. The dogs growl from behind the fence while helpless little yelps warble behind me.

I'm the only thing standing between these puppies and a pack of four coyotes.

The wild dogs don't move. They stand in a guarded, not attacking, stance. Sizing me up, I guess. I throw my shoulders back and make myself as tall as possible. "Back, get *back*," I say in my sternest dog mom voice.

They seem unimpressed.

I scan each of their faces, their gleaming eyes and sharp ears. Their tails are low but erect—another sign of high alert. Two of them have blood on the sides of their mouths. *What the hell am I going to do now?*

They seem to be thinking the same thing, but they beat me to a decision. The one on my left feints toward me. As my head jerks to attention, the one on my right blurs into motion, too.

"No, no, no, no," I shout as I zigzag around, waving my arms and the light in wild patterns. I know they're trying to distract me so one can get to the pups. No way in hell. No way in *hell*.

They scatter again without getting too close to the box. In the back of my mind, I'm aware that those little pups are in a plastic bin—and that the rain is certainly filling it up by the second. If I don't get this situation under control, it's not going to matter very soon anyway.

Again, no way in hell is that happening.

I charge one coyote and then change directions, kind of making an erratic semicircle around the box by the barn. They scatter and then reform, seemingly game to take me on. One feints toward the box again, and I trip over my own feet and fall on my ass in the mud. With a loud scream, I dig a fistful of gravel and earth into my hand and fling it at him. He yelps at the rocks and darts away in retreat, only to circle back to his post in a moment's time.

The mud is thick now that I'm down in it, and I'm doing double duty of flailing at the coyotes and trying to leap to my feet at the same time. It's not going well. I feel like I'm in quicksand, and the best I can do is throw handfuls of mud anytime they get closer.

They're getting closer. A lot closer. They've tightened the ring around me steadily, backing me up against the box. I know it's not me they're after—coyotes don't hunt humans and are generally afraid of us. But the puppies are a prize, and they seem determined to win. I know, too, that they're trying to keep me distracted long enough that one of them can raid the box.

I plant one foot under me. One coyote darts to my side, and I fall over again. This happens twice. Each time, panicked rage mounts in my chest. I'm operating on adrenaline and pure protective instinct, but I know I'm losing this battle. *Stay strong, Harmony. Take up all the space you can, girl.* I rip off my jacket and swing it wildly, screaming until my lungs are sore. Rain soaks my hair, my lashes, everything, but I don't register it.

One of the coyotes zigzags in front of me, and suddenly all I can count are two. "No, no, no, no, no," I holler as I force myself to stand up and spin as one of the missing two hurries behind me—

A bark so big and deep that it's more like a primal howl hits my ears. I watch, dumbstruck, as a dark gray shadow flies through the air and, suddenly, the attacking coyote is on the ground. It takes me a full beat to realize it's Phantom, that he's chewed through his harness—and is about to chew through this coyote, too. The wild dog is yelping and snapping as

another flies at my beloved dog. Phantom lets out a yelp of his own. He whirls, trying to find the new assailant, giving the first coyote time to get to his feet. It's two against one.

No. Make that four against two. I charge the other two coyotes before they can join the fray and keep at them until they fall back and run behind the office, out of sight for the moment. Then, I sprint/slip back to the fight, but there's not much I can do because they're a furious ball of fur and teeth. One of the coyotes howls and falls back, licking a bleeding paw while Phantom and the other keep going.

Finally, the remaining coyote gets Phantom on the ground and stands over him, giving me just enough time to grab its back two legs. I lift them in the air and pull them apart just far enough to put him off balance. It's a technique for stopping a dog fight that Lucas taught me early on. I've never put it into practice, but it does indeed stop the coyote. I flip him over, and he falls to the ground, momentarily stunned.

Momentarily.

Because after that moment, he turns on *me*. I jump back and kick at him, but he nicks my calf as I do. Pain sends fireworks across my vision just as Phantom roars again and brings him to the ground.

"Ma'am, get your dog off. Get him off, or we'll take him down too!"

I spin around again and realize we're surrounded by headlights now. Two uniformed officers are running toward us, guns drawn. But they're brown uniforms, not blue—animal control.

"Phantom, *touch*," I sob, nearly blind with pain and fear. "Touch, boy, come here."

He hesitates just a moment—and then obeys, running with a limp to touch my fingertips with his cold, wet nose.

I hear a silenced shot go off beside me, and with a yelp, the coyote is still. But its body is rising and falling with labored breaths. "You killed it," I sob even so.

Dr. Wheating appears behind the officer. “No, Harmony, it’s a tranq. It’s okay, honey. It’s *okay*.”

But it’s so very not okay. I’m sure blood is running down my leg, Phantom is hurt, and we’re not done here.

“Come, come help,” I manage and hobble over to the box.

Two tan puppies are up to their necks in water. The water is so high that they’re lapping at it and kind of standing on tiptoes. Dr. Wheating and I each rush to scoop one out and cradle it in our arms. Their little bodies are shaking nearly as hard as I am. She whips off her jacket and shields us from the rain as we open the barn and get them inside. I plop down in a bale of hay and hold them both as Wheating fetches towels to swaddle them. Phantom limps into the barn and collapses beside me. When I first came to Fido’s Farm, Dr. Wheating had Phantom listed at sixty pounds. He’s been growing like crazy, though—fifteen pounds in the last few months.

Now, that seventy-five-pound frame leans hard against me. His big, sweet face rests on my thigh. I can see blood on his ear and paw, but his pink-and-gray nose is wiggling, intensely curious about who these new visitors might be. I swear, being blind doesn’t stop him from *anything*.

I’m torn between panic and reassurance. He wouldn’t be sniffing the puppies if he was seriously hurt, right? But when I run a hand over his head, sticky wet blood coats my palm.

“Doc,” I call softly, and she jogs over. “Phantom, is he...?”

She gives him a quick scan while I swaddle the puppies. “He’s got some bite marks we need to see to, but most of this blood isn’t his. I’m glad animal control got here. They’ll bandage the coyotes and set them free about thirty miles into the hills once they’re healed. Your fella would’ve killed all of them if he’d had much more time, wouldn’t you, boy?”

Phantom yawns and turns to lick a wound on his paw.

“My best boy. The goodest boy ever,” I murmur while I pet his matted fur.

Wheating frowns at my leg. “Meanwhile, we need to have you seen. You should have a rabies shot. Let me call Officer

Barlowe. He'll get you to the ER, and I'll take the puppies and Phantom with me. You and Phantom can reunite in the morning, ok?"

A large part of me just wants to grab a towel and sleep in the barn tonight, covered in puppies. I'm that drained, but I know that makes no sense. Wheating is here, Phantom saved my life, and *I* saved the pups. I don't want to think about how many were in that box before I arrived. There's no way to know.

What matters is that I'll take care of them now. Because I'm a freaking boss.

Barlowe arrives and helps me stand. I doze off in the back of the squad car, but before I do, I smile to myself. *What would Lucas say about all this?*

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LUCAS

When I walk through the hospital entrance, my hands are shaking. I ball them in loose fists over and over, but it doesn't help. My skin still is on fire, and my heart feels like it's about to explode. It's pounding a deafening beat in my ears. Panic and worry collide inside my chest, the sensation like a train and a semi-truck crashing into each other.

Harmony.

I can't move fast enough. I've got to get to her. *Now.*

As I jog through the winding sterile hallway, I recall the voicemail message I listened to barely a half-hour ago while drinking with Levi at the Rusty Nail.

Hey, Lucas, it's Sam Barlowe. Your boss Harmony Daniels has been injured during an incident at the rescue earlier this evening... coyotes spotted on the property... not yet sure of the degree of the injuries she sustained...

Bile creeps up my throat before I choke it back. No. Hell fucking no.

The anger swirling inside of me turns to pain. Desperate, piercing, soul-crushing pain.

Please no. Please let her be okay.

I find her room number and burst in, halting when I see a half-dozen people standing around the hospital bed. And then I see her.

Every ounce of tension melts from me as I take in her expression: shocked to see me, but she's awake and alert and sitting up. She's okay.

Those beautiful blue eyes go wide. "Lucas."

Six pairs of eyes turn to look at me. I clock Morgan, Marco, Calder, Lily, Harmony's dad, and a woman who I assume is her mom given that she looks exactly what I imagine Harmony will look like twenty-five years from now.

I shuffle my feet, suddenly realizing that I've just intruded on a private moment with Harmony's closest family and friends.

But one by one, they smile at me. Morgan walks up and pulls me into a hug. I notice her belly has shrunk. She must've given birth.

The expression on her face is a mix of tenderness and pain as she looks at me. Harmony probably told her how things ended between us since they're best friends. I notice Lily giving me a similar look. Calder and Marco, too, actually.

"Came to check on your girl?" Morgan says only loud enough for me to hear. She winks before twisting around and telling Marco they should head home. Calder and Lily say they're headed out, too. They all give Harmony hugs, then tell me a quick hello before leaving.

"You sure you don't need us to stay the night with you?" Her mom tucks Harmony's matted blonde hair behind her ear. I notice a few faint red scrapes on her cheek and a purplish mark under her right eye. My entire body twitches with the need to go over to her and pull her into my arms, to hug her tight, to inspect every inch of her body and make sure that she's okay.

"I'm sure, Mom. Thanks, though."

Her mom nods even though I can tell by her worried expression that she'd rather stay and keep an eye on her daughter. Can't say that I blame her. I feel that urge, too.

Her Dad kisses her forehead. "You call us if you need anything."

“I will, Dad. Thank you.”

“We’ll be back to check on you first thing in the morning,” her mom says, cupping her cheek.

I offer a polite introduction to Mrs. Daniels and a quick hello to Mr. Daniels before they head out. Then it’s finally just us.

I walk over to her and sit on the edge of her bed, scooping her hand in mine. She blinks quickly, seemingly surprised by the gesture.

“You’re here.” She says it like she’s mystified.

“Sunshine. Of course I’m here.”

I press a kiss to her forehead, careful to avoid any scrapes or bruises. She lets out a low hum that sends goosebumps flying across my skin.

“I heard you kicked the shit out of a pack of coyotes to protect some puppies.” I let out a low whistle.

She chuckles, her eyes bright with amusement, and shrugs. “Is that the official version? Because from what I remember, it was a bit scrappier than that.”

“You were amazing, Sunshine. Seriously. How are you holding up?”

“I’ve got a sprained wrist, three stitches on my leg, and a few dozen scrapes and bruises. But otherwise I’m okay. I got a rabies shot just in case. And they’re keeping me overnight for observation. In the struggle, I hit my head on the ground, so they think I might have a concussion and want to keep an eye on me, even though I told them I’m fine. I’d leave right now if they let me—”

I shake my head. “Hell no. Better safe than sorry. You’re staying right here.”

She starts to smile at my demand. “I’m assuming the police and Dr. Wheating filled you in on what happened?”

I nod. “You saved those puppies, Harmony. And every dog at the rescue. Who knows what would have happened if you

hadn't been there?" My throat aches. "I should have been there. If I hadn't been at the Rusty Nail drinking with Levi, I could've helped you. Saved you the trip."

"Hey." She raises a scraped-up hand to my cheek. "None of that. I'd come out any time of day for our farm. And, I held my own just fine. I don't need big, bad Lucas Mallender to rescue me." She winks, and I chuckle.

A nurse enters the room to check on her. I move over to let her do her job, but as soon as she's out of the room, I'm back by Harmony's side.

"So, um, how have you been?" she asks.

The words I'm aching to speak tickle the tip of my tongue.

Fucking awful, Sunshine. I work. I talk to people. I eat. I sleep. I go through the motions, but every moment I wish I had you back.

"Fine," I lie, not wanting to sound like a whiny, lovesick teenager when she's the one hurting. "I, um, met up with Jessica the other day. She apologized for the way she left when we broke up. And she invited me to Taylor's birthday party this weekend."

Harmony's angelic face lights up. "Lucas, that's wonderful."

"It is. I, uh, don't know where things are headed, but this is a step in the right direction. She's letting me see Taylor. And she says Scott's okay with it."

Harmony squeezes my hand with both of hers. "Taylor is going to be over the moon to see you." Her gaze turns misty as she looks at me. "You're getting your family back."

Her whispered words punch my gut. I shake my head, cradle her face, and pull her close. "It's not a family without you, Sunshine."

When she opens her mouth, a stuttered breath falls out. A few seconds pass, but nothing more. We lock eyes and stay quiet, just the sound of our breath mingling over the beeping medical machines.

Moments later, she wraps her hands around my wrists, lowering my hands from her face. I start to move away, but she pulls me to join her on the bed. She shifts to her side and scoots to the far end of the bed, the entire time gripping my hand in hers. I move to spoon her, and we settle into that familiar position we fell asleep in so many times.

Soon her breathing goes shallow and rhythmic. She's sleeping deeply, which I'm grateful for. She needs the rest. But I don't sleep a wink. If this is the last night I'll ever have with her, I want to remember every moment.

I stay until the glow of dawn peeks through the blinds shrouding the nearby window. Then I slowly, quietly scoot off the bed. I glance down at Harmony, taking in the visual of this angel. Yeah, we didn't end up together, but I was a lucky bastard to have the time I did with her.

As quietly as I can, I lean down and press a soft kiss to her forehead. Then, I walk out of the room without looking back.



I stare at the bottle of vodka in the freezer, contemplating if I should down a quick shot. It would take the edge off the nerves whirring inside of me right now for sure.

“Nope,” I mutter to myself before shutting the freezer.

No way. I'm headed to a kid's birthday party. There's no need to pregame.

I pace the living room to work out this nervous energy. What is Scott gonna say when he sees me? Will it just be tension and angry comments like the last time we saw each other? Was Jessica really telling the truth when she said they both want me there? Maybe she was just saying that to get me to come.

Pressing my eyes shut, I halt in place. Screw all of that. Even if it's true, who cares? Taylor wants me there. That's all that matters.

If only Harmony were here, I wouldn't be feeling any of this anxiety. Just one smile from her, just her grabbing my hand in hers would set me at ease.

But she's not here, and she won't ever be. She made it clear last night in the hospital that nothing has changed between us. I still love her, she still loves me, but we still don't want the same things.

I ignore the ache that reminder sends to my chest and check the time. I should leave. I'm already late.

Just then the doorbell rings, and for a split second my asshole brain thinks it might be her.

"You know it's not her," I mutter while I walk to the front door.

When I open it, I'm right. It's not Harmony. But I'm shocked as hell to see Marco and Morgan standing in front of me, a baby in a carrier between them.

My eyes go wide as I dart my gaze between the three.

"Hey, man," Marco flashes that pretty boy Hollywood grin. "Sorry to drop by unannounced, but Harmony sent us."

"Is she okay?" A wave of worry crashes through me, and my stomach drops to my feet. I thought I was doing the right thing by silently slipping out of the hospital this morning. No matter how much I was aching to text and see if she was alright, I wanted to give her space. Maybe that was a mistake.

I swallow back a ragged breath. "Did something happen? Did she—"

Morgan rests her hand on my arm. "She's fine. Resting like the doctor ordered. She just asked us to grab some things that she left here."

All the muscles in my torso relax. "Oh. Of course, grab whatever you want." I refocus on their newborn. "Congratulations. She's beautiful."

Morgan and Marco beam down at their snoozing baby daughter.

“Sorry, I should have said that sooner. I’m a little out of it.”

“No worries, man. Totally get it. And thanks.” Marco beams down at his baby, the smile on his face impossibly wide.

“She’s got your hair,” I say to Marco, taking in her impressive mass of dark hair.

“Lucky kid, right?” he jokes.

“She has your nose and mouth, Morgan.”

She smiles and pats my arm. “Aww, thanks.”

“Feel free to stay as long as you’d like. I’ve got to head out.”

“Another birthday party?” Marco asks. I nod. “Who’s your mom got you dressing up as for this one?”

“Um, actually, not sure if Harmony told you about Taylor, but it’s his birthday today. My ex invited me to the party.”

A look of recognition crosses both of their faces.

“Harmony did tell us,” Morgan says. “That’s great, Lucas. You must be so excited to see him.”

“I am.” I shove my hands in my pockets. “But also pretty nervous to see how everyone will react. It’s an awkward situation, for sure. All the guests are my ex’s family and Taylor’s dad’s family. They all know our history.”

Sweat pricks the back of my neck just thinking about the whispered comments.

“You want me to go with you?”

I almost laugh at Marco’s offer. “What?”

“I’d be happy to. I mean, I know what it’s like to be really nervous and have to go to something like that alone. Having moral support, even just the presence of another person, in a tough situation can be really helpful.”

This guy. Looks like a model and sounds like a therapist.

The weird thing? I’m actually considering it.

“You’re serious?” I ask.

“Absolutely.”

I shoot out a breath. “Okay. Sure. Thanks, man.”

“No problem.”

I turn to Morgan. “If you want, you can hang out here and get some rest while we’re gone.”

Marco nods. “Yeah, I can take Sofia with us. That way, you can take a nap or zone out. Or do whatever you feel like.”

Morgan’s eyes light up. “Oh my god, you guys, I’d love that. Thank you.”

She leans down to give baby Sofia a kiss on the head, kisses Marco quickly on the mouth, then darts past me and plops on the couch. She’s lying down and closing her eyes before I even blink.

Marco chuckles and pats me on the shoulder. “We better get going. We’ve got a birthday party to get to.”

Fifteen minutes later, we’re standing at the front door of Jessica and Scott’s house.

Before I knock, I take a second to process the moment. I’m at the door of my ex’s house, about to walk in with the ex-fiance of the woman I’m in love with.

“This is wild,” I mutter.

I glance over at Marco. He seems completely relaxed and unfazed, like he does this sort of thing all the time. Maybe he does. How would I know?

“Is it?” He chuckles, cradling his free hand around his daughter’s head. She’s asleep in the baby carrier that’s strapped to his chest. In his other hand, he holds the diaper bag. Behind the door, we hear kids screaming and laughing.

“I’ve never hung out with my exes. Or the exes of the women I date,” I say. “So this is kind of a mind-fuck.”

“Yeah, well, that pretty much describes the vibe of our whole friend group.” Marco shrugs and half-smiles.

I laugh, feeling the knots in my shoulders loosen the slightest bit. I knock on the door, and a voice on the other side hollers for us to come in. When we do, we're greeted with the standard chaos of a children's birthday party: kids running in every direction, balloons and streamers everywhere, music blasting, and cartoons playing on the TV in the living room.

I do a quick scan of the half-dozen kids that are darting around but don't see Taylor. A woman walks in from the kitchen to scold who I assume is her kid for only eating the frosting off of her cupcake.

"Annabelle, I swear, you're gonna get a stomach ache. That's pure butter and sugar." She groans before noticing Marco and me standing at the entryway. "You must be Bailey's dads! So glad you came!" She aims a loving stare at Marco's chest. "Oh, I didn't know you two had a new baby!"

I shake my head. "Oh, we're not—sorry, I'm Lucas. Taylor's da—er, um... I mean..."

The woman frowns at my stammering, and I start to sweat.

"Dad!"

Taylor sprints over to me and hugs my leg so hard, I almost drop the gift I'm carrying. I move to set it down on the ground and pull him to my chest.

"Hey, buddy. Happy birthday." I try not to squeeze too hard, but I'm so damn happy to see him. All the panic, stress, and worry melts away. All of it was worth it for this hug, this moment.

He leans back to look at me and grins wide, his two front teeth missing.

"Whoa. Look at that. Did you get a visit from the tooth fairy?"

"Yup!" He blurts out that he got five dollars for each tooth.

"Wow. That's pretty good. Tooth fairy must be rolling in the dough. I only got one dollar per tooth."

"Same," Marco says above us.

Taylor laughs. "I'm so happy you came, Dad."

Hearing him call me dad has morphed my nerves into warmth.

"I'm happy too. Here." I hand him the box in Iron Man birthday wrapping paper.

"Can I open it?"

"Of course."

He rips the paper off, revealing an Iron Man Lego set. His eyes bulge out of his head. "Oh wow! This is so cool!"

The look on his face wrecks me. Like I've captured the moon for him. He hugs me again. "Thanks, Dad."

That warmth is now an explosion. Pure, unfettered joy ignites in my chest. He pulls away and starts opening the box.

"Honey, what did we say about playing with your gifts?"

I look up at Jessica walking out of the kitchen over to us.

"We'll play with all your new toys later, okay?"

Taylor frowns slightly but nods.

"I'll help you build something cool, promise," I tell him. He immediately cheers up.

"Aunt Hillary just hooked up the Slip-N-Slide in the backyard," Jessica says. "Why don't you change into your swim trunks so you can go play with your friends?"

Taylor runs down the hallway to his bedroom. The woman who greeted Marco and me aims a flustered smile at us. "Sorry about mixing you up earlier."

Marco grins. "No worries. I'm Marco, Lucas's friend."

He shakes her hand and Jessica's.

"He was kind enough to let me tag along with my new baby daughter Sofia so my wife can take a well-deserved nap."

Both Jessica and the woman, whose name is Katie, offer dual, "awws."

"Well, aren't you the sweetest!" Katie says.

“I’m really not. It’s the least I could do after she did the hard part of delivering her. And giving me the most amazing gift I could imagine.”

He gently palms Sofia’s head, flashing her another lovestruck gaze. The women in front of us go “aww” yet again. Jesus, this guy. He could charm the panties off of a statue, he’s so damn smooth.

Jessica blinks away her heart-eyed stare before turning to me, her gaze now tentative and focused. “Do you have a minute? Scott and I wanted to ask you something.”

I brace myself for whatever that could mean. We leave Marco and Katie to chat and head for the kitchen, where Scott is stirring what looks like a giant pitcher of lemonade.

When he looks up at me, he blinks quickly and swallows. He’s nervous to see me. It makes me feel a little better. I’m not the only one out of their element in this awkward and unfamiliar situation.

“Hey, Lucas. Thanks for coming.”

Jessica stands next to Scott and scoops his hand in hers.

“You guys wanted to ask me something?”

They exchange a look I can’t decipher before nodding at me.

“Yeah.” Scott takes a breath. “Will you be Taylor’s godfather?”

It’s a long moment before what he’s said sinks in. “What?”

“We’ve been talking about this a lot,” Jessica says. “We know we haven’t handled this situation with Taylor like we should have.”

“I’m sorry, Lucas,” Scott says suddenly, his eyes glassy with what look like unshed tears. “You were a father to my son when he needed it the most—when I couldn’t be that for him.”

His voice starts to shake, and he pauses.

“Thank you for that. Things would have been a million times worse for Taylor had you not been in his life.”

I nod, unsure of what to say. I'm so stunned.

"I'm sorry we took him away from you for so long. I know Jessica explained some of this to you when you two met up, but I owe you an explanation, too. I messed up. I went about this wrong. You have every right to be upset with me. To hate me. I'll admit, at first, I was threatened at the thought of another man raising my kid—at hearing Taylor call someone else dad. That was part of the reason why we thought that Taylor shouldn't see you."

He winces like he's ashamed to admit this.

"But I finally realized how screwed up that was. You loved Taylor. You raised Taylor. Our son is happy, healthy, kind, and well-adjusted because of you."

I start to speak, but Scott interrupts.

"Please, let me get this out first. Taylor thinks of us as the same—we're both his dads. And yeah, maybe that's nontraditional and unconventional and people think it's weird, but who gives a shit?" He tosses a hand up in the air. "All that matters is what's best for Taylor. And what's best for Taylor is to have all of us in his life. That's all he wants."

"We want you to be in his life again, Lucas," Jessica says. "We want you to see him regularly, to come to his school events, games and birthday parties, all that. We want to share holidays and vacations with you, if you want."

I grip the nearby counter to steady myself. I'm dizzy attempting to process everything they're saying.

"You're his Dad too, Lucas." Scott's tone is firm but kind all at once. "We understand if you want to think this over—"

"No," I say quickly. "I want it. All of it."

Both of them look relieved. And happy.

"Thank you," I say after a quiet moment.

"Thank *you*, Lucas," Scott says.

They mention naming me as Taylor's legal guardian in their will.

“If that’s okay,” Scott says hesitantly.

“Of course it is. I’m honored you’d even think of me in that way.”

“You’re his dad. Of course we would,” Jessica says softly.

We head to the backyard, where all the kids at the party are playing on the Slip N Slide and in the nearby plastic pool.

Jessica and Scott are called away to help with something party related. I walk over to Marco. He’s sitting in a patio chair with a handful of moms, all holding babies, all chuckling and gazing at him.

“That’s a brilliant tip about burping, Amanda. Thank you. You’re a lifesaver,” he says before standing up to meet me. I notice Amanda blushing like crazy.

We step off to the side. “I was gonna ask if you’re doing okay, but clearly, you’ve charmed every mom at this party.”

He grins. “I feel like I’ve been talking their ears off with all the questions I’ve been asking them.”

I peer around Marco. Every mom within ten feet of us gives him the thirstiest looks I’ve ever seen.

“I have a feeling they wouldn’t mind if you stuck around and asked them a million more questions.”

He chuckles. “So, how did it go?”

“Pretty good, actually.” I tell Marco about Scott and Jessica wanting me to be Taylor’s godfather.

“Holy sh—I mean, that’s freaking awesome.” He smacks my shoulder. “I’m thrilled for you.”

“Thanks. I’m thrilled, too.”

We walk back over, and I feel happier than I remember feeling in a long time. Someone yells that it’s family photo time.

Taylor whips his head to me. “Dad, come on!”

I hesitate but see Scott and Jessica waving me over. We huddle around Taylor as people take a million pictures of us.

Inside, I'm bursting. I'm Taylor's dad again. We're a family. This is all I ever wanted.

It's a second before I feel a faint ache surface.

Harmony.

I shove it aside. This moment, this family moment, isn't what she wants. I need to accept it and move on.

I glance down at Taylor, who aims his wide grin at me. I ruffle his hair and kiss the top of his head. This is more than I ever thought I'd get. It's enough. More than enough.

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HARMONY

I'm enough. Just me, Harmony. I can take up space and be loud and... and...

“What am I even doing?” I groan aloud and then flop face-first into the crocheted pillow on the sofa. I groan again, and Phantom huffs a big, sleepy sigh from his bed in the corner.

“Gah, Mom, can't you see I'm trying to sleep? I've had a tough weekend, okay?” he seems to say, all with that one sigh.

I peek at him, curled into a tiny, seventy-five-pound ball of cuteness. His snout rests on the buffalo check pattern of his original bed. When we'd walked in, he'd trotted over to that corner like he knew it would be there, waiting for him.

It was. Lucas hadn't moved it. In fact, the only thing that seemed different was that my usual coffee mug had been put in the cupboard instead of resting perpetually in the dish drainer. Otherwise, it was like we'd never left this little house, this little life we'd built in just a few months' time.

Phantom begins snoring softly again, and I sit up and chew on my nails. It's cute that the house is just as it was, but that doesn't mean that Lucas and I are just like we were, right? Okay, so my heart nearly kicked its way out of my ribcage when he walked into the hospital. And, okay, my panties needed changing just from the way he wrapped his arms around me in that bed. And, yes, my soul felt a little dimmer when I woke and found he'd gone. But that doesn't mean everything's cool.

Right?

That's why you're here. Because it's not cool, it's not okay, and you're allowed to admit that. If that's all that happens, fine. If he asks you to leave, well, technically it's your house anyway. But fine. It doesn't mean you can't be here now.

I sit and worry for so long that I eventually have to flip on the lamp. It's Monday. I knew Lucas would be at work until six, which is why I arrived just after five. But the days are getting shorter, and my watch says it's 6:30 already. Given that it's a five-minute commute, my brain starts working on reasons why he'd be late today of all days.

Maybe the puppies took a turn for the worse. I spent Saturday in the hospital. Then, all day Sunday I was stuck in a nearby hotel room. Half the day, I slept like a rock. The other half, I fought with friends and family because of how much work I tried to do. I called Dr. Wheating every hour until she brought Phantom to me and then promptly burst into tears in his fur. I called Kayla and Frankie about as much, but I couldn't be mad that they were slammed with handling the new puppies. Kayla reported that, even though it was a Sunday, Lucas had dropped by later in the afternoon. She had said things were stable, but that was yesterday. Maybe something terrible happened today.

Or maybe Lucas was late because he wasn't staying here anymore. Or maybe he bypassed the house and met up with Levi for drinks or something.

Or maybe he met someone else, and *they* went out for drinks.

I shove that idea away just as a car door thumps outside. That thump coincides with my stomach hitting the floor, even as I jump to my feet. I hear Lucas's familiar footfalls on the porch, count the two beats I know it'll be while he kicks off his work boots by the door, and then hold my breath as the door slowly swings open.

“Woof!”

“Jesus Christ,” Lucas gasps as Phantom totally ruins my surprise. His dark head whips around the room. Meanwhile, Phantom hops up, jogs over, and begins licking his hand.

Lucas's face splits into a gorgeous, wide grin. He drops to one knee and scratches Phantom's ears with both hands. "Hey, handsome boy, how are ya? How are ya, huh? I heard you were a good boy on Saturday, yeah? Were you the best boy? Did you get those big bad coyotes? I bet you did. I bet you got 'em good. Good boy, Phantom, good boy."

I clear my throat, but the ache doesn't ease. Tears sting my eyes as I watch this beautiful, loving man cuddle my dog. *Our* dog. "He chewed through his seat harness and jumped out the back of my car. I didn't even realize he knew he could get over the seats."

Lucas's pets slow, but he keeps stroking Phantom. He keeps his gaze on the dog as he says softly, "Uh, yeah. Amazing what dogs can figure out if they have to. Especially if their momma's in danger. If the back hadn't been open, this boy would've damn near busted the glass if he could've, no doubt."

My throat is so thick that my words come out choked. "I'm so proud of him. And... and so glad he's okay." I flick a tear off my cheek and try to keep the dams from bursting.

Lucas jumps up. His eyes are that lake-like color, shining in the low light. "And I am so proud of you. And so damn glad that *you're* okay, Sunshine." The corner of his mouth crooks. "But I gotta admit, I'm not sure what to make of you standing here."

You're enough. You can take up this space, too. Just do it, Harmony.

I roll my shoulders back and draw up to my full height. Lucas doesn't move. Part of me wants to just throw myself into his arms, but I know that's not an option. Nor is it an option to ask him to do the talking now. This is my show, and I can run it.

When I speak, I start slowly. I'm unsure exactly where I'm going, but I'm very damn certain of where I want to be.

"I'm not okay, actually. I haven't really been okay since the day I walked out of this house, Lucas."

He winces and nods. It gives me the push to keep going.

“I get it if you’ve made peace with our decision. I know what kind of life you want, and I’m not pretending to offer you that life. Lucas... up until a year or so ago, I thought that the pinnacle of my life was going to be getting married to a successful businessman and starting a family. And those are *great* things to do, as long as they’re what you want. But, turns out, they aren’t my goals. I thought I was pregnant this past spring. And it made me certain that motherhood isn’t for me.”

I take a deep breath and continue as I watch the emotions play in his eyes. “But I was just as certain that it *was* for me for most of my life. The point I’m trying to make is, I think things can be one hundred percent true for you but also change totally with time and experience. Maybe someday my mind will change again. But maybe it won’t. I know where I stand now. I’m certain of who I am and what I want, but I’m also comfortable with change.”

Impulsively, I step closer and grab his hand. Lucas doesn’t move, but he does grip my fingers tight. “Lucas Mallender, I am so fucking certain that I love you. And the time we’ve been apart hasn’t changed that one single bit. When I think about you, I think about a life that I want. This little house—we made it a home together, bit by bit. We made a *life* together, Lucas. And it’s a life that I want. That I miss every single gut-aching day I’m not here. This is where I want to be. And you are the man I want to call my family. I want to wake up beside you. I want us to take turns making dinner. I want to work together to make this rescue thrive even more than it already is.

“And I want your hands on me, all over me. And I want to be the woman whose name you call when you come, Lucas.” My voice bottoms out on his name. A fire sparks in his gaze—I’m feeling it all over my body.

We both take a shaky breath.

“I want to be enough. Children or no children, I want so bad to be enough for you to say yes to.”

Silence falls. We stare at each other until Phantom shuffles back to his bed. Still, nothing happens. When I can't bear it anymore, I clear my throat. "So, um, what do you think?"

"I think... goddamn, Princess. Look at you taking up space."

Heat floods my face. I try to pull my hand away, but Lucas threads our fingers together and steps toward me. He brushes his fingers across my cheek, and my knees wobble.

I bite my lip. "Lucas."

"Mmm?"

"I know I'm not the woman you—"

"Ever saw myself with?"

I nod, and the corner of his mouth curls.

"You're damn right about that, Princess."

"But, but I know that I'm also not the woman who will give you the life you want. I'm sorry," I whisper, then clamp down on my lip. "But I still just love you so much."

His arms are around me. I didn't even notice it happen. It just feels so natural, so damn right to be wrapped in his embrace.

"What I'm hearing you say, and stop me if I got it wrong—it's been a long day, and I wasn't expecting a goddess to be standing in my living room when I got done—but what I'm hearing is that you love me."

I nod, and he rests his forehead against mine. "That you want to make a life with me."

"Mm-hmm."

"That you want us to be family."

Tears spill from my eyes and blur my vision. "Mm-hmm," I warble again.

"That we figure it all out as we go. But we do it together."

"Y-yeah, but—"

He dusts his thumb across my lip. I'm not sure how, with how badly it's trembling. "Yeah, but what else is there, Sunshine?"

"Children."

That perfect smirk flashes again. "Taylor's in my life again. Jessica and Scott asked me to be his godfather and to be involved as much as Taylor wants. That's what I've been wishing for. Sofia's gonna need her awesome aunt and uncle's house and dog farm to come visit and tell all her friends about. And you and me have time to figure out what our life looks like. And," he chuckles, "we've got a pack of dogs who need us in the meantime. I swear, those new pups you rescued are as scrappy and feisty as you are."

"I'll take care of them first thing in the morning," I vow.

His pupils eclipse his eyes. "Good. But tonight, I'm the one taking care of you, got it, Princess?"

"Does... does that mean you..."

Lucas spins around and plops down on the couch, his hands so firm on my waist that I don't even think about following. I just spread my knees and straddle his lap as a nervous, hopeful yelp escapes me. He cradles my face with both hands and gazes up at me. The depth of love, of adoration in his eyes, steals my breath.

"That means I don't want to go another fucking second without kissing you, Harmony Daniels. Hell yes, Sunshine, I want it all with you. Never stopped, not for a second. And hearing you say all that—it's sexy as fuck, if I'm being honest."

I press my lips in a line and try to let them roll into a sexy pout, but a goofy grin breaks on my face instead. I giggle. "Lucas, I—"

But my words are lost. He pulls gently, I lean forward, and then there's nothing in the world but this kiss. A familiar feeling twinges in my gut. It's the same one I get when I'm working with the dogs, only so very different—so much more potent. And I know without a doubt that wherever we're

going, whatever kind of life we create, I am exactly where I'm supposed to be.

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LUCAS

It doesn't matter how long I touch or look at Harmony. I can hardly believe it. She's back in my life. We're together again, for good this time.

When we break apart from our kiss, I cradle her face, and for a few moments, I just stare at her.

"How can you do that?" she asks, that blindingly beautiful smile on display.

"Do what?"

"Look at me like... like..."

"Like you're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen? Like I can't believe I get to be with you?"

She bites her lip, and her cheeks turn pink in my hands. I swear, my heart grows ten sizes in my chest.

This. This right here is everything I ever wanted. I have Harmony. I have Taylor. I have the life I always wanted.

We made it happen. *She* made it happen.

Instead of saying more, I scoop her up in my arms. She squeals and slides her arms around my neck as I walk us upstairs to my bedroom.

When I set her on the bed, I get to work tugging off my shirt and unbuttoning my jeans. My hands still when I notice how she runs that gorgeous pink tongue of hers along that perfect bottom lip.

“Maybe I should shower first,” I say.

Harmony wrinkles her nose. Fucking hell, if that’s not the cutest damn thing I’ve ever seen a human being do. God, I missed seeing her do that. When I realize that I’ll get to see her wrinkle her perfect ski-slope nose for the rest of my days, I feel an instant burst in my chest.

Forever.

She leans up, shaking her head, and takes over unzipping me. “No way. Do you know how hot you are after a day’s work? How sexy your sweat smells? How much it turns me on?”

My jeans and boxers are at my ankles by the time she finishes. I start to say something, but she slides me into her mouth, and I lose all my words. Except for one.

“Fuck,” I mutter, my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

As good as this feels to have my dream girl working me over like this, I won’t last long. Especially not after today, when we finally put everything on the line—our feelings, our future, our happiness. I’m overloaded on love and lust, and if I’m not careful, I’ll blow early and ruin the moment.

I pull away and lean down, capturing her chin in my hand.

“You wanna know how I can look at you like that? Because you’re my everything, Sunshine. You’re all I could ever want. I can’t believe I get to be with you.”

She captures my mouth in a kiss that leaves me dizzy. Soon we’re tangled in my bedsheets, her clothes are gone, and I can’t keep my hands off her. Her skin, her hair, her lips, her tongue, her everything.

Forever.

Heat and pleasure build inside of me until I’m practically shaking. No way. Not yet.

I flip Harmony on her back and bury my face between her thighs. She writhes and shouts my name, squeezing those mile-long legs around my head like a vise. I smile against her

as she loses it. God, this is heaven. And we get to do this again and again.

I thrust inside of her. It's just a few minutes before I lose it, too. It's like a bomb has gone off inside of me. I'm eviscerated. My heart, my lungs, my stomach, and every muscle in my body pulses and aches. I'm wrecked in the best way, all because of her.

Panting and sweating, we cuddle into each other. Harmony's head is tucked into my chest, and my arms are wrapped around her.

"God, I missed that," she mutters.

"Me, too." I peer down at her, at those sleepy, sex-drunk eyes, at the lazy smile on her face.

"Promise me that we'll never stop being filthy in bed. Even when we're old and wrinkly."

I laugh. "I promise, Sunshine."

"And promise me you'll never, ever stop wearing those sexy worn t-shirts and flannels. And jeans that show off your delicious ass."

She reaches around to give my cheeks a squeeze.

"Only if you promise you'll never stop wearing those tiny shorts. And tank tops. And those tight little dresses."

She giggles. "Deal. God, who would have thought we'd work out? A prissy princess like me and a rugged guy like you?"

"Against all odds," I tease. "But we did it."

A beat later, her playful expression turns tender. "I'm so happy we're together again, Lucas. This... you..." Her eyes go watery, and she blinks. She's smiling again. "You make me the happiest."

I squeeze her tight against me and kiss her. "Same, Sunshine. You have my whole heart."

EPILOGUE

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HARMONY

5 years later

Orange glitter flutters around, and I have the distinct impression that I'm inside a snow globe. I don't care that I'll be picking glitter out of my hair and my carpet for the next six months. I am in a bubble of laughter, love, and so many smiles.

"Henry, no! Look what you did! You ruined—Aunt Harmony, your hair is orange now!" Sofia stops chiding her brother and doubles over in laughter when she notices. Henry has run over and upended our coffee-table art station.

Alice and Mia's dark brown eyes both snap to me, and then they fall down giggling, too. Being only three and a half, Lily and Calder's twins work hard to emulate pretty much everything Sofia does.

I chuckle and pat my hair, trying to rain some of the glitter back onto the construction paper. "Orange is a good color for me, I guess."

From the sofa cushion right behind me, a low growl rumbles in my ear. "Every color is good on you, Princess."

I turn and grin sweetly at Lucas, who's giving me a mischievous smirk while the children laugh. I take in the soft crow's feet flanking the corners of his eyes and the few silver hairs peeking through his beard and temples. My guy has gotten insanely hotter with age.

Even toddler Henry is now rolling around laughing, although I suspect he has no idea why. Quickly, I steal a kiss and go back to decorating a hand turkey.

“Come on, guys, let’s finish our projects,” I say in an attempt to refocus them.

“Ugh, there are too many little kids in here.” From the opposite end of the sofa, Taylor tears his eyes away from the football game. He casts a distasteful look at the coffee table. “And you guys kiss too much,” he adds, nodding at Lucas and me.

“You’ve been saying that since you were in first grade,” Lucas returns as he waves a socked foot at Taylor’s face.

Taylor slaps the sole of his foot, but his lips twitch at the same time. “And I’m still right.”

Lucas and I just shrug. The kid has a point.

But Taylor swings his feet to the floor and looks at the glitter and construction paper again. “I’m bored. I’m gonna go see the dogs, if that’s okay?”

Lucas nods and stands, too. “I could use the fresh air, sure.”

“Come on, Sofia. You want to go with us?”

Taylor’s tone is a little gruff, like he’s trying to sound bored. He glances at me, and I press my lips in a quiet smile. He might want to seem above it all, but Taylor has the kindest heart. He’s a great “oldest cousin” to this group.

Sofia, however, sees it a little differently. And, since she’s five, she has no subtlety about her crush. Anytime Taylor speaks to her, her eyes go round and her cheeks flush pink. This moment is no different, except that her jaw drops, too. Taylor rarely includes her in his plans, but when he does, oh boy. You’d think he’d asked her to prom.

“Uh, uh, uh-huh. Yes, yes, I’ll go too. Can I go, Aunt Harmony?”

“Well, sure. I’ll let your mom know. Just be sure to put on a coat, okay? Taylor, make sure she zips it.”

“That’s not my job,” he grumbles, but I know he’ll do it anyway.

Lucas bends toward my ear. “I’m gonna *un*-zip that sweater you’re wearing, Princess. Just so you know.”

“Mmm, you think I hadn’t already thought of that?” I purr right back.

He winks. “Figured you’d gotten the memo.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, Sunshine.”

Five years together have been a wild ride. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Fido’s Farm is now a dog boarding business in addition to a rescue. We’re busy as ever with caring for our pups and raising Taylor alongside his parents. He stays with us half the week, which Lucas and I love. It’s a joy seeing them together, seeing how happy Lucas is to watch his son grow up and be a part of his life.

Mia interrupts us. “Aunt Harmony, can you draw another turkey? Henry wants one.”

We trade a smile, and then Lucas is off to catch up with Taylor and Sofia while I return to the turkey project.

“Where’s Mom?” Alice asks as she calmly colors in her bird.

“Your parents went with Aunt Morgan to pick up dinner,” I explain.

“But there’s food in the kitchen.”

“Well, there’s dessert, bread, potatoes, and some appetizers. And your mom’s yummy lumpia. But I think we need some more things for a big Thanksgiving, don’t you? Like, hmm, what could we eat?”

They take turns shouting out foods, getting more and more ridiculous until they’re naming things like crayons and pillows. I laugh like it’s the funniest thing I’ve heard, just to keep them going.

Being an aunt to my best friends' kids makes my heart ache in a way I never thought it could. When Lucas and I got together all those years ago, we weren't sure where life would take us. But where we ended up is perfect. We have our dogs, these awesome kids, and each other.

The front door opens. Phantom's bark makes all three little ones jump reflexively, but they're not afraid of him. He's been in their lives since each of them first drew breath.

A chorus of "Mommy!" sounds. Art time is over, and my friends are being rushed by their children.

I rise from the floor and hurry to take bags of food from their arms. Calder, however, is on his own with that case of Sonce whisky.

"Think we each needed a bottle, including the kiddos?" I tease him as he follows me into the kitchen.

He chuckles. "It'll put 'em right to sleep. Dunno why Lily won't let me put a nip in the bottle. Always did me good as a wee one."

"Bullshit."

He laughs along with me. "Nah, this is a case from Nate. New blend we've put out just in time for the holidays. If it tastes like piss, well. It won't. But if it does, I'll handle it." He winks.

"Oh, I know you will, boss." Calder went from brand rep for Sonce all the way up to head of marketing in the U.S. He doesn't model anymore, even though five years have done nothing but improve his looks and physique. Fatherhood and the big-shot position look very good on him. He smiles even more these days, which I never thought possible from someone who always seemed so relaxed.

We're interrupted when the back door flies open. Taylor charges in, his coat half unzipped. "Harmony! Good thing we went to the pen! Someone dropped a puppy off. It's shivering. Lucas says we think it's been there since before the sun went down. He's outside calling Dr. Wheating. He told me to come in and get you."

I drop the bags and rush to him. A little fluff is shivering hard inside Taylor's jacket, so I run to grab one of Phantom's towels and wrap it up. Sofia is standing wide-eyed by Taylor's side. All five children shadow me as I head into the living room and crouch close to the fireplace. They stare, hushed, as I murmur to the puppy and rub its little body inside the towel to keep blood flowing.

"Is it... okay, Aunt Harmony?" Sofia whispers.

"It's okay," I confirm. "Just very, very cold." Of course, I won't be sure it's okay until Wheating arrives, but there's no need to tell them that. The dog is breathing and seems alert, so no need to panic anyone.

We get the shivering to stop pretty quickly, and while I tend to the puppy and the children, Lucas prepares a cozy box that we set by the fireplace. Phantom is sniffing around like crazy to introduce himself. I know from experience that he'll guard the pup's box until Wheating arrives, so I dust myself off and turn to the kiddos.

"He'll sleep. But I think it's time for us to eat!"

They cheer and run back to the kitchen. Taylor turns to Sofia and nods. "Good job spotting it."

She nearly swoons. "Thanks," she manages to whisper.

He smiles at her, and I'm sure she's going to faint. "Let's go get some food, yeah?"

They hurry to catch up with the others.

Lucas wraps his arms around me. "They're gonna get married one day," he jokes, chuckling.

"Shh, keep your voice down. Taylor will kill you, and Sofia will explode with happiness."

We laugh together, and then Lucas tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "You're coated in glitter. And your smile's even brighter than the sun today. I need shades just to look at you."

I snuggle deeper into his arms and sigh. "Yeah, guess so. But look around. My heart is so full, Lucas."

He squeezes me. “I know. I feel it, too.”

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EPILOGUE

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LUCAS

I press a kiss to Harmony's forehead, taking in the moment. Her in my arms, our family and friends around us, chatting and laughing and playing. It's chaos, but it's everything I wanted. And it will never, ever get old.

Harmony leans back, aiming a gorgeous smile at me, those baby blue eyes sparkling. My knees go weak like they always do when she blesses me with that look. This—being with her, having a life with her, loving her, craving her—this will never get old.

Yeah, I've been told that when you're together for a long time, the spark fades. But it hasn't for us, and I can't imagine that it ever will. Sure, our five years together isn't that long in the grand scheme of things, but we still balance a lot—busy schedules, working together, and helping to raise Taylor. And through it all, that want remains. I still end every day craving this woman. I still wake up every morning feeling like the luckiest bastard in the world to be with her.

Harmony wags an eyebrow at me, and there's a flash in her stare. She licks her lips while tracing her fingers up my chest. I swallow back a groan and lean my mouth to her ear.

“Later, Princess,” I whisper just as I feel two tiny bodies knock into my legs.

“Carry me, Uncle Lucas!” Mia squeaks.

“Me too, Uncle Lucas! Please?” Alice says.

Harmony steps back, laughing. “You've got your orders.”

I chuckle down at them. “I thought you two were eating.”

“We already ate.”

I look toward the dining room and spot Lily frowning at her girls. “You both had maybe two bites of lumpia.”

Calder is standing next to her, eating the leftovers that their daughters didn’t finish. I smile, remembering how hard it can be to get kids their age to eat.

I crouch down so that I’m eye level with them. “How about this: I carry you girls, but then you have to go back and try to eat another bite or two.”

“Okay!” they say in unison.

When I scoop them up, they’re squealing with laughter. I walk toward the dining room.

“We’re so high!”

“Yeah, so high!”

“You carry us higher than Daddy!”

“Yeah, way higher!”

Lily giggles while Calder rolls his eyes good-naturedly. I can hear Harmony laughing behind me as she follows. Calder swallows his bite and points at them. “Well loves, that’s because your Uncle Lucas is a brute who rudely has about five inches on me. Audacious, innit?”

They’re still giggling when I set them back down in their chairs. I make two small plates from the array of appetizers on the table. My mouth starts to water as I take in the charcuterie board, veggie plate, lumpia, fruit tray, and artichoke dip.

“Let’s try to eat, girls,” I say as I crouch between their chairs. “Your mom’s lumpia is the best. Think your bellies can handle a little more? Then, later, we’ll talk about dessert. Okay?”

I point at the counter where a giant bowl of banana pudding sits beside more bananas, graham crackers, and chocolate. A bottle of rum, spices, and walnuts sit beside a third bunch of bananas. I don’t know why these people have

such a thing for banana desserts, but each of them is so damn delicious that I'm not about to question it.

Alice and Mia gape at the sugar spread. They both pick up a lumpia and begin to chew. Lily beams a grateful smile at me while Calder claps me on the back.

I stand back up just as Harmony slinks an arm around my waist. "You're like the toddler whisperer," she says.

I wink at her. "I've had a bit of experience."

I glance over at Taylor, who pauses from eating when he notices Henry reaching for the fruit plate. He dishes up more fruit for his little cousin before looking at me. I flash him a thumbs up, and he smiles shyly.

My chest aches. I still can't believe we managed to make this work, that Jessica, Scott, and I figured out a way to co-parent Taylor. Five years into it, and it's been everything I ever wanted. Raising a kid isn't easy, but it's rewarding as hell. Sharing the stress and the joy has worked out better than I could have ever expected.

"When are Mom and Dad getting here?" Taylor asks me.

I check the clock on the wall. "Any minute now. Gramma Debbie and Uncle Levi should be on their way, too."

Just then, Morgan walks out of the kitchen with a plate of freshly fried lumpia. When she sets it on the table, Lily picks one up, takes a bite, and beams at her with pride. "So good! You did me proud."

"Really? Yay!" Morgan hugs her. "Thank you for teaching me your recipe."

"Man, this is a ton of food," I mumble. "Did we really need to cater *and* cook? We're gonna have enough to feed fifty people, easy."

Lily pats my arm. "Of course we need all this food. It's the holidays. Growing up, my family always cooked and catered a ton of food. It means everyone goes home with plenty of leftovers."

I nod my head at her. "Excellent point."

“Will Levi’s famous loincloth be making an appearance at Thanksgiving dinner?” she asks.

I groan. “God, I hope not.”

Taylor laughs. “Uncle Levi’s so funny.” Henry looks up at him and copies his laugh.

“He sure is, buddy. Among other things.”

Lily winces slightly as she looks at Morgan. “How’s Marco?”

Morgan rolls her eyes, but she’s still smiling. “Out of his mind. I still can’t believe he’s actually going through with it.”

Harmony walks over to her and gives her shoulder a squeeze. “I tried to talk him out of it.”

“Me too,” Lily says.

“I should have tried harder,” I say.

Morgan shakes her head. “It’s okay. It’s none of your guys’ fault that my husband is a goofball.”

The cheeky smile tugging at Morgan’s lips betrays her name-calling. She’s nuts about that guy, just like he is for her.

“Mommy!” Sofia squeaks. “You said we shouldn’t call each other names.”

Morgan aims a serious look at her daughter. “You’re right, honey. I’m sorry.”

“Is he out front?” Lily asks.

“Yup,” Morgan says through a breath before her phone buzzes with a text. She beams at the screen. “Gram’s here!”

I follow Morgan out the front door to see if her Gram needs help coming in, but Marco beats me to it. He helps her out of her tiny car and walks her to the front of the house. She grins and waves at us as she makes her way over.

“Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!”

Morgan runs over to her and pulls her into a hug. Gram laughs and says, “Aww Sugar Pea, you saw me just this morning.”

“I know, I know,” Morgan says, taking Gram from Marco and walking her up the porch stairs. “I’m just happy you made it here okay. It’s a bit of a drive from our house.”

Gram chuckles. “I know I’m pushing ninety, but I’m still very capable of driving and getting around.”

It’s the truth. She moves impressively quick for someone her age.

She stops to hug me. “Lucas! So good to see you. Thank you for having me over today.”

“It’s our pleasure. We’re so happy you could come. The kiddos are eating appetizers inside. Join them if you’re hungry.”

She beams. “Some snacks and cuddles with those cutie pies sound perfect.”

“Save room for the main course!” Marco hollers from the front yard.

My eyes go wide at his get-up: oven mitts, an apron, and goggles. He gestures toward the deep fryer he spent hours this morning setting up.

Morgan shakes her head at her husband. Gram laughs.

“Fried turkey will change your lives, I’m telling you.” He jogs over to us, and we all walk inside.

After the kids rush over to hug Gram, she settles at the dining room table with them. Marco stops to give Sofia and Henry kisses before darting into the kitchen and pulling the thawed-out turkey from the fridge. He flashes that blinding, pretty boy smile. This guy. Even when he’s dressed like a cross between a chef and mad scientist, he still looks like a menswear model.

“Who’s hungry for some turkey?” he asks.

All the kids cheer.

I follow him back outside. Harmony, Calder, Morgan, and Lily come along too. I notice Calder and I are the only ones to walk with Marco to the fryer.

“You don’t wanna see how this unfolds up close?” I ask them.

“It’s safer back here,” Morgan says. Lily and Harmony nod their agreement.

“Oh, come on,” Marco groans. “I know what I’m doing. I spent the whole week researching how to deep fry a whole turkey. I got all the right equipment, and I found the perfect recipe.” He holds the turkey by a metal hook that attaches to the top of the fryer. He winks at his wife. “Just wait till you taste it. All your worrying will have been for nothing.”

“Uh-huh. We’ll see,” Morgan says. Harmony, Lily, and Calder laugh.

Two seconds after Marco dunks the twenty-pound turkey into the hot, bubbling oil, my eyes go wide.

“Shit!” I grab Marco and Calder and pull them back.

“What the...”

“Fucking hell!”

They go quiet at the same time I hear Harmony shriek.

“Oh my god!”

Hot oil bubbles over the deep fryer like lava shooting from a volcano. Calder, Marco, and I run for the porch.

“Why is the oil crackling and bubbling over like that?”

“It looks like it’s going to blow, lad.”

“Oh my god! It’s all over the grass!”

“Shit! It’s going to catch fire!”

“Get some water! Get the hose!”

Calder starts to run for the hose, but I stop him. “No, don’t! Water is awful for a grease fire, hang on!”

I run into the house, grab the fire extinguisher, run down the porch stairs to the out-of-control fryer, and blast the extinguisher. Seconds later, the hot oil dies down, and the deep fryer is a mountain of white, flame-retardant foam.

It's not till then that I realize just how fast my heart is beating. I glance up at the five of them standing on the porch, eyes wide as they gawk at the ruined turkey.

Marco stammers for a second. "Um, maybe I had the oil temperature set too high."

"Did you pull the turkey straight from the refrigerator before you put it in the fryer?" Lily asks. He nods. She winces. "You're supposed to let it rest at room temperature for like an hour."

"Oh..."

It's a few seconds of silence before everyone howls with laughter, including me. I stumble back up to the porch.

"That's it, laugh it up," Marco grumbles, even though he's chuckling, too.

Morgan leans up to kiss his cheek. "We're laughing with you. Not at you. Promise."

"Sure." He flashes a mock glare at her before pecking her on the lips.

"It was a good try, mate," Calder says. "I would have cocked it up, too. I don't know anything about cooking."

Marco tugs a hand through his hair. "Sorry, everyone. I guess no turkey today."

Just then, two cars pull up the driveway. Scott and Jessica get out of one, and Levi and my mom get out of the other. They all aim confused stares at the ruined fryer.

"It's a long story," I say to Jessica and Scott as they walk up the porch. "We'll fill you in later."

They laugh and hug everyone as they greet them. I notice Mom pulling multiple containers of food from the back of Levi's truck.

"Levi James Mallender, would you make yourself useful for once in your life and help your mother with all this food?"

I jog down to help, greeting her with a hug and my brother with a clap on the back. I notice a giant aluminum roasting pan

in the back seat, covered in foil.

“Mom, did you bring a turkey?” I ask.

“Of course I did. And it’s a good thing. I’m guessing that’s the one you deep-fried?” She nods at the mess in the yard.

“Uh, yeah.”

She shakes her head. “Deep frying a turkey is asking for disaster. I roasted one as a backup.”

“Mom, this is the one time you being a control freak has paid off,” Levi says. She gently smacks his shoulder.

We all make our way into the house.

“Thanksgiving is saved. My mom brought a backup turkey,” I say.

Everyone is either laughing in disbelief or cheering.

“Debbie, thank you for saving the day,” Marco says, that charming smile on display. She practically swoons.

I set the turkey on the dining table and turn back to Harmony. She’s standing off to the side of everyone, gazing out like she’s taking it all in. I walk up to her and slink my arm around her waist.

“This is utter chaos,” she says.

“Definitely.”

She laughs, and I lean down to kiss her.

“It’s chaos, and I love it,” I say against her lips. “Almost as much as I love you, Sunshine.”

“I love you too.”

“God, you guys. We’re trying to eat.” Taylor makes a gagging noise, which makes Harmony and I laugh.

We join everyone at the table. Dinner is loud, messy, and crowded. Utter chaos. And totally perfect.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This is the third book by romance duo Sarah Smith & Skye McDonald, aka Sarah Skye.

Sarah Skye is the nom de plume of Sarah Smith and Skye McDonald. Sarah and Skye met on Twitter as fledgling authors seeking critique partners. That turned into a brilliant friendship, a joint podcast (Quick & Dirty Romance Podcast), and now three novels.

Sarah Smith is a copywriter-turned-author who wants to make the world a lovelier place, one kissing story at a time. Her love of romance began when she was eight and she discovered her auntie's stash of romance novels. She's been hooked ever since. When she's not writing, you can find her hiking, eating chocolate, and perfecting her lumpia recipe.

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