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Prologue

7 years ago

This was the stupidest idea I'd ever had.

Technically it wasn't my idea it was J.J.'s. My brother bless his heart had lots of ideas. And as usual he'd gotten me in over my head. It had been this way our entire lives. My big brother

would have a brilliant plan but I was the one who got bitten on the ass by it.

Why did I never learn my lesson you ask?

For all his troublemaking ways I loved J.J. and he loved me. Although he was three years older than me we were a team. And even when everything went pear-shaped J.J. was never malicious in his intentions. His strategies just tended to be...flawed.

If I was going to blame anyone for this disaster it probably should be Leanne J.J.'s ex-girlfriend of exactly 48 hours. She'd dumped him when he made it crystal clear that he had no interest in proposing to her. Not that I blamed him. She was kind of annoying. Though I really wished he'd broken the news after the wedding because it would have saved me from his harebrained idea. Not his wedding because as I said he didn't want to marry Leanne.

The plan?

Oh nothing much. I just had to be his plus one for his best friend's wedding. Sounds easy right?

He promised to sneak me champagne during the reception in return for me saving him from any rabid bridesmaids. I explained that rabies was an unlikely problem among women in their mid-twenties but he'd insisted. When he'd thrown in a hundred bucks on top of that I'd decided to do him a solid. I was a twenty-year-old college student and a hundred dollars would buy me a lot of ramen. Or burritos from my favorite food truck near campus.

Now that I was here I realized my mistake. I should have charged him three hundred. Brody might be J.J.'s best friend but he and I didn't get along. At all. And I kind of hated his stuck-up family. They thought that being the wealthiest people in our little town made them above everyone else and they never let me or my brother forget it.

Brody didn't think he was better than us. He just lived to irritate me. I'd had a huge crush on him when I was younger but that had died a swift and bloody death during my freshman year of high school. For no good reason Brody had suddenly started treating me differently giving me hell every time he saw me. And I gave it right back because McClanes didn't tolerate nonsense good-natured or otherwise. Yeah fun times.

He'd graduated the next year and I'd only seen him a handful of occasions since. He and J.J. had gone to the same college so he rarely spent time at our house when he came back to town to visit his family.

But today was his wedding day and his blushing bride a girl he'd met in college had insisted they have the wedding at the local country club because the grounds were "just so quaint".

Anyway back to J.J.'s brilliant plan that led to my current predicament. His bestie Brody Boy

was completely and utterly shitfaced. There was no other word for it.

At the moment Brody had his head in the toilet as he puked his guts up. J.J. the awesome friend that he was gave verbal encouragement from a few feet away. I leaned against the wall in the men's room studying my pretty peach pedicure. Sparkly.

When the sounds of illness subsided J.J. carefully removed Brody's tux jacket.

"Uh man you got a little uh stuff on this. I'm gonna go try to clean it up."

Oh hell no. This was my chance to escape vomit notwithstanding. I straightened and held out a hand. "That's okay I'll do it."

Just as I said this Brody heaved again.

My big brother my once favorite person screwed me over without a second thought. "No

no I'll do it. Will you just um keep an eye on him?"

Said eye twitched and J.J. put his hands together in a prayer-like fashion. "Please Cam. If his mom finds out what's happening

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Cam. If his mom finds out what's happening there'll be hell to pay."

And no doubt I would end up paying it. That's how it always seemed to work out in these situations.

"Fine" I sighed. "But you're taking me out to dinner at Torino's before you head back to the city on Monday."

J.J. winced. Torino's was a fabulous Italian restaurant three towns over. It was expensive and my favorite item on the menu was the lobster linguine which also happened to cost more than anything else except for the steaks.

"Cam" he whined.

“Keep it up and I’ll order a steak just to spite you.”

“Okay okay. Torino’s tomorrow.”

I took a step back and leaned against the wall as J.J. darted out the door. I tried to ignore the sounds of Brody hurling up all the whiskey he’d consumed but it was difficult.

Finally after one final spasm he groaned and collapsed on his ass.

“This sucks” he moaned.

“For both of us I’m sure” I shot back.

Brody twisted and his gaze landed on me. “Who are...” he trailed off squinting at me and tilting his head. “Shit Cami I didn’t recognize you.”

I nearly rolled my eyes but refrained. Didn’t recognize me? He’d known me since I was eight for crying out loud.

“I clean up okay” I replied dryly.

My sarcasm flew right over his head. Brody hauled his body up and stood on weak legs. Since he was wearing only a thin dress shirt and snug tuxedo trousers I could see that his once somewhat lanky frame had filled out. And then some.

Brody staggered over to the sink and rinsed his mouth out with water. Then he reached into the little Dopp kit on the counter next to him and withdrew a toothbrush and small tube of toothpaste.

I tried not to watch as his broad shoulders flexed beneath the fine material of his shirt. Or stare at the way his ass filled out his pants. Damn he no longer resembled the teen boy I'd crushed so hard on. He was a man.

Brody Murphy was a nice-looking male specimen despite his jerky ways.

Once his teeth were brushed he rinsed his mouth with some mouthwash he'd pulled out of the kit splashed his face with cool water and grabbed a handful of paper towels to dry off.

Only then did he look at me and say "You always looked more than okay to me."

I cocked my head and crossed my arms over my chest but said nothing. Well not aloud. I let my face do all the talking in this case.

Brody mimicked my gesture leaning his hips back against the counter. If I hadn't witnessed him doing the technicolor yawn a few minutes ago I wouldn't even know that he was wasted. "What? You think I'm lying?"

"Uh yes. Yes I do. I mean you are the one who started calling me Flatty Cami my freshman year."

Brody scoffed. "How many times do I have to tell you I had nothing to do with that? And that was six years ago! Why won't you let it go?"

“Maybe I just like holding a grudge.”

Brody laughed. “You’ve always had a contrary streak.”

That might be true but he had no business commenting on it.

“So why did you decide your wedding day was a good time to get trashed?” I asked changing the subject with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Brody blinked at me and for a split second he looked almost vulnerable. Then the wall slammed down and his expression turned nonchalant.

“Just celebrating a little too much a little too early.”

I stepped forward until only a couple of feet separated us. “It seems to me that the urge to

get trashed out of your mind is a big ole warning sign.”

“Maybe that’s what it seems to you but I am not you.”

I studied his implacable expression and nearly gave up. But I thought of J.J. and how much he admired Brody. How he loved him like the brother he never had and how he wanted the best for him.

So instead of keeping my mouth shut like I should have I said “If you think this is a mistake there’s still time to stop it.”

“What’s a mistake?” Brody asked his dark green eyes locked on mine. He looked intent as though he were hanging on my every word but he was acting like he had no idea what I was talking about.

“The wedding Brody.”

“Why would I want to call it off?” he asked but I could hear the bitterness in his voice. “I mean it’s the happiest day of my life right?”

“Is it?”

He stared at me his eyes turning hard. “Why exactly do you think I’m unhappy on my wedding day?”

“Because men in love don’t feel the need to drink themselves into a stupor the hours leading up to the walk down the aisle” I replied.

Brody continued to stare at me without speaking. I could almost see that bright mind of his working behind his eyes but he never had a chance to respond because my brother chose that moment to return.

“Hey Brody! Feeling better?” J.J. asked.

Brody’s eyes stayed on me for one more moment before he broke our staring contest and looked at my brother.

“Yeah man. Thanks for getting my jacket cleaned up.” No trace of a slur in his words. It was as if all that throwing up had cleansed his body of alcohol. Or maybe he was just Satan in disguise. Good thing this wedding wasn't in a church or else Brody probably would have burst into flames when he walked through the doors.

J.J. grinned. “No problem. The minister just cornered me on my way back. It's almost time to start.”

Brody took his tuxedo jacket from J.J. and shrugged into it. “Great. Let's get this done.” He glanced at me. “Good to see you Cameron.”

I tilted my chin up slightly. “You too Broderick.”

Ignoring my use of his full name Brody just grinned and walked out of the bathroom with my brother trailing behind him.

Guess it was time for me to take my seat. After all there was a train wreck in the making.

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Present Day

I inherited my intense love for rock n' roll from my dad. He introduced me to classic rock at an early age and I still loved it even if it was several decades older than I was. Right now AC/DC's Back in Black was blasting from my Bluetooth speaker as I organized and de-cluttered my office.

To be completely honest I hated cleaning. No more like despised it with every fiber of my being. The only thing that made the activity remotely tolerable was listening to some damn good music while I did it.

As it was I had to get things organized because my silent partner college roommate and best friend Sierra was coming to town. When I'd asked her how long she'd be staying her only reply had been "A while."

With Sierra that time frame could mean a few weeks a few months or even a couple of years. She worked remotely for some computer firm and made beaucoup money. So much money that she asked me if she could invest in my small business. At the time I'd needed every penny of capital possible because I was twenty-two years old and no bank in our hometown would give me the time of day when it came to a start-up loan. It hadn't mattered that I had a five-year plan cost and profit projections marketing plans and a million other details organized. I was just a kid and a girl at that therefore I couldn't possibly be successful.

But I was.

While Farley was a small town it was surrounded by other small towns. Places that didn't have cute little ice cream shops that served homemade ice cream in fun flavors and delicious concoctions with crazy names like "Sundae Roadkill" or "Texas Ice Cream Massacre".

When I'd opened Crave I hadn't just marketed to the people of Farley I'd invested in advertising within a thirty-mile radius.

And it paid off.

Business wasn't just good it was great. I'd never be a millionaire but I was definitely comfortable and getting better every year. In another ten years after I bought out Sierra I could hire a full-time manager and not have to come into work almost every single day the shop was open which was six days a week.

Even though it was a lot of hard work I loved my job. I got to make ice cream in nearly any flavor I wanted. When people came to my shop they left with a smile on their face and a delicious frosty treat. As far as careers went it was pretty damn good.

Oh and I didn't answer to anyone but myself. Or Sierra but she didn't hound me for information. I think that even if the shop wasn't turning a profit

she wouldn't have cared. In fact I was almost certain she'd just invested so we could work together even when she wasn't on the same continent.

Which was about to change for the first time in two years. Sierra was coming to visit. I was incredibly excited but also stressed. While I kept the front of the shop and the kitchen spotless to keep the health department off my back my office was one step above a dumpster fire. I had stacks of paper everywhere; invoices payroll order lists. Basically anything and everything a small business owner should really keep organized in a file rather than in haphazard piles that tended to crash to the ground with alarming regularity.

Then there was the dust. I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken a rag to the desktop computer and I knew it would be the first thing Sierra would look at when she came into the office. Hmmmm now that I was thinking about it I hadn't dusted the computer since Sierra installed it two years ago when my last system

crashed. Lucky for me she'd been visiting then as well.

Which lead me to my current situation. It was one in the afternoon and the shop wouldn't open for a couple of hours. It gave me ample time to clean but not the motivation. Thus the rock n' roll turned up to window-rattling volumes. If rock couldn't keep me moving I had no hope of getting it done.

AC/DC changed to Def Leppard and I danced around my office tossing my hair and shaking my ass like an extra on an 80's music video. In between wild gyrations I put folders in the filing cabinet put away bits and pieces required for clerical work like paper clips and sticky notes and took a dusting cloth to every surface in the office.

I'd just completed one badass complex turn followed by a dramatic pose that consisted of me arching backward over my desk when the sound of someone whooping and clapping

pierced the sudden silence at the end of Pour Some Sugar on Me.

I jerked upright but the abrupt movement overbalanced me and I fell face first into what were admittedly a nice pair of boobs. At least that's what Sierra insisted.

“Good to see you too partner” my friend said drily. “If I'd known you were so hard up I would have stopped at one of those sex shops in Dallas and bought you something special.”

I managed to disentangle myself from Sierra pulled my phone out of my pocket and paused Led Zeppelin. My Bluetooth speaker fell silent.

“You know you've got some pretty good moves. Or you did until that last one” she commented.

“Hey it was spot on if I wanted to motorboat someone but still make it seem like an accident.”

“Surely there are less dangerous ways to accomplish that goal.”

I grinned at Sierra then glared. “You’re early. You weren’t supposed to be here until after closing time.”

“I woke up at five and decided to head out” she replied with a shrug.

That was Sierra. She went wherever her instincts took her. It was something I both loved and hated. Sometimes it meant we went on a spontaneous adventure and others it led to us not seeing each other for two years.

"Well I'm glad you're here. I'll take you to the house get you a spare key and help you get settled in. I have to be back at the shop in two hours to open up but we can have a late dinner together tonight if you want."

Sierra nodded. "Sounds great. I'll cook."

I stared at her.

I clearly did a poor job of hiding my fear because she burst out laughing until she snorted. "You should see your face." She looked at me again then bent over giggling uncontrollably. "I promise my cooking has improved in the last two years. I took some classes."

I tried not to cringe. I wasn't sure classes would help. Sierra was a disaster in the kitchen. She was one of the smartest women I knew but even working from a recipe she couldn't make simple dishes like meatloaf or fried chicken. I'd even been witness to her scorching canned soup.

I opted for physical safety over honesty and said "Sounds great."

"Your enthusiasm is overwhelming" Sierra commented. Her tone was as dry as mine had been.

I shrugged one shoulder. "Until I see the evidence I'm withholding judgment."

"No you're not!" Sierra exclaimed.

I grabbed my purse out of my desk ushered her out of my office and locked the door behind us.

"Okay

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so I'll try harder."

She scoffed but didn't argue.

We walked down the short hall that lead from my office to the main part of the store. There was a bathroom to one side and a small supply closet on the other. When we emerged from the hallway I saw a tall male figure standing at the huge shop window at the front his hands cupped around his eyes so he could see inside.

"Who is that?" Sierra asked her voice warm with interest.

"Benjamin Murphy" I replied.

"Wait Murphy. Murphy? How do I know that name?"

"You're thinking of Brody Murphy J.J.'s best friend."

We drew closer to the front door and Ben spotted us. He waved and walked to the entrance waiting outside as I unlocked the door and let Sierra exit before me.

"Hey Cam" he greeted me but his eyes were on Sierra.

Sierra was shorter than me but she had curves. She rarely worked out but had a gorgeous hourglass figure. Life wasn't fair. I was in great shape because I either ran practiced yoga or lifted weights nearly every day but I would never look like a 1950's pin-up the way Sierra did.

I wasn't surprised by the way Ben eyed her. Everywhere we went men stared at her. Between the stacked bod and the thick black-framed glasses she wore Sierra was the epitome of men's fantasies; a hot nerdy girl that went from buttoned-up to bombshell with one toss of her hair.

While Sierra enjoyed the attention from time-to-time nothing pissed her off more than a man who was so focused on her physical appearance that he had no appreciation for her intelligence or twisted sense of humor.

My best friend was brilliant and gorgeous but all those wonderful characteristics masked the fact that she was well a handful. Considering who my brother was that was saying something.

I turned back to lock the door before I answered Ben.

"Hey Ben. This is my friend and business partner Sierra."

Sierra held out her hand and gave Ben's hand a firm shake. "Nice to meet you."

The glimmer of interest in his eyes intensified as he stared down at her and he grinned.

"That's some handshake."

Sierra raised an eyebrow at him and I knew he'd already taken one step toward pissing her off. "Well I practice a lot" she stated deadpan.

Ben's grin widened and I bit back a sigh. Sierra's biting wit could be challenging and Ben never backed down from a challenge.

This wouldn't turn into a shitshow. No way. Everything would be just fine.

I braced myself to intervene when Ben opened his mouth and said "Practice makes perfect. But it's a pleasure to meet you too."

He said it sincerely and without a hint of smarm. Not that Ben was smarmy but he could lay the charm on pretty thick. It worked well for him in

Farley but Sierra was immune to smooth talkers. She preferred intelligent funny men to hunks with muscles and dimples.

He released her hand and turned to me. "I actually came by to talk to you" he said to me.

While I'd known Ben a long time he rarely stopped by just to chat. "What's up?"

"Brody's back in town" he stated. "And he brought my niece with him."

"Um okay?"

Ben grinned both dimples popping. "When I told him about your shop he seemed very interested in bringing her by. I just wanted to warn you."

I didn't understand why he thought I needed a warning. "Why?"

"I just wanted to make sure you wouldn't be too surprised."

I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at him without a word.

Ben sighed and shook his head. "Still don't like my sainted brother much do you?"

"I never disliked him Ben. I just get annoyed by his constant poking and prodding. It's like the man can't be in my vicinity without trying to get a rise out of me."

"Well you are kinda cute when you're mad."

Ben and I might not be kids anymore but I was definitely willing to sacrifice some maturity and sock him on the bicep for that remark.

"Hey" he said rubbing his arm.

"No whining. When you say sexist things you get frogged. You know that."

The fake frown on his face vanished immediately and his eyes gleamed with

mischief and humor. He was up to something but I had no way of knowing what it was.

"Yes ma'am" he drawled making sure his accent was nice and thick. "No disrespect intended."

I sighed. "Thanks for stopping by."

Ben gave me a side-arm hug. "You're welcome. I'll be back later for a milkshake."

"You do that" I replied hugging him back.

"Sierra nice to meet you. I hope I see you again while you're here." He accompanied his statement with a wink and a devilish smile.

"Only time will tell" Sierra countered.

Ben's grin widened and he released me. "Y'all have a good day now" he drawled giving us both a wave as he sauntered down the street and turned into the local diner.

Sierra turned to me and fanned herself.

"Woman why didn't you tell me that they grew men like that around here? I would have come back earlier."

"Ben's cute but he's kinda wild. Well he used to be. And we haven't spent a lot of time together since he came back to town."

Suddenly Sierra giggled.

Worried I studied her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded still giggling.

"Okay I'm confused. What's so funny?"

Between bursts of laughter Sierra managed to say "He'll be back later for a milkshake."

I continued to stare at her which made her laugh harder. She bent over smacking her thigh with her hand as she whooped. "Sierra! What is so funny?"

Wiping her eyes she straightened and grinned at me. The moment she opened her mouth it clicked. I knew exactly what she was about to say.

"Your milkshake brings all the boys to the yard."

Without a word I turned and marched off in the direction of my car.

"W-W-Wait for me" Sierra sputtered. "I may not be a boy but I want a milkshake too!"

And now everyone on the street was staring at me.

Shit. No doubt I'd be hearing from my mother about this.

3

My phone rang the moment I pulled into the driveway. I glanced at the screen and cringed. As I expected it was my mother. The grapevine in Farley moved faster than the speed of sound.

My mama Colette McClane was soft-spoken and sweet a true Southern lady. But she carried a steel spine beneath that gentle exterior. And she could rip you to shreds without raising her voice or even using cruel words. Instead she would tell you how disappointed she was in your choices. And that there were always consequences to your actions. Sometimes she even cried. It was torture. She balanced that power with a dry sense of humor and the ability to not take herself too seriously. Which meant she was an awesome mom. Most of the time. Lately however she'd gotten it in her head that I needed to find a man. A good man. Someone intelligent at least moderately successful and preferably not living with his mother.

I was beginning to think that was a tall order since all the men I met seemed to be lacking in one way or another. Then again I hadn't met someone new in nearly two years. Which meant my mother was also convinced I was a workaholic and despaired her chances to have grandchildren to spoil before she was "too old to enjoy them."

Forget the fact that I had an older brother who could also provide those grandchildren. I was pretty sure Mom had given up all hope after his last stunt. She'd been complaining to him about how all her friends had grandbabies and she didn't so the next time he came home he brought a woman named Clea. She was adorable and sweet but dumber than a box of rocks. He only brought her the once but when Mom started in on him again the next time he came over to Sunday lunch he told her that Clea would be the mother of his children. Mom never brought it up with him again.

Hence the reason I was the only one who got the guilt trip about not having kids yet.

With a sigh I picked up my phone. It was better to answer now than let her marinate in whatever she had to say.

"Hey Mama" I answered as I shut off my car and climbed out.

"Hi Cameron. How are you doing today?"

"Good. Great. Just running home to get Sierra settled before the shop opens."

"Oh Sierra's here. That's wonderful. I hope you'll bring her by the house for lunch after church on Sunday."

Lunch on Sunday was a family tradition. My brother got out of it most of the time because he was rarely in town but I was expected to show my face each and every Sunday or deal with Mom's verbal expressions of disappointment. And even at the age of twenty-seven nearly twenty-eight I didn't want to face my mother's lectures when she was disappointed.

It didn't matter that I no longer went to church with them on a weekly basis since Sunday was usually a workday for me. It didn't matter that I was a grown woman who might have plans of her own. I was expected to arrive promptly at a quarter to one and stay until two-thirty which gave me a half-hour to get to the store and

open up. Sunday afternoons were a busy time for me. Texas stayed warm or even tortuously hot at least eight sometimes nine months out of the year and my ice cream shop had quickly become the place to see and be seen by churchgoers teenagers and singles alike on Sunday afternoons.

"Of course Mom. You know Sierra always loves to come to Sunday lunch with me."

Sierra appeared beside me her eyes wide. While she loved my parents she didn't love that my mama also tended to mother her the way she did her own children. In the McClane house if you were close to one of Colette's children you became one of her own. This meant she wanted to know what you were doing with your life and what your goals were. And if you didn't have any she wanted to know why. My mother wasn't necessarily strict. She was...involved intensely so. Sierra's mom and dad had a much more relaxed parenting style. In fact they seemed to forget they were parents at all. My friend had never been grounded in high school

even when she pulled crazy stunts. Probably because her parents were never at home.

As a result Sierra didn't know how to handle all the maternal nurturing and questioning she received when she visited.

She must have caught the tail end of my conversation because she started shaking her head vehemently her vibrant red hair flying in all directions.

You owe me I mouthed.

She scowled at me and crossed her arms over her chest. The act was mostly for show and one that she perpetuated every time we visited my parents but I knew she secretly loved it.

"Oh and dear?" my mother said.

"Yes Mom?"

"Would Sierra be the reason that Natalie Phelps called me a few minutes ago and asked me

when you came out as a lesbian? For some reason she was under the impression that you and your girlfriend were having a disagreement outside Crave this afternoon."

I rolled my eyes heavenward and suppressed a sigh. One of the drawbacks of living in a smallish Southern town was that you would see at least one person you knew anytime you left the house. And if you did anything they considered untoward your parents/husband/sister/cousin would get a phone call asking if something was wrong.

It also didn't help that Natalie Phelps had read in some tabloid that one in ten women were lesbian and she was convinced at least one woman of her acquaintance was in the closet. Natalie was also older than dirt deaf as a doorknob and thought the term "politically correct" meant you voted in every election. She didn't understand that you couldn't believe everything you read in magazines and you definitely didn't ask people personal questions about their sexual orientation age or weight.

"Mom" I said.

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment then I heard my mother snort. She was laughing at me. Great.

"What did you tell her?" I asked.

"Well now honey you know that I just want you to be happy and that I will support you no matter who you love. I told Natty the same thing."

"Mom!"

My mother cracked up her laughter ringing through the line. "I told her that as far as I knew you're very happy being a heterosexual spinster."

"That woman is a menace. One day she's going to offend someone who isn't as nice as we are and there will be no saving her."

More peals of laughter rang out and I actually had to hold the phone away from my ear because I couldn't stand the volume any longer.

When the noise died down I asked "Are you done?"

"Yes dear" my mother replied. Her voice shook and I knew she was fighting back more laughter.

I knew exactly how to get her goat and said "Ben Murphy came by the shop today."

Never one to miss an opportunity to remind me of the attractive eligible men in the area

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eligible men in the area my mother replied "Oh really? Well he is a very good-looking young man. And single."

I rolled my eyes again. "Actually he dropped in to tell me that Brody is back and he brought his daughter with him. I didn't get the details but my

impression was that he and his wife had split up."

"Oh I knew that. Your brother called me last week and asked me to keep an eye on him. Apparently the divorce is finalized but there's still a lot of bad feelings. Or at least on his ex-wife's part. I got the impression that Brody put up with a lot before he said enough was enough."

Damn. There went my leverage. It figured that my mother would know more about the situation than I did. As she did with Sierra Colette McClane took Brody under her wing as well mothering him as much as possible as well as passing out lectures when necessary.

"Maybe he'll take a liking to Sierra when he's here for Sunday dinner" she commented.

Something in the vicinity of my chest twisted at her casual implication. It couldn't be my heart but it sure felt like it. More likely it was the guilt I felt for having to subject Sierra to him because

she was my best friend and she didn't deserve that. "Yeah maybe" I murmured.

"Oh I have to go. Your father's two o'clock is here. Love you Cam."

"Love you too."

I didn't lower the phone after the line clicked signaling that my mother had hung up. Instead I stared at my front door wondering why in the hell I cared if Brody hooked up with my bestie. I'd barely seen him in seven years and my pitiful high school crush was long gone.

"Whoa what did your mom say to put that look on your face?" Sierra asked.

I shook myself out of my thoughts and shrugged. "Nothing. She's thinking of playing matchmaker for you."

Sierra's blue eyes widened. "Oh hell no. I'm not going Sunday. I'll come down with meningitis or something."

I frowned at her. "You do realize meningitis is a serious illness and that you'd have to be in the hospital if you had it right?"

"Shit. I meant the mumps."

"You've had all your vaccinations Sierra. Mom and Dad made sure of that so I don't think they'll believe it."

Sierra sighed. "Damn. Well what creepy dude are they planning to set me up with?"

"Brody. He's Ben's older brother."

Her expression turned calculated. "Oh really. Is he as hot as his baby bro?"

Hotter. Definitely. But I wasn't going to admit that out loud. Instead I lifted my hand and rocked it back and forth. "So-so. He's handsome but I don't know if I would say he's better-looking than Ben."

"There is something to be said for the bad boy turned good. Or at least better." She cocked her head. "What's Brody like?"

Smart. Funny. Sexy. Infuriating.

I didn't utter the description aloud. "He's my brother's best friend. He lived to make my life difficult while I was in high school but I haven't seen much of him since he went to college over a decade ago. I have no idea what he's like now."

Other than the fact that he'd looked even better at thirty than he had at twenty the last time I'd seen him in more than just passing was seven years ago at his wedding. Maybe he'd gone bald and grown a beer gut.

If only life worked like that.

"Hot or not I'm honestly not ready to jump into anything. The last guy I dated turned me off when it comes to relationships."

Sierra had been tight-lipped about her previous boyfriend. I think she'd only mentioned him a couple of times. I didn't even remember his name.

I unlocked my front door and gestured for Sierra to follow me inside. My house was cool and dim an oasis in the middle of my usually hectic life. If I wanted more light I only had to open my curtains. My house was small but perfect for me. A cozy hideaway.

"Wow this place looks great" Sierra said as she came in behind me. "You've really made it homey and peaceful."

"Thanks. You wanna put your stuff in your room or grab a drink first?"

Sierra groaned. "Room first. This bag is heavy as fuck."

I glanced back at her. "Um Sierra that's a rolling suitcase."

"I know" she replied staring at me as though I'd lost a few marbles.

"So why are you carrying it?"

Her expression remained blank for a few moments until the penny dropped. "Well shit."

"You graduated magna cum laude?"

"Shut up" she grumbled. "I've been up since five and then on the road all day. I'm tired."

It was probably true but I didn't tease her anymore. I didn't have time for the inevitable bickerfest that would surely follow. Sierra was brilliant but sometimes she spaced out on basic things that required common sense more than book knowledge. Usually when she was tired or tipsy.

I led her down the hallway to the guest room and flipped the switch just inside the door.

"Oh my God" Sierra sighed. "This is perfect Cam." She dragged her suitcase into the room and looked around before her eyes came to me. "I didn't think you'd be able to fit a queen bed in here but it definitely works."

My guest room was done in shades of light blues and greens. The walls were white and I'd kept the furniture to a minimum. The result was airy and light.

"Thanks."

Sierra dropped her bags in the corner and twirled around in the center of the room before she fell backward onto the bed her arms and legs splayed out.

"Ahhhhh" she sighed. "This is the best thing ever. I'm never moving out."

I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned my shoulder against the doorjamb. "Awesome I'll draw up your rental agreement in the morning."

"Rental agreement?" Her head popped up as she stared at me with bugged eyes. "You would charge your best friend and business partner rent?"

"Hell yeah. I am first and foremost a businesswoman."

Sierra smiled sly and a little scary. "I'm so glad I've finally rubbed off on you." She let her head fall back and closed her eyes. "Now go away so I can take a nap. Did I mention I've been up since before dawn?"

"Only a couple of times. Instead of giving us both food poisoning when you attempt to cook dinner why don't you come by the shop around closing? Maybe grab some takeout on your way?"

Sierra didn't bother to respond to my jab about her cooking. "Yeah yeah. Pizza or tacos?"

"Burgers from the gas station."

"God I'd forgotten about those" she groaned.
"Sounds great. See you at eight."

Her eyes were closed before I even left the room.

4

I walked into my parents' house Sunday afternoon with Sierra in tow only to be greeted with a shower of frigid iced tea.

"Holy forking shit!" I cried.

I pinched my soaked shirt between my thumbs and index fingers and pulled it away from my skin. My entire outfit was now uncomfortably wet and chilly but also stained with tea.

"I'm sorry." I glanced down at the direction of the young voice and saw a little girl with long dark hair and big tear-filled eyes. Very distinctive green eyes. "I didn't mean to."

I blinked at her for a prolonged moment until Sierra nudged me. "Uh It's okay. Accidents happen."

The girl sniffled. "I'm Jacks."

"Jacks?" I parroted blinking again.

"Jacqueline Josephine Murphy."

I glanced up at the deep voice and lost any ability to speak. Brody Murphy stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room. A grey t-shirt hugged his upper body and a pair of faded jeans clung to his hips and thighs in all the right places. His dark hair was the shortest I'd ever seen it leaving the sharp edges of his cheekbones and jawline on full display. His fingers curved around a beer bottle and he lifted it to his lips hiding the smirk. Behind me Sierra moaned quietly jerking me out of my mindless perusal.

"A little wet there Cam?"

"If she's not I am" Sierra whispered behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder at her and cut my eyes toward the little girl beside me.

A faint pink tinge rolled over Sierra's cheeks.
"Oops."

"Oh dear." I turned toward the sound of my mother's voice.

"I said I was sorry Daddy" Jacks said. Her voice trembled with tears.

Brody opened his mouth but I cut him off. "It's okay. I didn't announce myself when I came in and she didn't know I was here."

He stared at me his expression inscrutable but he closed his mouth.

"You still have some clothes upstairs" my mother piped in.

I winked down at Jacks who gave me a faint smile and left the living room without a word. I stared Brody down as I walked by telling him with my eyes to leave her alone.

He stared right back but I could see the hint of a dimple in his right cheek. Probably because I looked ridiculous walking with my legs slightly spread and hunched over to keep the cold wet fabric from sticking to my skin.

I headed up the stairs to my old room. I hesitated at the top listening to the murmur of voices coming from downstairs. I wouldn't put it past Brody to chastise his daughter once I was out of earshot.

Surprisingly I heard a peal of little girl laughter a second later.

Hmmmm. That wasn't what I expected. Especially considering the stern way he'd called out his daughter's name a few moments ago.

Satisfied that he wasn't going to give her hell I went into my room and shut the door behind me. Mom had left my furniture alone when I moved out but she had removed all the posters and assorted heartthrob magazine pictures taped to the wall. She'd also packed away most of my trophies and ribbons with the exception of a few.

I stripped off my clothes and carried them into the bathroom pausing when I reached the door. Mom had changed this up quite a bit since the last time I'd been up here. There was a new white pedestal sink with sleek curved lines and a new toilet. The shower had also been retiled and enclosed in sparkling clear glass.

Since my skin was sticky from the tea I dropped the pile in my arms onto the tile floor and opened the shower door. Might as well test out the new equipment. I fiddled with the knobs for a few minutes and studied the multiple showerheads. Though my hair was in a ponytail I still didn't want to get it wet. Finally I figured out how it all worked and turned on the water.

And fell in love.

I wanted to luxuriate beneath the hot flow of water but I knew my mother would be up here banging on the door if I stayed too much longer.

With a sigh I turned off the water and toweled off. Knowing my mother's propensity to always be prepared I opened the medicine cabinet and grinned when I saw not only a new toothbrush still in the package and a tube of toothpaste but moisturizer lotion and deodorant all unopened and lined up neatly on the shelves.

I applied deodorant and went back into my childhood bedroom to the dresser where Mom stored my old clothes. As soon as I opened the top drawer I knew this afternoon was going to be shitshow.

Dread bloomed in my belly as I opened the other two drawers in the dresser and quickly turned into resignation. I grabbed a handful of

fabric from the top and middle drawers and slammed them shut.

I was just tugging the tank top down over my torso when there was a light tap on the bedroom door.

Sierra stuck her head in and her eyes widened. She stared then blinked then stared some more.

"What?" I asked lifting my arms in frustration.

"You look like every teenage boy's fantasy" she blurted.

I looked down and saw the way the scooped neck of the tank top emphasized the upper curves of my breasts where the bikini top plumped them up. The teeny bottoms that matched the top were hidden by a pair of tight denim cutoffs leftover from my college days.

Actually I was kind of impressed I fit into them. The entire reason I'd left them here was

because I hadn't been able to button them and breathe at the same time. Maybe working out nearly every day was helping. Yeah probably not. Most likely it was the fact that I was so busy with the shop that I barely had time to eat.

"It's the same stuff I wore in college" I replied. I couldn't help the defensive edge in my voice.

"Yeah but you didn't fill it out that way in college" Sierra shot back.

I sighed and went back into the bathroom to grab my wet things taking a moment to wrap them in the towel I'd used to dry off. "These were the only things in the dresser that remotely fit. Even my bra is completely soaked and there's no way I'm bouncing around the house braless with Brody Murphy and his daughter here."

Sierra studied me and cocked her head. "I'm not sure Brody would mind all that much."

I didn't dignify that with an answer as I slipped by her and went back downstairs. I could hear everyone in the kitchen as I snuck by to the laundry room. I had just enough time to wash and dry my clothes so I could wear them to work later.

Sierra didn't follow me and I was glad. I didn't want to talk about Brody with her. We might not see each other as often as I wanted but she was still my best friend. She knew me better than anyone and could see straight through my defenses.

I tossed the clothes in the washer added soap and closed the lid. I turned to leave the laundry room and gasped when I saw the large man looming behind me.

I stumbled back and fell against the washing machine. Brody moved quickly and steadied me with a hand on my hip.

"Jesus Christ Brody. You scared me half to death."

"Sorry."

Yeah

Sponsored

Brody. You scared me half to death."

"Sorry."

Yeah he sounded really sorry.

I straightened and leaned my hips back against the washer which was still filling with water. The noise was so loud I couldn't hear him when he spoke again.

"What?" I asked.

He stepped forward right in my space. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end at his proximity and I crossed my arms over my chest.

"I'm sorry about Jacks. I appreciate that you didn't fly off the handle with her."

If he'd said something like that to me ten years ago I would have snapped at him. Now I just lifted an eyebrow and asked "What did you expect me to do scream at her?"

Brody sighed just as the washer finished filling and the cacophony of rushing water faded into the low hum of the agitator. "Not exactly. But I did think you'd be a little more...upset."

I inhaled sharply and released the breath in a slow steady stream. When I was sure I could speak calmly I said "Brody she's a little girl and it wasn't intentional. Believe it or not I've had children spill drinks melted ice cream and other much more disgusting things on me. I've been puked on peed on and on one occasion pooped on though in the baby's defense it was beyond his control. I would never hold it against a child for accidentally dousing me with tea. If she'd done it on purpose that would be a different story but it was obvious that she didn't mean it and she apologized. Now I only have an hour and a half to eat and spend time with my family

before I have to get to the shop and open up for the afternoon so if you'll excuse me..."

I stepped to the side in an effort to skirt around him but Brody sidestepped with me. I didn't try to go the other way. I remained still and stared up at him letting my annoyance show.

"Why do you always assume I think the worst of you?" he asked frowning at me.

"Because you usually do Brody. And this is a perfect example of that. Since my freshman year of high school you've picked at everything I say and do and seem to derive some sick pleasure out of it."

He looked...shocked. "I don't do that. I wouldn't pick on you if I didn't care about you."

"I'm sure that makes it all okay then" I retorted. "Look we're both adults. I can be civil to you when I see you. All that I ask is that you do the same for me. I'm used to it and I'm not going to make a big thing of it if you can't help yourself."

But please don't act surprised when I don't lower myself to your expectations."

Brody stared at me but didn't try to stop me when I moved around him once again.

As I left the laundry room I smiled. It was the first time I'd clearly and concisely told Broderick Murphy exactly what I thought of him and it was freeing. I hadn't realized that there was a dark corner of my brain that housed my insecurities in regard to him. The deficiencies that he always seemed to jab poke and prod with frightening precision.

Somehow in the last seven years I'd moved beyond caring what Brody thought of me. Did it still irk me a little that he expected me to be the reactive emotional girl I once was? Yes but it no longer burned in my belly the way it would have.

I guess I'd grown up after all.

Well only a little since I intended to charge him full price if he brought Jacks into the shop.

Mom was just placing the food out on the dining room table when I entered. She was in the process of setting a bowl of salad down when her hand arrested in midair as she studied my attire.

"You look...summery" she finally said.

I shrugged. "It was this or a pair of my old track shorts crop top and no bra."

"I'm sure this will be fine" she murmured.

"Do you need me to bring anything else to the table?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. I moved over to my usual seat and was just about to plop down when a pair of arms wrapped around my waist and yanked me off my feet.

I clutched at the arms and squealed as I was spun around in rapid wide circles. My eyes wouldn't focus and I staggered when he released me. But I still managed to punch my brother in the shoulder hard enough to make him yelp and rub the spot.

"Jeez Cam no need for violence."

Before he could defend himself I punched him in the other shoulder.

"Ow! What the he—"

"Jackson Joseph McClane watch your mouth." My mother's sharp remonstration interrupted his complaint. While she wasn't yelling the woman had a way of projecting her voice in such a way that you could hear her loud and clear over any other background noise. I think if she hadn't married my father and become a nurse in his office that she could have had a career in the theater. "There is a child present and your mother who doesn't appreciate your foul mouth."

Speaking of the child I realized that her name was the feminine of J.J.'s and my chest tightened. Brody had named his daughter after my brother. It was incredibly sweet.

J.J. shot me a baleful glare as he rubbed his sore shoulders. "Sorry Mom."

"Now if you two are done acting like idiots how about we have a nice family meal together?"

My brother moved around the table still glaring at me and took the seat between Jacks and Sierra. That meant that the seat next to me was for Brody.

Great. Just great.

5

You know when you're stuck sitting next to someone who irritates you and you get that feeling like hot prickles on the skin closest to them?

No? Maybe that's just something I experience.

Or maybe Brody Murphy finally succeeded in driving me over the edge.

My right arm and leg tingled like crazy as though I were sitting too close to a bonfire and I swore that I could actually feel his presence.

Perfect. I was going to stress eat all during lunch which would make my already snug cut-offs even tighter. So much for fitting in my clothes from college.

I growled under my breath as I reached for my iced tea and took a sip. I shot a look to my right when Brody made a strange coughing-slash-choking sound. He didn't meet my gaze but kept his eyes on his plate.

"Miss McClane?"

I glanced up at the sound of Jacks' voice. Brody's daughter met my gaze and I noticed that while her eyes were a slightly different

shade from her father's they were shaped the same. Her stare was almost as piercing as her father's as well.

"Please call me Cam Jacks."

She glanced at her father. I followed her example and saw Brody nod at her.

"Uncle J said you own an ice cream shop. Is that true?"

I grinned at her. "Yes it is. And I make all my own ice cream too."

"Really?"

"Yep. Twelve flavors that I offer daily and three that change with the seasons or my mood."

Her answering grin was huge. "That sounds great. I wish I could try them all."

"You're welcome to come by any time. I'd be happy to let you."

Her smile faded a little. "Mom doesn't like it when I eat ice cream. She said it'll make me fat." She studied me. "Do you eat the ice cream in your shop? Because you're not fat at all."

My eyes shot over to Brody and I bit my bottom lip. I could see the muscles in his jaw ticking. I felt another wave of heat against my right side and I was pretty sure it was anger. He didn't say anything though.

Well if he wasn't going to address the sudden gigantic elephant in the room I was.

I turned back to Jacks. "I do eat my ice cream sweetie. But I try not to eat too much of it. Anything can be bad for you if you eat a whole lot." I peered at Brody out of the corner of my eye but he remained silent so I soldiered on. If I was going to screw this up I was going to do a magnificent job. "But you shouldn't worry about being fat. You're still pretty young and have a lot of growing to do. If you eat well stay active and get plenty of rest you'll be very healthy and

that's more important. If you feel good on the inside it shows on the outside regardless of the size or shape of your body."

I chanced another quick look at Brody but the ticking in his jaw was noticeably absent. My mother looked almost proud.

I ignored them all because it made me uncomfortable and refocused on Jacks.

"Yeah I told Mom that Dad said that and she said it was a load of bull..." Jacks' eyes slid to Brody. "Uh just bull."

I couldn't stop myself from looking at him again and saw that the muscles in his jaw were once again tight and hard. I thought I even heard his teeth crack a little.

"Um well Jacks there are some people who think that way but my father is the one who told me all this and he's a medical doctor so he probably knows right?"

Jacks turned her avid gaze to my father.
"You're a doctor?"

My dad smiled at her but I could tell it was forced. I knew he hated hearing children repeat some of the things their parents said and this was one of those times he would rather express his outrage to Jacks' mother rather than pretend he wasn't upset. But he was a pediatrician and he considered it his job to establish a good rapport with his young patients.

"Yes I am" he replied.

Finally Brody spoke. "He'll be your doctor now that we live in Farley."

For such a little girl Jacks' eyes were piercing as though she perceived more than other kids her age. "You're a kid doctor?"

Dad nodded.

Finally Jacks grinned. "I dig it."

I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing. This time when my dad smiled it didn't look forced at all.

I looked down at my plate and caught movement out of the corner of my eye. Brody's hand was fisted on his thigh so tightly that his knuckles were white.

Without thinking I reached out and put my hand on his forearm. Then my brain kicked into gear and I froze. Before I could move my hand away he reached over with his right hand and covered mine.

Holy shit. What was I doing? This was Brody Murphy. We didn't like each other and we definitely didn't hold hands.

I was saved from figuring out an awkward extrication by my mother's voice. She asked Brody a question and he shifted his hand when he turned toward her to respond.

My cheeks heated up and I knew my face was probably a bright pink beacon. I angled my head toward Sierra. When our eyes met she bugged hers out as if to say What was that?

I shrugged. I had no idea.

The expression on her face assured me that we would discuss this later. Since I'd rather yank out an ingrown toenail than have that chat I decided I'd sneak Benadryl into her evening cup of coffee. The woman drank coffee morning noon and night. I'd seen her drain an entire pot a half hour before I found her facedown and drooling on her laptop.

As though she could read my mind which wouldn't be a surprise after nearly a decade of friendship Sierra cocked a single brow at me and shook her head once.

I was once again saved from our silent argument by my mother's voice.

"Cameron aren't you going to eat? You'll have to leave for the shop soon and I don't want you to get hungry later."

Sierra smirked for a moment until Mom's voice continued. "And you Sierra finish your vegetables. I know your favorite food group is coffee but you need proper nourishment. "

I couldn't suppress my snort but I turned my attention to my plate and picked up my fork. Mom was right. I had to be at work shortly and I probably wouldn't have time for dinner until after I closed the shop down at eight.

Just as I expected my afternoon and evening were busy. Though the shop was only open for five hours on Sunday it was still one of my craziest days. Between the teenagers who liked to spend afternoons in the shop to the families that came in after church or dinner Crave stayed hopping.

It was also unfortunate that one of the two part-timers I'd hired called in sick. This was the third Sunday in two months that she'd done it so I was beginning to wonder if she had idontwannaworkitis.

By the time the shop closed the soles of my feet were burning and my legs ached. I wanted nothing more than two ibuprofens a hot bath and my bed. All those things would have to wait though because there was a lot of cleanup to do and only two of us to do it.

As Kelly my other part-time employee and I finished the last of the washing-up I pressed a hand to my lower back and vowed to have Sierra take a look at the books with me and find the money to hire an assistant manager. I couldn't keep working six sometimes seven days a week. Especially since my goal was to open up other locations in Texas. I wouldn't have time to do that if I spent every waking moment here.

"Bye Cam" Kelly called. "See you Wednesday!"

"Bye!"

I did a final walk-through of the shop and everything looked clean and ready for me on Tuesday when I came in. Tomorrow the shop was closed but I had to make ice cream pay bills order stock and take care of various other tasks associated with owning my own business.

I'd just checked the lock on the front door when I saw something dart past in my peripheral vision. I whirled around and stifled a scream when I saw the figure of a man standing not a foot from the door his face nearly pressed to the glass.

It took my terrified mind a few seconds to realize who it was. Brody frowned at me and tapped on the glass when I continued to stand there and stare at him my heart still thundering in my chest.

"Cam" he called.

I mulled over my choices the events from earlier that day and how badly my feet hurt. Then I made my decision.

Without a word to him I turned and walked toward the back of the store. The employee exit was in the kitchen and led to a small parking lot behind several of the buildings downtown.

I knew it was petty of me
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I turned and walked toward the back of the store. The employee exit was in the kitchen and led to a small parking lot behind several of the buildings downtown.

I knew it was petty of me but I just didn't have the energy to deal with Brody Murphy any more today. I grabbed my bag from my office locked it up shut out the lights in the kitchen and set the alarm.

I gave my surroundings a cursory glance as I walked out the back door and turned to lock it.

"Cam."

This time I couldn't stifle the scream that erupted from my mouth at the sound of Brody's voice.

My keys hit the pavement as I twisted around and let loose a right hook that would have made my brother proud. Sadly it didn't make contact because Brody knew me well enough to evade the punch.

"Hey hey. Calm down."

The hair on the back of my neck rose at his patronizing words. "What did you just say to me?" I whispered.

He had the good sense to take another step back and lift his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry I scared you but I needed to talk to you."

Still panting I squatted down to pick up my keys. "There's this thing called a cell phone."

You can pick it up dial a series of numbers and talk to people. I'm pretty sure you have one."

Brody sighed and tucked his hands in his pockets. "I don't have your number."

"Yes but the shop number is listed online. You could have called me there" I retorted.

"I thought this conversation would be better in person."

I gave him my back and finished locking the door before I headed toward my car.

"Cam."

I ignored him irritated beyond belief. When I was younger I used to admire Brody's take-charge attitude but now that I was older it annoyed me. He decided that whatever he had to say would be better done in person and screw whatever I thought on the matter.

"Seriously Cam? You're just going to ignore me?"

I growled under my breath as I used the remote to unlock my car. I opened the driver's side door tossed my purse inside and then faced him.

"Look Brody I'm a bit irritated with you right now so this may not be the best time for me to have this conversation. It might work for you but you're not the only person here and you don't get to arbitrarily show up at my place of business scare the absolute shit out of me and then get miffed when I don't want to talk to you. Especially after the shit you said to me earlier today."

Brody stood a few feet away his face partially obscured by the shadows. "That's why I came by" he said. "Because your mother always told us that apologies should be made face-to-face so the other person can see that we're sincere."

Well that took my ire down a notch. "What?"

He took a step forward. Then another. "I'm sorry that I upset you earlier. I didn't mean to insult you." I saw the flash of his teeth as he smiled. "Since you were dressed in some of the same clothes you wore in high school I think I forgot that you're not a kid anymore."

I cocked my head and studied him. "I haven't been a kid for a long time Brody. And even then I probably wouldn't have acted like that if you hadn't been...well how you were."

He stilled but I couldn't read his expression in the darkness. "You're right. I did provoke you and I'm sorry for that too. I think we're both different people now. At least in the ways that matter most."

There was a shift inside of me in the vicinity of my heart and a burden I hadn't realized I still carried was released. We'd both been young and stupid as teenagers and I thought I'd released the hurt from those memories long ago. Apparently I hadn't.

"I'm sorry I ignored you earlier" I replied.

"But not for punching me?" Brody teased.

I shook my head. "Nope. You've been a part of this family long enough to know exactly what you're gonna get if you sneak up on me so no apology for that."

He chuckled and came closer until I could actually make out his face in the waning light. Though it was nearly nine p.m. there was still a bit of color in the sky.

"I also wanted to thank you for what you said to Jacks." He rocked back on his heels. "Her mom can be..." He trailed off as though he were searching for the right words.

"A piece of work?" I asked.

I'd only met Brody's ex a handful of times one of those being their wedding and that's exactly how she'd come across to me. And not in a good way.

He sighed. "Yeah that's probably the best way to describe her. I hate that she says shit like that to Jacks but now that we're not living together I have to wait until she comes home to do damage control."

"That sucks" I said. "How does Jacks handle it?"

"Well she only sees her mom on the weekends and the occasional Wednesday."

I blinked at that statement. "What's-her-name didn't want joint custody?"

"Monica doesn't like obligations that interfere with her social calendar" Brody answered with a shrug. "So at least there's not a lot of damage control to do."

Oh yeah definitely a piece of work.

"Well you're more than welcome to bring Jacks by any time you want for sundaes or even samples. She seems like a very sweet girl."

Brody laughed. "Oh she's got you fooled already but I'll take you up on it. Jacks needs good women like you and your mom in her life."

Once again something in my chest shifted and I took a deep breath. I covered the sudden swell of emotion with a smartass remark. "Oh my God I think that's the first compliment you've ever given me."

He flicked my nose as he laughed again. "Nope as I recall I told you that your toilet paper boobs looked realistic in the seventh grade."

I gasped in mock outrage and smacked his arm. "Brody Murphy I told you what would happen if you ever mentioned that again." That was part of the reason the nickname I'd had in high school had hurt so much. While J.J. had teased me mercilessly about the incident Brody hadn't said anything at the time. Then two years

later he dubbed me "Flatty Cami" just before my freshman year started. Fourteen-year-old me had been humiliated and deeply hurt.

"Nope you swore vengeance on your brother not me."

"Well it was an understood inclusion."

Brody slung an arm around my neck and gave me a rough hug followed by a tousle to my hair. It was the same move he pulled on me when he was twelve and I was eight. Back before our relationship changed into something more contentious.

I retaliated by pinching his side the way I'd done as a kid. Valiantly I ignored the fact that his waist was lean and muscled rather than the chub he'd carried as a child.

Brody yelped and released me immediately. Rubbing his side he said "Guess I should have seen that coming. You did it back when we were kids too."

My stomach rumbled which made him chuckle.

"You better go get something to eat or I'll have to answer to your mom" he stated.

"Yeah Sierra promised me dinner. And I'm ready to get off my feet."

"Your friend seems interesting."

"No hitting on my bestie" I commanded.

Brody grinned. "I wasn't planning on it. Though my brother did mention meeting a hot redhead when he dropped by to see you the other day."

Oh shit.

"Tell Ben no hitting on my bestie either."

"You say that like Ben listens to me."

He had a good point. Ben followed his own path. He always had. He learned his lessons by

screwing up rather than listening to someone else's warnings.

"Man I'm not sure who would win if he and Sierra got tangled up" I murmured. "She's got ninja skills."

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see before we place our bets."

I rolled my eyes. "No betting on whether my best friend and your brother will break each other's hearts. Understand?"

Brody laughed again. "Understood. Go home and get something to eat. I'll bring Jacks by the shop later this week for an ice cream tasting."

I climbed into my car as Brody walked away tooting my horn as I drove by him when he was getting into his truck.

He smiled and waved both of us oblivious to the people watching us from the diner two doors down.

The next morning I walked into the living room to find Sierra ensconced on my couch watching television with a cup of coffee in her hand. This was unusual especially since she'd been up so late the night before. I smirked when I remembered her reaction to meeting Gary the neighborhood mooch. Also known as a very fat raccoon.

Carefully I wiped the smile of my face before I spoke. "Uh why are you watching a cooking show?" I asked.

Sierra's sleepy eyes shifted to me. "Huh?"

Clearly her coffee hadn't kicked in yet. I rephrased "Why are you watching a cooking show when you don't cook?"

She took a sip of coffee. "I cook" she answered. "Just because I don't cook well doesn't mean I don't need to know how. When the zombie apocalypse comes I'll have to eat my own

cooking with no backup plan for take-out and I don't want it to suck."

I shook my head and went straight for the kitchen. It was too early for that discussion and I hadn't had coffee yet.

I let loose a happy sigh when I walked into the kitchen and found a cup waiting for me under the Keurig. There was a fresh pod inside and all I had to do was press a button. I was taking my first sip when Sierra wandered in her hair a mess.

"What are you doing today?" she asked. "And why are you up so early?"

"I could ask you the same thing" I replied.

She shrugged. "My boss called around six and wanted me to handle some things. It didn't take much time but once I finished I was wide awake."

"Was there an emergency at work?" I asked before I drank some more coffee.

"Not really" she scoffed. "It wasn't anything one of the other people in our department couldn't handle. I think he just enjoys ruining people's day."

Sierra glanced down at my cup and shuddered. "Oh my God when did you start drinking your coffee black? You've been invaded by a parasite haven't you? The aliens have arrived to assimilate us and they've started with the most intellectually vulnerable."

I rolled my eyes at her obvious change of subject and drank more coffee. "Gee you're so funny first thing in the morning when I haven't had coffee."

"No seriously when did you start drinking your coffee black?"

"When I got too lazy to add sugar."

Sierra shook her head. "I'd call you a liar but I've known for too long."

I smirked at her but didn't say anything.

"What are you doing today?" she repeated.

"You woke up when I took out the trash at four and it's six-thirty now. The shop's closed so what's up?"

"I have to handle the books pay bills and make ice cream."

"On your day off?"

I gave her a sideways glance. "Uh yeah. That's the only time I can get things done. And you're one to talk Ms. I-Got-Up-Early-to-Work-on-Vacation."

She ignored my comment and studied me for a long moment. "When was the last time you had a day off? I mean completely off."

"I have no idea. Probably not since I opened the store. Except for maybe Christmas and Thanksgiving. I do take two days off then."

Sierra was silent. "Why didn't you tell me? I could've helped out more."

"You have a full-time job and I didn't expect you to work at Crave when you offered to invest."

"Well I decided to take a vacation since it's been two years. I just finished a project and I won't start another one for six weeks so it's the perfect time to take a few weeks to myself. While I'm here I'm going to give you a hand. And we're going to look at the books to see if we can hire another full-time employee."

"Okay."

She frowned at my quick agreement. "Okay?"

I nodded sipping my coffee.

"So you're just gonna agree? No argument at all?"

I grinned at her. "Nope."

"You were planning on asking me anyway weren't you?"

"Yep."

"Guess I fell into your plans then didn't I?"

I nodded.

"Then I'd better shower so I can help you with your to-do list today."

"We're leaving at seven-thirty so get a move on."

Sierra made a face at me as she left the room.
"Bet I'm ready before you are."

I drained the rest of my coffee.

If my bestie wanted to turn this into a competition who was I to let her down?

Before I even made it out of the kitchen Sierra yelped. Well it was more of a muffled shriek.

I hurried out of the kitchen and bumped into her just on the other side of the wall.

"Ooff" she exhaled when I collided with her. Her face was pale.

"What is it?" I asked. "What's wrong?"

She didn't speak just lifted her arm and pointed to the French doors that led from the living room into the backyard.

Gary stood on his haunches on the other side of the glass his little metal bowl clutched in his paws. When he saw me looking he tapped it against the glass.

"Why is he hitting the window with that?" she whispered. "Is he going to break in and murder us?"

I shook my head. God she was a drama queen sometimes. "No he's hungry. I forgot to feed him this morning. Let me go get a scoop of food out of the pantry for him."

"What?" she snapped. "You're feeding that mutant?"

I laughed. "He'll run away as soon as I get to the door. He's really sweet most of the time. I think you just surprised him last night."

Sierra's eyes bugged out. "Surprised? He hissed at me and I swear his eyes turned red. Then after you went back to bed I caught him staring at me through the back door like he was trying to figure out the best way to kill me."

The metal bowl hit the glass and Sierra winced. "If he doesn't stop that he'll break the glass."

"Why don't you feed him?" I suggested. "He'll probably be a lot friendlier then."

"No way! Murder by raccoon isn't on my bucket list!"

I couldn't suppress the laugh any longer. "Oh I can't wait to tell J.J. you're too afraid to feed Gary."

Her spine went rigid. She knew that J.J. would be relentless in his teasing if I told him she was too chicken to feed a little raccoon.

"Fine I'll do it. But if I get rabies I'm taking you down with me."

"What? Are you gonna bite me too?" I teased.

"You bet your ass."

I snorted as she marched into the kitchen and rummaged around in the pantry. A few seconds later she emerged with a full scoop of the food I

kept in a plastic dog food container on the floor.

As soon as she approached the back door Gary backed up a few steps dropped the bowl and scampered off. I bit back another snort as she tiptoed to the door and took her time to look from side-to-side even crouching to look up at the gutters before she opened it. Watching her

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I couldn't resist. I moved forward on bare feet until I was a couple of steps behind her. She didn't notice my reflection in the glass because she was too busy looking for Gary in the bushes.

Finally Sierra took a deep breath unlocked the door leaned out as far as she could and dumped the food in the bowl. The moment she closed the door and locked it Gary bounded out of the bushes and stared down at the bowl. Then he looked at her looked back down at the bowl glared at her one more time and only then did he begin to eat.

"Ungrateful asshole" she muttered.

I took that moment to grab her waist and yell. Sierra screamed and jumped straight in the air the cup flying from her hand and landing on the floor behind us with a ping.

I immediately started backpedaling when she whirled to face me fury in her face and vengeance burning in her eyes.

Before she could speak something hit the glass behind her which made her jump once again and turn toward the door. I took her moment of inattention to move as far away from her as I could. There was another ping and I realized Gary was flinging food at the door. I held back the laughter as well as I could.

"I'm going to get ready. We'll be leaving in an hour so get a move on."

I'm not ashamed to say I ran away before Sierra could even reply.

An hour later I leaned my hips against my car with my arms crossed over my chest. Sierra snuck out of the front door but the toe of her sandal caught the edge of the welcome mat and she stumbled forward. She managed to kick over two of my potted plants and a cute wooden pinwheel my mother had given me last year before she faceplanted next to my flowerbed.

I sighed and walked over to her. Her head popped up when I grabbed her arms to haul her to her feet.

"Where in the heck did you come from?" she groaned brushing grass and dirt off the front of her shorts and tank top.

"I've been waiting out here for the last ten minutes."

"Ugh" she groaned. "I thought I beat you! I can't believe you cheated!"

"Cheated? Me?"

Her eyes cut toward me. "You left the radio on in your bedroom. You knew I'd think you were still getting ready."

"Sucker" I taunted.

"Shut up. Shit I forgot my coffee." Sierra started to turn to go back into the house but I grabbed her arm. "Don't worry. I made you a travel mug. It's in the car. I also have a machine at the shop so I can brew more later if I need to."

"I guess I can forgive you for cheating then" she muttered turning to face me again.

In the bright morning sun I saw that she had dark circles under her eyes visible even beneath her make-up. She looked as if it had been days since she'd had a decent night's sleep. That worried me. Sierra might be a night owl but she usually got a good night's sleep when she finally went to bed. Last night was a late one for both of us but it usually took a few days before she looked this ragged.

Sierra walked past me to the car and plopped down in the passenger seat. She yawned as she buckled her seat belt.

Another shaft of worry pierced me.

I climbed in next to her and buckled my seat belt as well. As I backed out of the driveway I said casually "Why didn't you tell me about Brian when you told me you wanted to come visit?"

Sierra shrugged and stared out the window. "There wasn't anything to tell. He thought we were serious I didn't. I hurt him." Her head turned back toward me. "And I wanted to avoid the postmortem because it makes me look like an asshole." She paused for a second. "Besides I was bored and it's been two years since we've seen each other. It seemed liked a good idea until today. If I'd known you were going to make me work for my room and board I would've gotten a hotel room."

I ignored her blatant guilt trip because well she offered to help and I wasn't stupid.

"No other reason?" I asked.

"No" Sierra replied.

She fell silent alternating between staring out the passenger side window and sipping from the travel mug I'd filled for her.

I wracked my brain for a roundabout way to ask for more details about the situation with Brian. Obviously it was more than what she'd said at my parents the day before. Sierra had been my friend for almost a decade but she was still an extremely private person. She hated talking about herself and her personal problems. I'd often wondered if it was because her parents had been so distant when she was growing up and she was unused to talking about things that were bothering her.

"Yesterday's lunch was interesting" she commented as though she knew the direction my thoughts had taken.

I glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"Just that you'd have to be completely and utterly oblivious not to feel the tension between you and Brody Murphy."

I bit back a sigh. It figured that she would bring that up before I could dig into whatever was bothering her.

"Brody and I have a history. He's my brother's best friend and my teenage crush-slash-nemesis. That's all."

Sierra twisted her head toward me and lifted a brow. "History? Oh no Cam. That wasn't history I saw yesterday. That was definitely something very current."

I ignored the little zing that zipped through my body at her statement. "Brody came by the shop last night to apologize."

"What? Why didn't you tell me when you got home?"

I grimaced. "I wanted to avoid the post-mortem. It was too gruesome for dinnertime conversation."

"What happened? Did y'all have another argument? Did you have angry sex in the kitchen?"

I pulled into the parking lot behind Crave and turned to gape at her. "Where did that come from?"

"Seriously?" Sierra asked.

"Yes seriously."

She shook her head. "Don't act like you're ignorant to the fact that the sexual tension

between you and Brody Murphy is off-the-charts. I think everyone at that lunch table yesterday knew it except for maybe his little girl and only because she's too young and innocent to understand such things."

"You are off your rocker if you think there's sexual tension between Brody and...and..."

"You?" she supplied.

"Yes!"

"I don't think I'm the one who's crazy if you're claiming that it's not true."

"It's not!" I snapped.

Sierra crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in the passenger seat. "Okay then. What happened?"

I mirrored her position. "He came by I ignored him. He snuck up on me in the back and I tried to punch him in the face. Then we talked a little

and he apologized. I accepted. It was all very civil and mature and I think we're going to get along much better now."

Sierra's expression was skeptical. "Oh really?"

"Yes. Neither of us is a teenager any longer. We can be friends."

"If you say so" Sierra replied unbuckling her seatbelt and climbing out of the car.

I turned off the ignition and followed her. "We can."

"Uh-huh."

"We can!"

She didn't bother with a verbal response only moved to the back door and gestured for me to unlock it.

Grumbling beneath my breath I stuck my key in the deadbolt and twisted it. We didn't speak as I

headed toward the control panel for the alarm and entered the code to disarm it.

I set about turning on lights and brewing another pot of coffee when my phone went off. I tugged it out of my back pocket and glanced at the screen surprised to see a text from Brody. Wait a minute just last night he'd said he didn't have my cell phone number. That little shit.

HBA: Jacks is excited about her ice cream tasting. Also wants to know if she can help you make a new flavor.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth.

"Who's HBA?" Sierra asked.

I jumped and my heart kicked hard against my ribs. "What the hell Sierra?! You scared me!"

"Who's HBA?"

"Brody" I replied absently staring down at the screen as I thought about how I should respond.

"What's that mean?"

"Hot but annoying" I answered.

She hooted a wicked smile gracing her face. "I knew you still had a thing for him."

7

"Acknowledging someone's hotness isn't the same as having a thing for them. It's like appreciating a work of art. You can think it's pretty without wanting to bone it."

"If you say so."

I ignored her and walked away typing rapidly on my phone.

I should have known you were lying about not having my cell number. I make ice cream every Monday but I usually create the menu on

Thursday or Friday if she wants to help me decide on a new flavor. Or you can bring her by next Monday and we can experiment.

I paused then deleted the last three words and instead typed - she can experiment with several different combinations.

There. That didn't sound quite as suggestive as my initial message would have.

I hit send and tucked my phone back into my pocket.

I didn't realize I was smiling until Sierra called out "You're totally gonna bone!"

I flipped her the bird but she only cackled harder.

"Quit your Wicked Witch of the West impression and get to work" I groused.

"Cam and Brody sittin' in a tree..."

Before she could finish the ditty I grabbed the spray nozzle in the sink and flipped it to full blast. She managed to dodge a majority of the water but I caught the inner edge of her shorts with a little spray.

"Dammit Cam! Now it looks like I peed my pants!" she yelled. "You are so dead!"

I laughed and waved the nozzle at her threateningly. "Bring it."

Sierra sniffed. "I thought we were here to work not goof off."

"Truce while we're at the shop?"

She studied me and I knew she was considering her revenge. "Fine. But once we walk out that door watch your back."

"I'm shaking in my flip flops" I teased.

"Shut up and get me a towel."

"I can do better than that" I replied. "I have a washer/dryer combo in the storage room. You can toss your shorts in there for a little bit."

"And wear what?"

I replaced the spray nozzle and headed toward my office. Sierra might plot her revenge all day but she wouldn't break the truce. "I have a pair of athletic shorts in my gym bag."

"You don't belong to a gym" she mumbled behind me.

"No but I do like to go for runs a few times a week and I'm less likely to skip it if I have workout clothes on hand."

"You're running?" she asked.

"No need to sound so shocked. Thirty is a couple of years away and my metabolism isn't what it used to be."

"Oh put a sock in it. I've gained nearly ten pounds this year."

Considering Sierra looked like a 1950's pin-up those pounds were in all the right places.

"You could start going with me if you wanted" I offered.

"If you ever see me running you'd better haul ass because it means I'm being chased by a zombie or an axe murderer."

I laughed. "So that's a no?"

"That's a hell no."

I unlocked my office and unzipped my gym bag which hung on a hook by the door. I left it there reasoning that I'd be more likely to use it if it was in my line of sight when I was sitting at my desk reminding me that I hadn't exercised that day. It usually worked too.

Sierra took the shorts from me and sighed. "At least they're stretchy."

She marched down the hall toward the bathroom and disappeared inside.

Once the door closed my phone chimed again. I pulled it out of my pocket and read the message.

HBA: I don't know where you got that idea. ;)
but it's a date.

Of course it wasn't a real date but that didn't stop the ridiculous surge of excitement that spread through my limbs.

I couldn't stop myself from replying.

See you next week. :)

His answer came within seconds.

HBA: Not if I see you first.

To my relief Sierra took a hard look at the money situation for the shop and proclaimed that we could afford to hire an assistant manager. She also insisted that she learn the ice cream recipes and the day-to-day operations of running Crave.

I took her insistence to mean that she was sincere about staying in town for a few weeks.

It also sharpened my concern for her. Sierra liked living in cities. She liked the hustle and the anonymity of living among a large population. Then there was the food situation. Sierra kept crazy hours and preferred to order in most nights. Living in the city meant she could find just about any kind of food she wanted any time of night.

Here in Farley she'd be lucky to order pizza and that's if she remembered to order before the restaurant closed. There was also a little

Chinese restaurant in town but they only delivered on the weekends.

"We should put a want ad in the local paper and online" Sierra suggested.

I bit back a laugh and said "Give me five minutes."

Then I picked up the phone and dialed Natalie Phelps' number. When I heard her quavering voice answer the phone I grinned at Sierra.

"Hi Mrs. Phelps. It's Cameron McClane. How are you today?"

The weak quality disappeared immediately. "Oh Cam. How lovely of you to call. I'm doing better today than I have in a while. The heat seems to help my joints even if it ruins my hair. How are you? Is your friend still visiting?"

"I'm so glad you're doing well. I'm okay and yes Sierra is still visiting but I wanted to ask you for some advice if that's okay."

"Of course you can darlin'. Any time."

"Well Sierra is not just my friend she's also my business partner. We were going over the budget today and realized we really need to hire an assistant manager. I was wondering if you knew anyone reliable who was looking for a job. It will probably be part-time at first but eventually it'll become full-time."

Natalie was silent for a moment. And though she was in her mid-eighties I knew her mind was sharp. "Hmmm. Your best bet would be Lyria Prescott."

I frowned. I knew the Prescott family but I didn't know anyone named Lyria. "Is she related to the Prescotts?"

Natalie laughed. "Of course she is darlin'. She's the youngest and the only girl."

"You mean Lee?" The name evoked the image of a little girl with pigtails. "Isn't she still away at college?"

She laughed even harder verging on a cackle. "No. She's in graduate school. Online or some such. Gosh the child must be nearly twenty-five now."

I gaped and blinked. "Twenty-five? Are you sure?" That meant we'd gone to high school together but I couldn't picture her even after I wracked my brain.

"Honey she's only a few years younger than you."

She'd seemed so much younger the last time I saw her. Then again that had probably been close to a decade ago. When had I gotten so old? "I had no idea."

"Anyway if you need a new employee I would definitely recommend her. She's a hard worker trustworthy and smart as a whip."

"Thank you so much Mrs. Phelps. I appreciate your help."

"As I said any time Cameron. Good luck finding a new employee!"

We rang off and I glanced at Sierra. "Apparently the girl...er woman that Mrs. Phelps recommended is someone I knew when I was younger. I thought she was a lot younger than me but it seems I was wrong. She's nearly twenty-five."

"What do you remember about her?" Sierra asked.

I thought hard back to the last time I'd actually spoken to Lee Prescott. "She's quiet and sweet. The youngest of five kids and the only girl. The best I can recall she never got into trouble. I didn't even know she was back in town."

"Then we should definitely call her. If she isn't fodder for gossip then she must still be quiet and sweet."

"I'll call my mom this afternoon and get her number." I paused. "Do you want to put an ad out online just in case? I mean what if she turns out to be a closet psycho?"

"Then she'll fit right in with us" Sierra deadpanned.

"Ha ha you're hilarious."

"I know right?"

"Okay enough. It's time to make ice cream and clean. If you actually help instead of sitting around and looking pretty

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enough. It's time to make ice cream and clean. If you actually help instead of sitting around and looking pretty we might get out of here in time to pick up a pizza and go home for that movie night you've been wanting to have."

"You say that like I didn't just go through a year's worth of financials for the shop in one morning!"

I snickered and got up from my desk. "Okay so you've earned your keep for this week. Now it's time to work off next week's."

"I'm a partner not an employee. I don't need to earn my keep" she retorted.

And this was why I hated arguing with Sierra. She won nearly every argument I had with her. Her brain was too sharp. It was a little scary.

"And don't you need to call this Lee person about the job?"

I sighed and sat back down. "Good point."

I picked up my cell phone and scrolled through my contacts to my mother's name. She answered on the third ring. "Hey baby. How are you today?"

"I'm good. I was wondering if you had Lee Prescott's number?"

My mother was rabidly social and she knew nearly everyone in town either through her social circle or because they brought their kids to Dad's office.

"Let me just..." she trailed off and I knew she was looking through her contacts. "I think I have it here." After a few moments of silence she said "Here it is. Do you have a piece of paper?"

"You can just share it with me Mom." I walked her through the process and heard my phone chime a moment later. I checked the screen and saw that the contact came through. "Great. Thank you!"

"Oh your dad's next patient just came in. I'll talk to you later sweetie. You'll be over for lunch on Sunday right?"

"Yes Mom. Love you."

"Love you too baby."

After we disconnected I looked at Sierra and said "I have no idea how to call someone and invite them in to interview for a job that they didn't apply for and that they may not get."

She grinned at me and held out her hand for the phone. "Let me handle that."

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We took a break for lunch and walked to the diner two doors down. Sierra had set up an interview with Lee Prescott for Friday and we'd already made two batches of ice cream. I needed to make a couple more but I was much closer to being done than I normally would have been. Though she wasn't as familiar with the day-to-day operations Sierra was a huge help.

We walked into the diner and Steph the owner waved at us. "Sit wherever you want y'all. We'll be right with you."

Sierra walked directly to a booth near the front corner of the diner and she tossed her purse onto one of the benches. "I'll be right back."

She disappeared down the back hallway toward the bathrooms. I settled on the other side of the booth and grabbed the menu even though I had it memorized. Steph tried to change the menu last year and the entire town revolted. Dennis Middleston even took out a half page ad in the Farley Gazette protesting the change.

It was hysterical. I still laughed a little every time I thought about it.

When I was younger that would have bugged the shit out of me. I couldn't wait to leave this place behind. But after I went away to college I realized I wanted to come home. I missed seeing familiar faces every morning. The easy

pace of things. Of knowing that I could ask someone for help and they would do so happily.

Six years later I was glad I'd made that decision. Sure it was hard to meet men. Well men I hadn't known since I was a kid but I loved it here. My family was here. Most of them anyway.

I studied the menu vacillating between the club and patty melt but movement across from me caught my attention and I looked up.

Right into Brody Murphy's bright green eyes.

I blinked at him unable to reconcile that he was now sitting across from me.

"Eating alone?" he asked.

I shook my head still holding my menu up between us. This was not something I'd considered when I was musing about how much I loved living in Farley now. Though for

once I didn't feel the usual mixture of both excitement and anxiety at his presence.

For once it felt...normal.

He grinned. "It is normal to greet someone when you see them. You know hi how are you or stop following me around. That sort of thing."

The corners of my mouth twitched and said "Stalking is illegal in all fifty states."

"See that's a good greeting" he teased his green eyes sparkling.

"It took me a minute because I'm not used to you popping up wherever I go. Maybe I should start carrying around one of those Whack-a-Mole hammers."

Brody laughed. "I'm not too worried. If I remember correctly you sucked at that game."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Really? You're gonna go there?"

"Go where?" Sierra asked as she approached the table.

"Nowhere" I muttered.

Sierra stopped next to Brody and stared down at him her expression expectant. It took him a moment to catch on which made me bite back a laugh.

"Am I in your seat?" he asked. His tone was ripe with amusement.

Sierra nodded and Brody got to his feet and slid out of the booth. Then my best friend looked at me with a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "You can sit next to Cam if you want to join us for lunch."

"Thanks but I just finished eating and I need to get back to work. Maybe next time?"

I had no control over my head as I nodded. Brody walked away waving at Steph before he walked out the door.

As soon as he disappeared from sight Sierra looked back at me and said "Y'all are so gonna bone."

My cheeks heated. "Stop saying that. Who even uses that expression anymore?"

Her answering laugh was more like a cackle. "That must have been some apology. You went from wanting to smack him to wanting him to smack your ass."

"What? Where in the hell did that even come from Sierra?"

She shrugged and slid into the side of the booth that Brody had just vacated.

"And Brody definitely doesn't look at me like that" I continued.

"How does he look at you?" she asked.

"Like an annoying little sister."

Amy one of Steph's waitresses came over.

"What can I get y'all to drink?"

After we both ordered iced tea and Amy vanished behind the counter Sierra turned back to me. "You may annoy him but if a man looks at the sister the way he looks at you well they belong on that cable show you're always moaning about."

I gaped at her. "Are you bad-mouthing my favorite show?"

Sierra rolled her eyes. "That's what you took away from what I said?"

"I'm pretending you didn't mention the other thing. The only thing Brody and I could ever be is friends."

"Let me know how that goes in a month okay? Wait never mind I'll be here to watch it all in real time. That'll make saying I told you so completely satisfying."

Amy arrived with our tea and straws. I tore the tip off the wrapper of my straw and blew it at Sierra. It hit her right between the eyes.

"Hey!"

"Quit talking about Brody or I'm going back to the shop."

"Fine. What are we doing tonight again?"

"Nothing" I answered.

"Sounds perfect."

It was so nice to have a friend who enjoyed doing nothing with me.

8

I cursed Sierra for the rest of the week. Silently and in the privacy of my own mind because her

red hair might come from a bottle but her temper was one hundred percent natural.

To my surprise Brody continued to text me at random times throughout the week. Asking me questions about the town or observations about people we both knew.

It was the kind of stuff friends would talk about.

But I couldn't help the flutter in my stomach every time I saw a text message from him. I blamed Sierra for that because she'd put such a stupid idea in my head.

By Friday I'd given myself at least three stern lectures. It was ridiculous to get so excited about a few messages from Brody. I wasn't in high school anymore.

Then there was the fact that up until a few days ago I hadn't gotten along with him. I had to remember that.

It wasn't like Brody had been secretly in love with me for years.

I'd spent so much time thinking about Brody that week that I thought my imagination had conjured him out of thin air when I turned around Friday afternoon to see him standing at the counter.

It wasn't until Jacks started speaking her happy voice ringing out that I realized he was real and he was there.

"Hi Ms. McClane."

I smiled at her and shook my head. "Call me Cam remember? Ms. McClane is my mother."

She grinned back at me revealing a dimple in her left cheek and glanced up at her father as if asking for permission. He nodded which made her smile even wider.

"Daddy and I are having an all-day date!" she announced.

Oh shit. Dammit all to hell.

That was adorable. And my resolve to keep my feelings toward Brody platonic took a massive hit.

"I love date day. Dad always has the best ideas! A couple of weeks ago he took me on a food crawl. And before that we went to the county fair."

I was officially toast. I loved that he made an effort to not only spend time with her but to do things that she enjoyed. However I had one question.

"Okay what's a food crawl?"

"We went to all these different restaurants and tried one or two things. I was so full that I thought I was going to get sick." The last was said with such glee that I couldn't contain my urge to laugh.

Brody's smile was huge when I looked at him. "Where in the heck did you come up with that idea?"

"Ever heard of a pub crawl?" he asked. "It was my inspiration. It was just as much fun but without the hangover."

That made me laugh even harder. "I don't know about that. Both will cause you to be sick to your stomach."

Jacks giggled.

I had to change the subject because this was too much cuteness for words.

"I'm just guessing but I bet you're here to try some ice cream."

Jacks' hazel eyes lit up and she immediately bounded over to the freezer case that held all the ice cream flavors I offered. Her nose was nearly touching the glass as she gazed at each and every label.

"Try not to leave drool marks on Cam's glass Jacks" Brody teased his daughter.

Her eyes met mine and the expression on her face revealed her exasperation with her father. I bit back a smile because I didn't want to encourage her to rebel too early.

I'd wait until she was twelve or so before I helped her make Brody's life a living hell.

"You can try any flavor you want" I offered.
"Even if it's all of them."

Her eyes widened and she stared hard at the case. "I don't know if I can decide."

"Trust me?" I asked.

She nodded.

I grabbed two sample spoons and dipped them into one of my seasonal flavors. It was vanilla with a chocolate hazelnut swirl and I was

seriously considering making it a permanent addition to the menu because I sold out of it nearly every day during the summer.

I handed one to Jacks and one to Brody. Their identical expressions of delight as they tasted the ice cream were downright comical.

"That was soooo good" Jacks stated. "Is it your favorite?"

I leaned forward over the case. "Not really. I mean I like it but it's not something I could eat all the time."

"So which one is?"

"Promise you won't laugh?" I asked.

She nodded her face solemn.

"The double chocolate. I usually eat a scoop as soon as I take it out of the ice cream maker."

"Can I try some?" she asked.

"Of course." I looked at Brody. "You want to try it too?"

His eyes gleamed when he said "Definitely."

I ignored the thrill that ran through me at his husky voice.

Bad Cameron.

I wrestled my unruly emotions into submission and grabbed two more sample spoons.

They tasted the double chocolate which was chocolate ice cream with chunks of milk chocolate folded in after it was made.

Jacks bounced on her toes as it melted in her mouth. "That one is yummy too."

"I can see why it's your favorite" Brody muttered.

"Okay what do you want to try next?" I asked Jacks ignoring the way my skin heated when Brody looked at me with those intense green eyes.

This went on for several minutes until they'd both tried every single flavor.

"Now here's the hard part" I said. "Do you want a single double or triple scoop? Or do you want to try one of my sundaes?"

"Shit" Brody grumbled. "This isn't going to end well."

I nearly choked on a laugh as Jacks turned toward him and said "Dad language."

"Sorry baby" he replied.

And just like that my heart melted again. It wasn't safe to have him here with his daughter. It was so sweet it would make the ice cream taste bitter.

Jacks looked at me and surprised me with her answer. "I want two scoops in a cup please. The vanilla chocolate hazelnut swirl and the double chocolate. I like them all but those two are my favorites."

I crossed my arms on top of the ice cream coolers. "Are you sure? My brownie fudge sundaes are really good."

"I'll try one next time" she replied.

How was it possible that Brody Murphy was raising such a sweet girl? As I recalled he'd been a complete hellion by the time I met him. Then again that was when he was eleven so most of his sweetness had probably worn off by then.

"And you?" I asked Brody.

"I'm eating some of hers."

"Daaaaaad."

He looked down at her. "What? You won't finish it."

"Yeah but you need to get your own. That's what you always tell me when I try to eat your food."

I chuckled at that. Brody did have a weird quirk about people eating off his plate. As in he hated it. It was also good to know that he hadn't changed that much.

"He was always like that" I told Jacks. "One time my brother J.J. decided he really wanted the pasta your dad ordered when we all went out to this super nice Italian restaurant so—"

"That's enough of that story" Brody interrupted.

"What?" I asked trying to arrange my face into the picture of innocence.

"You know what. She's bratty enough as it is. Don't give her any ideas."

"Don't talk about my new friend like that" I retorted and pointed a finger at him. "She likes my favorite ice cream which automatically makes us besties."

Jacks laughed the sound light and musical. "He doesn't think I'm a brat" she said to me. "He just likes to pretend that I am."

Seeing Jacks and Brody together made my chest tight. When Brody told me about his ex and how she didn't want motherhood to interfere with her social life it broke my heart for Jacks. But being around them today I felt better. Their relationship seemed both loving and fun. It was clear that she was the center of his universe.

I imagined she would miss having a mother around as she got older but I could see that he would do everything in his power to keep her from feeling the true depth of that absence.

"I'll take that brownie fudge sundae you mentioned with the vanilla hazelnut

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" Brody said.

I nodded and set to work getting Jacks' order first.

Her eyes lit up when I handed her the cup.

"Thanks Cam!"

"Go ahead and grab us a table. I'll be there in a few minutes."

She was too busy stuffing ice cream in her mouth to speak so Jacks nodded and walked over to an empty table.

I tried to ignore the way my skin tingled as I set to work making Brody's sundae. I knew he was watching me. When I was younger it made me uncomfortable because I was certain he was picking me apart in his mind finding things to comment on.

Now I wasn't so sure.

I put the finishing touches on his sundae including a pretty flourish of whipped cream.

"How many cherries?" I asked out of habit. The way he looked at me made my cheeks flush but I rolled my eyes. "Grow up Murphy."

He grinned and more than my cheeks heated. How was I going to keep from drooling over him now that I actually liked him as a human being? He was off-limits. Our history was too twisted and fraught with harsh words.

"Three please."

I topped the sundae with three cherries and handed it to him across the counter.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

I shook my head. "On the house. As the father of my new bestie you don't pay when I'm here."

Yes I know I swore I would charge him full price but that was before he apologized. And I'd seen how he interacted with Jacks.

"That's no way to run a business" Brody said with a frown. "Friend or not I'm paying."

I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at him without a word. We'd played this game before and he should have remembered that I could out-stubborn him any damn time I wanted.

But the shithead only smiled pulled his wallet out of his pocket and slapped a fifty on the counter. "Unless you give me the actual total I'm gonna leave this right here."

Before I could argue Harmony my other part-timer swooped in picked up the fifty and rang him up. She handed him back his change with a sweet smile.

Brody shot me a triumphant look and tucked a ten-dollar bill into the tip jar next to the register. "Thank you" he drawled.

He grabbed his sundae from where he'd set it on the counter and headed toward the table that Jacks had chosen.

"He's hot for an older guy" Harmony said to me her voice loud enough to carry across the shop.

I bit back a laugh as Brody stopped in his tracks his shoulders tight. "Inside voice Harmony" I whispered. "I think he heard you."

Her cheeks turned bright red and her eyes shot to Brody who'd resumed his walk toward his table. "Oh shi-shoot. Do you really think he heard me?" she asked much quieter this time.

"Probably not" I lied. "I'm going to grab a couple of other flavors from the freezer. Hold down the fort."

Somehow I managed to hold in my laugh until I made it inside the freezer. Then I leaned my butt against one of the shelves and wrapped my arms around my belly as I laughed so hard that my face hurt.

I would have given that fifty-dollar bill to see the look on Brody's face when he heard what Harmony said. I bet it would have been worth every cent.

I shrieked when the door to the freezer flew open to reveal Sierra.

"What's so funny?" she asked. "I could hear you laughing all the way from the office."

My guffaws had died the moment she scared me but I still had tears running down my face.

I wiped my cheeks and answered "Brody and Jacks dropped by. We were in a stand-off on whether he would pay for his ice cream when Harmony swooped in and took his money. Then when he was walking away Harmony said..." I

giggle-snorted a couple of times before I continued. "Said that he was hot for an older guy."

Sierra's face broke out into a wicked grin. "Oh my God. What did Brody say?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. He had his back to us but I would have given the fifty-dollar bill he put on the counter to see the look on his face."

"A fifty?" she asked whistling. "Damn he's not playing around."

I wiped my cheeks again glad that I wore waterproof mascara in the summer because it would have been smeared all to hell if I wasn't. "Wh-what do you mean?" I stuttered.

"He definitely wants your attention Cam. And that's just one way to get it."

"Will you give up the whole Brody Murphy has the hots for you stuff? He's off-limits and I'm off-limits. It's the little sister of your best friend rule.

Even if we aren't fighting anymore it still takes precedence."

Sierra shook her head but didn't argue with me.

"Lee Prescott is coming by later for her interview. Don't forget."

"I won't" I promised straightening from my position against the frigid shelves. I grabbed two tubs of ice cream—vanilla-hazelnut swirl and pistachio. "I hope you have some idea of what questions we should ask her because I've never interviewed someone for a management position."

"Neither have I" Sierra replied.

I carried the ice cream out of the freezer and kicked it shut behind me. "Then we'd better think of some fast because she'll be here in a couple of hours."

Sierra took the top container out of my hands and followed me out into the front of the store.

Harmony took the vanilla-hazelnut swirl from my hands. "Awesome. Thanks for bringing this out. I just sold the last of the other tub."

I watched as she took the empty one from the case and inserted the fresh one. Then she took the pistachio ice cream from Sierra and put it in an empty spot off to the side ready and waiting until the other container was gone.

She grinned at us as she carried the empty container into the kitchen to wash it out. "Be right back."

I watched her go and shook my head slightly.

"What is it?" Sierra asked quietly.

"I don't know. She calls in sick at least one Sunday a month but she works really hard when she's here. I thought maybe she just didn't want to work when something more fun came up but she comes in whenever I call her

to cover for Kelly. I feel something's going on and I don't know what it is."

"You could ask her" Sierra pointed out.

"Yes but I'm pretty sure she would just tell me if she wanted me to know. Whatever it is she's keeping it a secret."

"Soooo...what are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. I need to think about it."

"Okay I'm going back to the office. It's too complicated and people-y out here" Sierra muttered.

"Wait" I said before she could walk away.

"Brody manages several of his dad's businesses. He probably has a good idea of what sort of questions we should ask someone interviewing for an assistant manager position."

She waved over her shoulder at me without turning around. "Good idea. Go ask him."

I scowled at her back as it disappeared down the hallway toward my office. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Brody leaning across the table toward his daughter his mouth open to take a bite of her ice cream from her spoon. Just as his lips were about to close around the spoon Jacks jerked it away and stuck it in her own mouth. She made a show of humming as she ate it a huge mischievous grin on her face.

9

Brody shook his head pretending to be hurt. Then when she wasn't looking he dipped his spoon into her bowl and took a bite anyway.

I smiled to myself at their antics. I didn't want to interrupt but Brody chose that moment to look up and his eyes met mine. He waved me over.

"How is everything?" I asked them as I approached the table.

"Delishoush" Jacks replied her mouth still full of ice cream.

Brody's grin was directed at me and yet again I felt it somewhere very private. "It's really good. I see why it's so popular."

"Thanks." I glanced at Jacks. "I'm interviewing someone to be my assistant manager today and I've never done that before. What do you think I should ask them?"

She thought about it for a long moment as though she were seriously weighing the question. Finally she answered "You should make sure that they like ice cream." Her eyes darted to her father then to me before she expounded. "I mean they're supposed to sell your ice cream for you so if they don't like it how will they do a good job?"

"That's a really good point" I said honestly.

"Jacks I'm gonna talk to Cam for a few minutes. Give her some pointers. Can you sit right here for me?"

"Okay Daddy."

Brody got to his feet and put his hand in the middle of my back guiding me toward the hallway that led to my office. He stopped when we were out of sight of the dining area and faced me.

"Have you seriously never interviewed anyone before?" he asked.

I frowned at him. "I didn't say that. I've interviewed my part-time employees but I've never interviewed someone for a management position. Natalie Phelps recommended the woman I'm talking to today and I trust her judgment but I also want to ask the right questions. I want them to take me seriously because this shop is my baby and someday I want to expand."

"You waited until the day of the interview to decide on questions?" he asked his expression unhappy.

I sighed. I wanted to be angry at his pointed question but it was accurate. "There's a reason I need to hire an assistant manager. I'm doing ninety percent of the full-time labor on my own and it's getting to the point that I can't keep up anymore. I haven't had a day off in nearly two years. I love this place but I do occasionally need time to myself and to have a life. If I don't find a husband and start popping out grandkids at some point I'm pretty sure my mother will start leaving sperm bank brochures and IVF information all over my house."

Brody's expression became inscrutable at my words but his eyes flashed with irritation. Then he sighed and the annoyance faded. "I understand. It's difficult to find time to do everything when you literally are doing everything." He placed his hand in the center of my back and gave me a gentle nudge toward my office. "I have to get back out to Jacks but if you'll bring me a notebook or pad and a pen I'll write down a few questions for you. Will they be responsible for any bookkeeping or bill paying?"

Because if they are you should definitely consider investing in a background check."

I shook my head. "No Sierra and I will be taking care of all that. They'll just have to count the drawer if they're closing up and put the money in the safe. And this is a small town. It won't be difficult to find Lee if she decides to rob me. Heck her mama would probably drag her ass back up here personally and force her to return the money."

The corner of Brody's mouth tugged up in a small smile as though he didn't want to but couldn't help himself. "Mrs. Prescott raised five kids four of them boys she had to be tough."

I shuddered a little as his words conjured up a mental image of Mrs. Candace Prescott. She was a pretty woman tall and well-built but she could strip the paint off a fence with a single searing glare. The first time you crossed her would be your last because no one wanted to face her when she was angry. I'd never seen her turn into the She-Hulk but I could have

sworn I'd seen a greenish hint to her skin a time or two.

"Notepad. Pen. I'll be waiting for you at the table with Jacks. I need to get back to her before she gets into any mischief."

I nodded and watched as he walked away.

"Whew. I never thought that I'd find a bossy man attractive but that was downright hot."

I sighed at the sound of Sierra's voice behind me and turned to face her. She held out a legal pad and a pen without a word. I snatched them from her hands and left before she could say anything else.

"Be nice and smile" the she-devil called behind me. "Men like a sweet woman."

I growled beneath my breath and flipped her off before I rounded the corner into the dining area. Her answering laugh followed me the entire way.

I'd just turned off the lights at Crave when my phone chimed. I walked over to the counter where I'd left it and glanced at the screen.

HBA: Knock knock

Before I could type a reply my phone rang. It was Brody.

Shaking my head I answered "Hey."

"Little pig little pig let me in."

"Not by my hairless chinny chin chin" I deadpanned.

Brody chuckled. "I don't think that's how the rhyme goes but I brought you something."

"Tell me what it is or I'm leaving you out there to rot" I replied.

"Well it used to be one of your favorites..."

"I have lots of favorites."

"I drove thirty minutes each way to pick this up and it's getting warm which means it won't taste as good."

"Sushi!" I cried. I whirled around and looked toward the front door. No one was there. "Uh please tell me you're not at my house" I said.

Brody laughed again. "I'm at the back door. I figured it would be smarter to come to the back rather than give the gossips more ammunition."

"Gossips? Ammunition? What in the heck are you talking about?"

"Uhhhh."

I disconnected the call and headed toward the back door through the kitchen. I unlocked it and yanked it open to find Brody standing there with his phone in one hand and a white paper bag in

the other. For a moment I contemplated grabbing the handles of the bag out of his hand and shutting the door in his face but I quashed that urge.

I also noticed he was alone. "Where's Jacks?"

Brody frowned. "Her mom asked if she could have her for the weekend. Jacks wanted to go so I said yes."

I inhaled sharply. Yet more evidence he was a good dad. He wanted his daughter to be happy more than he wanted to stick it to his ex.

He lifted the bag between us. "I was hoping you would take pity on me and eat the dinner I brought rather than forcing me to eat with my parents in their enormous dining room."

I took the sushi from him and waved him inside with my other hand. "I'll take pity on you you poor wretch. Even though you called me a little pig."

Brody smiled but I could still see the worry in his eyes. He played along though. "Oh beautiful kind mistress. Thank you for your mercy."

"Okay that's enough" I muttered as he shut the door and locked it. "Why don't you explain your comment about gossips?"

I set the bag on one of the stainless steel counters and began to remove container after container of sushi. Lots and lots of sushi. When I pulled the sixth plastic tray out of the bag I glanced at Brody who was still silent.

"How hungry did you think I would be?" I asked staring at the feast before me.

"I was hoping you'd share" he murmured.

"I guess I will if I have to but don't think I didn't notice you changing the subject."

"I didn't change the subject" he said. "You did."

"Just answer the question

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Brody."

He sighed and started popping lids off the trays. "I might have gotten a call from your mother asking me how long we'd been dating."

I dropped a handful of soy sauce packets all over the kitchen floor. "What?"

"Apparently when I came by to apologize last Sunday a group of people from your parents' church saw us together here and witnessed you waving at me as you drove by."

"So that means we're dating?" I knew Farley was a small town but this was insane. A wave and a conversation now meant we had a relationship?

"I guess so" he replied.

I shook my head. "That's just great. Now I'll be even more undateable."

"That's the second time you've mentioned that."

"Mentioned what?" I asked crouching down to pick up all the sauce packets that scattered all over the floor.

"Your uh love life."

"Or lack thereof?" I straightened and piled the soy sauce on the counter. "Sorry it's been...a while since I dated anyone."

I rummaged around in the bottom of the bag looking for chopsticks.

"How long is a while?" Brody asked.

I glanced up and saw that he was studying me closely. My eyes narrowed. "A while."

He leaned back against the sink and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll show you mine."

I mimicked his posture. "If I show you mine?"

He nodded.

"You've only been divorced for what six months?"

"Eight but we were separated for a lot longer than that."

"How long?" I asked skeptical.

"You first."

Was I really going to do this? Was I going to share with him how pathetic I was? I stared at Brody. I always hated to be vulnerable in front of him.

But things were different now. Weren't they?

So I inhaled deeply and took the risk.

"Eighteen months" I admitted. "He lived near Dallas worked there and he asked me to move in with him but—"

"You would have had to give up the shop"
Brody said.

I nodded.

"Damn that sucks. I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "It is what it is."

"I've noticed people always say that when it's something they really don't want to discuss."

I couldn't help the huff of laughter that escaped me. "Yeah it's not my favorite subject. I really cared about him."

"But why haven't you dated anyone since then?" he asked.

"The dating pond here isn't exactly teeming with fish."

Brody nodded but didn't say anything else.

"Your turn" I said.

"Two and a half years."

My eyes widened. "But you weren't separated that long were you?"

He shook his head. "No. We were separated for about a year before the divorce was final but after I found out she was cheating on me I wouldn't touch her."

I wracked my brain for a delicate way to ask but couldn't find one so I just spoke my mind. "You didn't you know look for someone else?"

"Absolutely not. After everything I went through with Monica I wasn't exactly interested in starting up something with another woman."

"Not even sex?" I asked almost shocked. Two and half years was a long time for anyone but Brody exuded such a strong aura of masculinity I guess some would call it virility that I almost couldn't believe it.

"Sex was how I got into that mess with Monica." His eyes glittered hard and angry. "I don't regret having Jacks but I hate that I managed to get myself so twisted up that I married Monica instead of just shelling out child support. Or fighting for full custody." He laughed but it was harsh rather than humorous. "I'm fairly certain that if I'd offered Monica enough money she would have signed away her parental rights from the get-go. Instead I had it in my head that I needed to do the right thing. That a child needed both parents to be successful."

I understood that attitude because I'd had two great parents who were still crazy in love with each other. But I'd also seen the other side. Kids I went to school with whose parents fought constantly or treated each other like crap. "If the child's parents are miserable together do you think it's helping in the long run?"

Brody's eyes were nearly piercing when they met mine. "It doesn't help. It makes it worse. And I'm pretty sure that's what you were trying to tell me the day of my wedding."

"Have you been beating yourself up about this for a while?" I asked grabbing a couple of paper plates from the stack I kept on a shelf above the cabinet.

"Only about five years" he muttered.

Those words hit me right in the chest. Made my heart ache for him.

I decided to tell him exactly what I thought. It might be a mistake considering we'd just started getting along less than a week ago but I didn't think it would be. Brody could handle my bluntness. He always had.

"Brody you probably won't like hearing this but you're human. You made a mistake. We all do that. But I can tell you learned from your mistake."

"And how can you know that?" he asked. I couldn't read the expression on his face. It was one I'd never seen before.

"A lot of men would have gone out and chased the first piece of tail they could find if they discovered their wife was cheating on them. Or at least started dating after they separated and divorce proceedings were underway. You didn't. You focused on your daughter. Now I'm not saying you don't deserve to find someone you care about but you didn't go out looking for a revenge fuck. Your attitude and actions are coming from the right place."

He cocked his head and stared at me but this time I could decipher his emotions.

"Oh stop looking so surprised. I've grown up too ya know."

His lips tilted to one side in a half-smile I hadn't seen in a long long time. One that was usually reserved for me.

"Older and wiser" he replied.

"Both of us." I exhaled hard. "Okay enough of this maudlin stuff. I'm hungry and cranky. Not a good combination."

Brody didn't say anything else just came over to the counter where I stood and grabbed one of the paper plates I'd left on it.

I handed him a pair of chopsticks and took a set for myself. We divided up the rolls though I gave the spicy salmon a wide berth. I loved cooked salmon but the texture of salmon sashimi made me want to hurl.

I hopped up so that my butt rested on one of the counters and dug in. Brody leaned against the island next to where I sat.

We ate in silence for a little while before I asked "So what are you doing the rest of this weekend?"

He shrugged and lifted another piece of Louisiana roll to his mouth. "The moving

company is bringing things over and unpacking them on Sunday but that's it."

"Maybe you should see if J.J. is available" I suggested fighting to keep my words casual.

He chewed and swallowed before he said "J.J. has a deadline at work and he's not free this weekend."

So he'd already asked. Damn.

I was working part of the day Saturday and Sierra was taking over the shop on Sunday so I could get a little bit of a break.

"Wanna go to the movies on Saturday night?" I asked him. "I actually have the night off."

Brody glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "Feeling sorry for me?" he asked.

"Absolutely. That means you're buying right?"

He grinned at me and shook his head. "Not worried about hurting my feelings?"

"Nope. You're a big strong guy you can take it." I nudged him with my elbow. "So movie?"

"I should probably be offended but I could definitely use a night away from Mr. and Mrs. Murphy so...yeah."

It was my turn to shake my head. "I can't believe you're living with your parents."

He scowled at me. "It's not that bad."

I just looked at him.

"Eat your damn sushi" he said.

I laughed but did as he directed. I didn't want to piss him off too much or he wouldn't pay for my movie ticket tomorrow.

It never occurred to me that I'd just asked Brody Murphy out on a date.

And that he'd said yes.

10

I yanked off my apron and tossed the neck strap over the hook on my office wall. I had forty-five minutes to run home and take a quick shower before Brody picked me up to go to the movies.

If I'd been in this situation thirteen years ago I would have been giddy at the prospect of a night out with Brody Murphy.

You still are.

I ignored the whispered words that rose from somewhere deep in my subconscious. I wasn't giddy. I was just excited to have a night off. It had been way too long since I'd been to the movies.

When I'd texted Brody this morning and asked him what he wanted to see he told me to choose anything as long as it wasn't animated.

Since he'd given me carte blanche I was extremely tempted to force him to go see a new rom-com or period drama but I couldn't in the end. I didn't particularly want to see any of those either and it was my first Saturday night off in a long long long time.

So I'd selected an action flick. One that I'd been dying to see since the first trailer was released a few months ago.

I snagged my purse from the bottom drawer of my desk and locked up my office. Sierra Harmony and Kelly were all behind the counter. The after-dinner rush hadn't started yet but business was beginning to pick up.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" I asked Sierra.

She rolled her eyes at me then turned to Kelly. "Do I seem like I'm completely useless to you?"

Kelly had already gotten used to Sierra over the course of the week so she answered "Not

completely useless. Maybe only partially useless."

Sierra gasped in mock affront. "I should fire you for that remark."

Kelly laughed. "Then you would be completely useless."

Harmony was watching their byplay with wide eyes. I half-expected her to crawl under the cash register at any moment.

Worry nudged me as I watched her. I'd thought maybe her tendency to ditch work was due to irresponsibility but it seemed less and less likely that was the case. As I'd told Sierra I still wasn't sure what to do or even say to Harmony.

Until I figured it out I would treat her the same way I treated Kelly.

"You're hilarious. Y'all should take the show on the road."

Kelly gave me a confused look. "What?"

God that look made me feel old.

"Never mind."

"Go out. Have fun. Pretend you're still young and spontaneous" Sierra commanded.

"Are you calling me old and boring?" I asked.

"Of course not darlin'. Have fun!" Sierra said with a wave.

I scowled at her but didn't argue. Time was slipping away and I wanted to at least shower and put on a little make-up before Brody showed up. Date or friends' night out I wasn't going anywhere in public without at least a little something on my face. Not with the dark circles I was sporting under my eyes.

I hurried out the back door of the shop and locked it behind me. The drive to my house

went quickly and I made it home with exactly thirty-seven minutes to get ready.

I was already stripping my clothes off as I slammed the front door. In thirty-four minutes I was showered dried dressed and swiping mascara on my eyelashes. I swept my hair up into a ponytail on top of my head glossed my lips and slid my feet into a pair of wedge sandals.

I had no sooner buckled the last strap when the doorbell rang. I glanced at the clock and smirked. Right on time. Brody hated being late and he used to give me no end of shit about always making everyone late when we carpooled during high school.

I gathered up my stuff and opened the front door. "Punctual. I see you haven't changed a bit."

"You have" Brody replied. "You're actually ready for once."

"Oh ha ha. You're hysterical."

"Shall we?" he asked.

I slipped out the door and turned to lock it. The move put me closer to Brody and I could smell the hints of his cologne. It was different from the one he wore during college but it still went straight to my head.

When I faced him I actually let myself take in how he looked. Which was too good. He was dressed down in a pair of faded jeans and a white t-shirt. His dark hair was brushed away from his forehead and still damp from his shower.

He looked better now than he did at twenty-four on the day of his wedding. It wasn't fair.

"So what are you going to torture me with tonight?" he asked.

I grinned and told him the name of the movie I'd chosen.

"Nice. Should I be grateful you didn't choose something based on Jane Austen or a chick flick?"

"Chick flick? Really? You're better than that Brody."

He shrugged. "I'm not sure what else to call them."

"Whatever the real genre is. Rom-com romantic drama that sort of thing. You have a daughter. You need to watch what you say."

He shook his head and laughed. "I'm not sure if I'm glad or terrified that I moved back to Farley with her."

"Just don't pass on any of your inherent sexism and all will be fine."

He stared at me with his brows raised.

"Down with the patriarchy!" I said raising my fist just above my shoulder.

"And now I'm not sure if you're going to be a good influence or a corrupting one for Jacks."

"Good of course. She needs to know that she can do anything be anything she wants to be. That she can earn what she wants no matter her gender."

Once again he placed his hand on the small of my back something that usually drove me absolutely nuts and guided me down the front steps toward his car. Strangely instead of feeling herded I had the sense of safety. That he cared. Which was ridiculous because I'd barely seen him in the last seven years.

"Has someone ever made you feel something other than that?" he asked.

I grabbed the handle on the car door a split second before he did and opened it. I leaned against the frame and looked back at him. "Not

my family. And not you. But yeah. There have been times when I was treated differently from the boys in my college classes or at my part-time job while I was in school." I shrugged one shoulder. "It could have been a lot worse. I could have had parents that encouraged me to get married young and start popping out babies that my only value lay in the roles as wife and mother." I realized how that sounded and continued quickly. "Not that wives and mothers are worth less. Just that I wasn't pushed into that. That wasn't all that was expected of me. There's nothing wrong with a woman having those goals just like there's nothing wrong with a man having them. Shit I'm making a mess of this explanation aren't I?"

Brody's eyes were oddly intent as he looked at me. "No I understand exactly what you mean. And I just decided that I wouldn't be upset at all if Jacks picked up your attitude."

I grinned at him before I climbed into the car. "You say that now. Wait until she's fourteen. Or have you forgotten what I was like?"

"Dear God you're evil to wish that upon me" he grumbled. He waited until my feet were inside the car before he shut my door.

But I was pretty sure he heard my laugh as he walked around the car to the driver's side.

Less than five minutes together and this night was already entertaining.

As soon as we got to the theater and found seats I realized this was a truly horrible idea. Brody drove us to a movie theater near the Dallas area and the armrests lifted up between the seats. Which he promptly did claiming it would be more comfortable.

As soon as I sat down my arm brushed his and my thigh made contact with his leg. Eleven years ago seventeen-year-old me would have been in a state of bliss.

But twenty-eight-year-old me felt like she was coming out of her skin.

At Brody's insistence we both got drinks

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we both got drinks but he asked if we could share popcorn. I hadn't argued because he refused to let me pay for any of it. He'd even grabbed a pack of Raisinettes.

To distract myself from his proximity I turned to Brody and said "Thanks for getting me some Raisinettes. I'm surprised you remembered."

His answering look was droll. "Surprised? You only begged for them every time we came to the movies from the time I met you."

I shrugged one shoulder and struggled with the plastic wrap on the candy box.

Brody's laugh was soft as he took the box from me. "And this hasn't changed either I see."

I swallowed hard as he used his teeth to pierce the plastic wrap and he deftly ripped it off the box. Without asking if I wanted him to he jabbed his thumb into the perforated section and peeled the top of the box back.

"Thanks" I murmured when he handed it back to me.

I held the bucket of popcorn in my lap and dumped a pile of chocolate-covered raisins in my palm. The lights dimmed and I nearly jolted out of my chair when Brody reached across me to grab a handful of popcorn. It put his upper body so close to mine that I could feel the heat emanating from his skin.

It was official. This was the worst idea ever. I'd once thought going to his wedding was the stupidest decision I'd ever made. But offering to be his friend? That took the cake.

I should have known better. He was even more handsome now than he'd been seven years

ago. And it had been way too long since I'd been touched by a man.

I cleared my throat to hide the way my breath hitched and forced my eyes to stay on the screen. But my attention was split between the movie and the man next to me.

Which sucked because I'd wanted to see this for months.

Maybe I could talk Sierra into coming back with me tomorrow. To a different theater.

My distraction was complete when Brody leaned over and whispered something in my ear about the movie. His lips brushed the shell of my ear and I could swear I felt that contact shoot straight to my nipples.

Holy shit. His mouth had barely touched my ear and I could feel it all over my body. What would it be like if he...

I cut off that train of thought with merciless precision. I would not fantasize about my brother's best friend. He was off-limits. Under absolutely no circumstances could I go there.

Besides there was a strong chance that he would push me away if I threw myself onto his lap and tried to get him to put his mouth on other parts of my body. Any part.

Thank God he didn't seem to expect a response from whatever he'd said because he leaned back in his seat and munched on the popcorn he'd just grabbed from the bucket.

For the rest of the movie all my focus was on the movement of his arm when he reached for the popcorn and the slide of his leg against mine when he shifted in his seat.

By the time the end credits rolled a light sweat had broken out on my back and my thighs were sore because I'd clenched them together so tightly.

I ignored the way my legs wobbled as we got to our feet. I had to get my shit together before we left the blessed darkness of the theater. I couldn't let him see the way he affected me. God it was even worse now than it had been when I was in high school.

Probably because I knew exactly what I was missing during my dry spell.

Back before I truly understood how good sex could feel I'd yearned for him to hold my hand to kiss me but my imagination didn't go much further than that. I'd had mediocre sex and even some really good sex with my last boyfriend but something about the way my body reacted to Brody told me that the pair of us together and naked would be utterly deliciously combustible.

But I would never find out for sure.

That thought was enough to cool me right down.

By the time we made our way back to the lobby my cheeks were no longer flushed and my body was under control.

"So what do you think?" he asked me.

I blinked at him for a moment wondering if I'd been so lost in my own thoughts that I'd missed a huge chunk of conversation. "I'm sorry what were you asking me about?"

Brody grinned. "I should have been clearer. I meant what do you think about the movie?"

"It was fun" I answered with a shrug. "A break from reality."

He eyed me his gaze speculative. "Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Nope. I think it just hit me that I have a night off and I wasn't spending it sleeping for a change."

He grinned. "I guess we helped each other out then."

I smiled back and we emerged from the movie theater into the warm summer night. There was a nice breeze and the humidity from the day had faded quite a bit. It was perfect.

"Wanna see my new place?" he asked me.

"I thought you hadn't moved in yet."

"We haven't not technically but we can drive by. Jacks is excited because the neighborhood has a really nice communal pool and playground. There's even a splash pad."

I knew exactly what neighborhood he was talking about and I would never ever be able to afford a house there. Well maybe in twenty or thirty years if I turned Crave into a franchise and had stores all over Texas.

Still I wasn't quite ready for the evening to end even if reality had brought me back to Earth with a resounding crash.

"Sure."

This time Brody beat me to the passenger side door and opened it for me smirking when I sighed. When he did things like that...well it no longer seemed like a platonic evening out. I climbed into the car and muttered a grudging thank-you which made him smile even more.

Brody just laughed and shut the door. That's when inspiration struck.

I waited until he rounded the car and reached out toward the driver's side door handle. Then I hit the lock button.

"Really?" I heard Brody ask from outside his voice muffled.

He grabbed the handle and the doors automatically unlocked but I'd been waiting for

that. I hit the button again before he could open the door.

"Cameron" he said.

I giggled and ignored the warning in his voice. He tugged the handle again but I was waiting for it. I used to do this to my brother and by extension him all the time when we were younger and they were forced to give me rides to school or pick me up from my extracurricular activities.

This time Brody pulled out his key fob gave me a sinister grin and hit a button on it. The car alarm blared drawing the attention of any people within a fifty-foot radius.

"Oh my God" I groaned ducking down in the passenger seat when heads swiveled toward the noise. I crouched on the floor and put my head on my knees.

From my position on the floorboard I heard the locks bleep and then the alarm chirped before it

died. Then Brody started laughing. Not just laughing. Guffawing.

Deep rolling belly laughs erupted from him so loud that I was sure they could hear him in the lobby of the movie theater.

I lifted my head from my knees and glared at him. "It wasn't that funny Brody."

He just kept laughing smacking the steering wheel with his right hand as he rocked back and forth in his seat.

"Brody!"

He wiped his eyes as he calmed somewhat. "God I wish J.J. had a car alarm in high school. It would have saved us so much time and annoyance."

"Whatever" I grumbled levering myself back up into the passenger seat.

"C'mon Cam. You wouldn't have done it if you didn't think it was funny. You're just mad because I got the best of you for a change."

I didn't say anything because it was true and we both knew it.

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Brody still had a huge smile on his face as he started his car and drove out of the parking lot.

A few seconds later I was smiling out the window because he was right. It was pretty funny.

"I see that shit-eating grin" he commented.

I rolled my lips together and fought to keep my mouth in a straight line before I faced him. As soon as our eyes met I burst out laughing. I just couldn't help it. The expression on his face was classic Brody one I was used to seeing from him during high school. One that I used to look forward to seeing every chance I got.

His green eye sparkled with mischief and good humor and his grin was so wide that the small dimple in his right cheek was visible.

"Fine" I sighed flopping back in the passenger seat. "So it was funny."

He laughed again but didn't say anything else. Though I could feel him gloating all the way across the front seat of his SUV.

He drove in silence for a few moments but when he pulled up to a red light he turned to look at me. In the shadowed interior I could just make out the point of his chin and the sharp angle of his cheekbones.

"Thank you for coming out with me tonight" he said. "I won't go into details because it will lower my cool level but I'm pretty pathetic during the weekends that Jacks is with her mom."

My chest tightened but I ignored it and quipped "I hate to break it to you Brody but your cool

level became non-existent when you started driving a mom vehicle."

He gaped at me. "This isn't a mom vehicle. It's an SUV! A very nice luxurious SUV."

I gave the leather interior and the fancy dash a dismissive wave. "Doesn't matter how many upgrades it has it's still a mom car. Maybe one step up from a minivan."

Brody stared at me open-mouthed and speechless until the car behind us honked.

I reached out and patted his forearm. "Oh bless your heart darlin'. I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you."

It took every ounce of willpower I had not to burst into laughter at the glare he shot me.

Then he groaned. "You're fucking with me aren't you?"

I couldn't hold back the laughter anymore. I clutched my stomach and giggled for a few seconds before I managed to say "It took you long enough to catch on. I guess I can attribute your sloth-like reflexes to old age."

"Ass" he muttered.

I giggle-snorted. "I had to do something. You were getting all mushy on me."

Brody rolled his eyes. "Don't worry. I won't ever make that mistake again."

I chuckled to myself for a few minutes as he drove back toward Farley. But by the time he'd turned on to the main road that led to town my urge to laugh had faded leaving me a little sad for him.

I put my hand on his arm again and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I'm glad I could help."

Before I could move away his palm landed on mine holding my fingers closer to his skin. His

fingers clasped mine for a brief moment before he released me but I understood what he wanted to say anyway.

The next day I woke up bright and early.

And in a great mood.

I came out of my room dressed in my yoga clothes with my mat tucked beneath my arm. I whistled a short tune. The sun seemed to shine brighter than usual and I felt rested. Full of energy.

"Damn girl. Why are you so chipper this morning?" Sierra grumbled from the couch.

I leaned over the back and stared down at her. She was in the clothes she was wearing last night and her hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head. Mascara was smeared around her bleary eyes and there was a streak of lip gloss angling from the corner of her mouth to her cheek.

"What happened to you?" I shot back glancing at the mess around her. "Did you host a stoner party here after I went to bed?"

There were junk food wrappers soda cans and tissues all over the coffee table. They surrounded her laptop as if they were offerings to a shrine for the gods of technology.

She moaned as she sat up and rubbed hard at the back of her neck. "Damn I'm getting too old to sleep on the couch anymore."

"We're twenty-eight not ninety-seven" I said.

Sierra rolled her head around in an attempt to loosen up her neck. "I feel ninety-seven most days. I'm just glad I didn't drop the laptop on the floor. Been there done that had to buy the replacement."

"Sierra why did you sleep on the couch instead of your nice comfy bed?"

"My boss called me with a work emergency so I spent the night working on it. Plus my feet are killing me. I don't know how you do it."

"You get used to it" I replied. "Does your boss call you with emergencies often?"

She shrugged. "I just got a promotion so he probably thinks he's entitled to my time whenever he needs it. I hope this isn't a sign of things to come" she grumbled.

"You just got promoted?" I asked my eyes wide.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell me? That's awesome! We should celebrate!"

"Maybe while I'm here" she said but she seemed unenthusiastic. I wanted to ask why but Sierra's eyes moved over my clothes and the rolled yoga mat under my arm. "You're going to work out first thing in the morning?"

Since she changed the subject I let it go. For now.

I nodded. "We're going to my parents' for lunch remember?"

She collapsed back against the arm of the couch and closed her eyes. "Ugh. Can't I skip it? I mean your mom realizes I'm not actually her child right?"

"No such luck. If I don't bring you she'll just come by later."

"I have to go to the shop later."

I opened my mouth to offer to take the half-day shift she was supposed to work but one of her eyes popped open and she glared at me. "Don't even think about it. You're taking the day off. I can do this. I'm just not used to it yet. For the last six years I've been able to work from the comfort of my couch or bed or by a pool somewhere with good wi-fi."

"Okay okay. Why don't you go wipe that scary mask off your face and take a nap? I'll wake you up an hour before we have to leave for my parents'."

"Scary mask?" she asked frowning at me.

"You're still wearing your make-up" I explained.

"Shit" she sighed. "Yeah I'll go do that now before a huge zit decides to develop in the middle of my forehead."

I shook my head as she vanished down the hallway toward the spare bathroom. The morning was still cool

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so I carried my yoga mat onto the covered back deck and unrolled it. This deck was one of the main reasons I bought this house. During the warmer months which took up nearly nine months of the year I spent a lot of time out here when I was home. I would drink my coffee at the little table in the morning before I headed to the shop. Or have a glass of wine and read on

a lounge in the evenings if the mosquitos weren't too bad. And since I'd decided it was time to get into better shape last spring I would work out on the deck. Yoga weight training even this weird suspension trainer that Sierra bought me for my birthday a couple of years ago when I mentioned wanting one but not willing to pay the hefty price tag myself.

I unrolled my yoga mat and started a series of poses that I'd learned a couple years ago when the local gym held classes. The teacher had since moved on but I found that I was a lot less stressed and it eased the minor aches and pains I experienced from being on my feet for so long each day so I tried to practice at least twice a week.

I was just finishing up when Sierra stuck her head out of the back door. "I'm gonna lie down for a couple of hours now. Don't forget to wake me up in a few hours."

I settled on the mat with my legs crossed. "How about I tell Mom that you were up late for work and that you'll come with me next time?"

"You'd do that for me?" she asked.

"Of course."

"You are a goddess. A gift! Okay I'm going to bed before I fall asleep standing up. I'll be sure to be at the shop by two."

"I can—"

"Zip it. You're taking today off. No arguments." She pointed her finger at me with a stern expression on her face. It would have been a lot more effective if she didn't nearly fall over when she shook it at me.

"Yes'm" I agreed. "Now go to bed."

Sierra gave me a thumbs-up and disappeared back inside.

I stretched out on my back and closed my eyes focusing on my breathing.

As soon as I relaxed my brain immediately veered toward Brody. Last night had been a lot of fun. It was all of my high school daydreams come true. He still teased me but it was fun and light-hearted rather than painful. He also insisted on opening the car door for me paying for the movie and snacks and he actually touched me several times. Mostly by putting a hand on the small of my back when we were walking somewhere or on my arm when he wanted my attention.

Yeah I knew exactly how I sounded. Like my fifteen-year-old self. I probably should have been ashamed but I was in too good of a mood.

And I would get to see him again today.

I kept my eyes closed and smiled. Maybe this wasn't the fairytale relationship I'd daydreamed about as a teenage girl but it was still nice. Even when Brody got on my last nerve or hurt

my feelings I would watch him laugh and joke with my brother and the rest of my family and wish he treated me that way.

Now I had what I wanted. In a different way.

I inhaled slow and deep and held my breath for just a moment.

Then I exhaled.

Three hours later I stood in front of my closet with my hands on my hips. While my brain understood that Brody was a friend and nothing more my vanity insisted that I still look hot for Sunday lunch with my family.

I glanced down at my bra and panties both utilitarian cotton and flesh-toned and rolled my eyes. I'd managed to talk myself out of the push-up bra Sierra bought me for Christmas one year. The one advertised to add an extra cup size to any woman's bust.

Same for the halter top I'd bought on a whim one summer because said push-up bra made my modest B-cup look more like a D when I wore it.

I needed help. My eyes darted over to the clock on my nightstand and I sighed. I couldn't bring myself to wake Sierra up for advice when she still had a few more hours before she had to wake up and go to the shop.

I was on my own.

Feeling utterly ridiculous I ignored the tortured moans of my vanity and grabbed a light blue t-shirt that I favored when I wanted to be comfortable and cool and a pair of cut-offs that made my butt look fantastic. They were also soft and broken in so I could pretend that was the reason I picked them.

I scowled at my reflection in the mirror. Why was I agonizing over my outfit? I hadn't been this bad since I was thirteen and I knew that

Brody was coming over to spend the night with J.J.

Enough!

I slipped my feet into a pair of plain black flip flops with a three-inch thick sole and brushed my hair back into a ponytail. I went with the light make-up I usually wore in the summer which consisted of loose translucent powder a little blush mascara and a generous sweep of peach-flavored lip balm.

I looked exactly like I did nearly every Sunday during the summer. Mom had been aware of my painful crush on Brody when I was a teenager and I didn't want her to think that it was rearing its head once again. Even if it was true.

I emerged from my bedroom and nearly screamed when the guest room door flew open and Sierra stomped out looking half-asleep and more than a little homicidal. Her hair was also smooshed against one side of her head and

standing around three inches high on the other side of her scalp.

"Uh..."

"How long until we have to leave?" she mumbled.

"Forty-five minutes. But I thought you weren't coming?" I stood very still because a half-asleep Sierra was a dangerous Sierra. She was like a honey badger that way.

"Perfect." She yawned and stretched her arms over her head which drew my attention to what she was wearing. "I changed my mind. I woke up because my stomach was growling. I'll get yummy food made for me and I won't have to do the dishes afterward."

Her t-shirt was faded and holey and a baggy pair of men's boxers drooped over her hips. She was also wearing socks but one was long just about knee-high and the other was an

ankle sock. I almost laughed at her but managed to hold it in.

"I'd kill for a cup of coffee" she grumbled as she disappeared back into the bedroom. As the door shut behind her I heard a series of ominous thumps. "I'm good. I'm good" Sierra called through the door. "Just tripped on my shoes."

I bit back a laugh and went into the kitchen to make her a cup of coffee. I knew she didn't expect it but it would definitely help her wake up a little more before we left.

I knocked on her bedroom door five minutes later with a mug in my hand. When she didn't answer I eased it open and heard the shower running in the ensuite bath. I walked over stuck my arm through the partially open door and left the cup on the counter where she would see it when she came out of the shower.

Then I went back into the living room and surveyed the mess on the coffee table.

Typically I would ask Sierra to clean it up but I knew she wouldn't have time and it would drive me crazy if I had to look at it when I was trying to relax on my day off.

So I picked up all the trash and dumped it in the trashcan in the kitchen. Then I wiped down the coffee table with a furniture wipe to clean the sticky residue off the surface. What in the heck had she been eating last night?

I carried her laptop over to the bar that separated the kitchen from the living area and plugged it into her charger. Then I grabbed the hand-held vacuum out of the laundry room and went over the couch cushions. And the rug in front of the couch.

Good Lord it looked like a bunch of mice had a junk food bender in front of my sofa.

I'd just put the vacuum away when Sierra came down the hall with the now-empty mug in her hand. She looked much more alert.

"Thanks for the coffee. You didn't have to do that."

"No problem" I answered.

She jerked to a stop in front of the coffee table. "Cam dammit you shouldn't clean up after me. I was going to do it."

"I know but I didn't think there would be enough time before we have to leave so I took care of it."

"I'm not a guest Cam" Sierra stated.

I frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm family which means that when I leave a mess you should treat me the same way you do J.J. when he does it."

I couldn't suppress my smile. "So you want me to put the trash and crumbs in your bed and then make it up perfectly so you don't realize it's there until you climb inside?"

Sierra gagged. "Oh my God. Have you actually done that to J.J.?"

"Nope" I replied with a shake of my head. "But he hasn't left trash in my house when he stayed over or I would have. It's been on the list since he was a teenager. Unfortunately he grew up into a semi-responsible man who cleans up his own messes when he comes over."

"Are you saying I'm irresponsible?"

"Only when it comes to junk food" I retorted.

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Sierra waved a hand at me. "Okay. Enough is enough. I don't have the brainpower to deal with this right now. I need at least three or four more cups of coffee before I can argue with you." She paused and studied me a sly smile spreading across her face. "You look pretty today. Any particular reason?"

I glanced down at my clothes. "I'm not dressed any differently."

"No but you have a...glow about you."

My eyes narrowed. "I got a good night's sleep. Thank you for the compliment."

"Uh-huh."

"Are you ready to go? You know how Mom gets when we're late."

"Let me get one more coffee to go and I'll be ready." Sierra moved past me into the kitchen. She prepped the coffeemaker and put a travel mug under the spout. While she waited she turned toward me. "And don't think I didn't notice you changing the subject."

"Glad you noticed. Subject is still changed."

"Fine fine."

Sierra put the lid on the travel mug and said "Ready as I'll ever be."

"Same here" I muttered beneath my breath as I went to get my bag. I had it under control. I wasn't going to drool over Brody Murphy today. Not at all.

"What was that?" Sierra asked.

"Nothing. Let's go."

She gave me a knowing look but let it drop.

I was pretty sure today was going to end with me being completely embarrassed. Story of my life.

I was right. The afternoon was completely awkward.

And we were both to blame.

It didn't start out too badly. When Sierra and I entered my parents' house Brody wasn't there

yet. J.J. however was. And he pounced on me immediately.

"Cam!" He grabbed me in a bear hug and picked me up off my feet. "How's my favorite little sister?"

"I'm your only little sister" I squeezed out smacking his shoulder repeatedly. "Can't. Breathe. You. Jackass."

J.J. gave me one more hard squeeze which forced a deep grunt out of me then dropped me on my feet. He stared down at me a slight frown on his face. "You look...different."

"Gee thanks. That makes me feel special" I snarked. "And you saw me seven days ago! I can't have changed that much."

J.J. tugged on my ponytail and danced out my reach when I tried to smack him again. "I meant it in a good way sis. You look kinda pretty."

My eyebrows rose. "Kinda?"

He grinned at me. "I can't tell my sister she's pretty. It's weird."

I rolled my eyes and elbowed him in the gut as I walked past him toward the kitchen. "It's only weird if you ask her if she comes here often right after you tell her she's pretty."

Sierra snickered behind me and J.J. glared at her.

"Hey there J" she said.

There was a pitcher of tea and a set of glasses on the dining room table so I filled up a glass and lifted it to my mouth.

"Sierra" he replied. Then a wicked grin crossed his face. "Hey you're single now aren't you? What do you think of my friend Brody?"

I inhaled sharply...and promptly choked on my tea. My eyes watered as I coughed. And coughed. And coughed.

Finally J.J. came over to me and pounded his hand between my shoulder blades. "You okay Cam? Jesus what happened?"

I was still too busy trying to exhale sweet tea to answer so Sierra stepped up. "Thanks so much for the offer to fix me up J.J. but I'm pretty sure Brody isn't interested in me. And I'm not really interested in him."

J.J. opened his mouth as though he wanted to argue but Sierra shook her head at him and disappeared into the kitchen. He looked at me. "Did I just stick my foot in my mouth?"

I took my first decent breath since I choked on my drink and patted him on the arm. "Only every time you speak darlin'."

He scowled at me and followed Sierra into the kitchen. I laughed to myself and took a cautious sip of my tea. It wasn't often my brother left himself wide open for a verbal jab like that. I wanted to savor it.

The doorbell rang and I was grateful I'd already swallowed the liquid in my mouth because I definitely would have choked again. Without looking out the window I knew it was Brody. Well it had to be because no one else was supposed to come to lunch today.

I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders. Calm. Cool. Collected. No embarrassing myself.

When I opened the front door Brody stood with his hands tucked in the pockets of his shorts and grinned at me.

"Hey there."

Must be strong. No drooling. No fawning. And absolutely positively no swooning. I was a McClane. I was made of sterner stuff than that.

I answered as I stepped back to let him in.
"Hey. No Jacks today?"

"Her mom called this morning and asked to keep her one more night since it's summer. Jacks said she wanted to stay so I agreed" he answered with a shake of his head.

"Well tell her we missed her" I replied. "And that I still expect her to come help me next week."

Brody's grin widened. "She'll love that."

Then he did something he hadn't done since I was a kid. He stepped into the house and gave me a tight hug. My arms lifted and wrapped around him of their own volition. Muscle memory took over and I pressed in closer the way I had when I was eight and he was eleven. Back then Brody Murphy always had a hug for me.

The hug lasted for a long while too long because my body seemed to realize that not only was I hugging a nice warm male body it was firm in all the right places and he smelled good.

Crap. Abort. Abort.

Before I could drop my arms and step away there was a clatter of footsteps behind us and I heard Sierra's choked laugh. I also heard another laugh and looked behind Brody to see Ben standing on the porch. Dear God I'd been so consumed with ogling his brother that I hadn't noticed he was there. He was also staring at the two of us with narrowed eyes as though he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Unhand my sister you scoundrel!"

Brody released me with a laugh and turned to J.J. "What is this the nineteenth century?"

My mother seemed oblivious as she came forward and enveloped Brody in a hug.

"And my mother too?" J.J. asked in mock outrage. "Pistols at dawn it is!"

I shook my head. "Have you been watching historical romances again?"

My brother sputtered. "I would never."

Sierra and I shared a look and laughed. Brody and Ben laughed as well as my mom released Brody and hugged his brother. "PBS or BBC?"

"Shut up

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the nineteenth century?"

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Sierra and I shared a look and laughed. Brody and Ben laughed as well as my mom released Brody and hugged his brother. "PBS or BBC?"

"Shut up" he grumbled as he grabbed a carrot stick off the tray in the center of the table and crunched on it.

Unfortunately my mother wasn't as easily distracted.

"So when did this happen?" she asked her eyes bright and happy.

Brody's mouth opened but I answered before he could. "Nothing happened Mom."

Her brows lifted but instead of arguing with me she asked Brody "Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure Mrs. McClane."

Her eyes narrowed. "How many times do I have to tell you to call me Colette?"

"One more" he teased her.

She huffed out a sigh and shook her head at his antics. She'd been asking him to call her by her first name since he turned eighteen but he never did. "Well come on then. Let's get you some sweet tea."

Brody and Ben followed her into the kitchen leaving me with a smirking Sierra and my brother. He gaped at me closed his mouth then opened it again. It was one of the few times I'd ever seen him speechless.

"Sierra can you give me a minute with my sister?" he finally asked his voice quiet. His expression was difficult to read.

Surprisingly Sierra did what he requested without argument.

Uneasy I shifted and crossed my arms over my chest. "What's up J.J.?"

My brother just stared at me. God was that disappointment in his eyes? I couldn't be sure because J.J. had never looked at me like that

before. Finally he asked "What are you doing Cam?"

I frowned at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He frowned as well. "Why are you messing with Brody like that?"

I laughed but the sound was harsh and biting. "I'm not messing with Brody J.J. I'm trying to be his friend."

My brother mirrored my position and crossed his arms over his chest. It was clear he didn't believe a word I'd just said. Probably because I didn't sound as convincing as I'd intended to. "He knows better than to make a move on my sister. But you—"

"Do not say another word" I interrupted pointing a finger at him. His mouth closed then opened again as he took a breath. "No J.J. You need to shut up right now before you say something that will make me angry."

His frown turned into a scowl. "Really Cam? You're jerking my friend around and you're angry with me?"

That was it. I'd had enough. I marched over to him and jabbed my finger at him. "Brody and I have barely gotten along since high school. We went to the movies last night and just hung out. It was nice and I think we're going to finally be friends again. Do not lay this shit on me as though I'm going around torturing poor pitiful Brody because that's not what's going on." I turned away from him and walked a few steps away before I scoffed and whirled back around. "And after all your bitching about how he and I bickered too much I can't believe you're upset that we're getting along."

"Don't pretend like you don't know what you're doing."

Exasperated I threw my arms out to the side. "You know what? I'm done talking to you. You're just as bad as Brody used to be always

thinking the worst of me and half the time I have no idea why. Tell Mom and Dad I'll see them next week."

"Cam—"

I didn't hear the rest of what he had to say because I'd grabbed my purse and I was already out the front door before he could get any further.

My temper was so hot that the temperature outside felt nice and comfortable rather than the insane heat of Texas in July. Muttering beneath my breath I stomped out to my car and yanked my keys out of my pocket.

I was nearly home when my cell phone rang and I saw Sierra's name on the screen.

"Fucking shit" I snarled. I couldn't believe I'd left without her. I lifted the phone to my ear. "I am so fucking sorry. I was just so mad when I left I didn't even think."

"What did your brother say to you?" Sierra asked me. "Because he looks like a puppy who just got the crap beat out of him with a newspaper."

I couldn't suppress another snarl.

"Whoa. You really are mad."

"He told me to quit messing with Brody." My breath hitched. "That I shouldn't be playing mind games with his best friend."

"Oh no he didn't" Sierra whispered.

"He did."

"Okay then I'm officially not upset you forgot to take me with you when you left. Want me to hurt him for you?"

I laughed as I turned into my driveway. "Thanks but that won't be necessary. Just make him squirm a little."

Sierra's answering laugh was dark and a little scary. "Oh that I can do."

Then I realized that my mother would want to know why I'd left. "Crap. I have no idea what to tell my mom."

"Tell her the truth that J.J. was being an asshat."

I didn't laugh. "I can't. She's always had this thing about how we had to work out our differences without yelling or violence."

"How exactly does she think you're supposed to do that?" Sierra asked. She was an only child and though she and I had the occasional spat it was never anything like the knock-down-drag-outs that J.J. and I could raise.

"By talking" I answered my tone dry.

"You mean shouting?"

"Nope. Talking. Calmly and reasonably about why we were upset with the other person and resolving the issue with compromise and love."

"Screw that. Total annihilation is the only way to go."

There were several reasons that Sierra and I were friends and this was definitely in the top five. She understood the way my brain worked because hers worked the same way.

"Today I'm going to settle for not having to stare at my brother's face across the dining room table at lunch. If you want I can swing back by and pick you up."

"Don't worry about it. I'll get Brody or your mom to drop me off at the shop. Besides if I leave now who will make your brother squirm?"

Yep. Our minds definitely worked the same way.

"Let me know if that changes."

"Roger that Ghost rider."

The phone line clicked as Sierra disconnected. I shook my head and laughed. My brother was in for one heck of a Sunday lunch.

I was almost sad to miss it.

Almost.

13

To my utter surprise my mother didn't call to express her eternal disappointment in me for my abrupt departure.

And I was downright shocked when I saw J.J.'s name pop up on my cell screen around three that afternoon.

My first instinct was to let it go to voicemail. J.J. and I had already had a tense conversation today and I didn't want it to devolve into an out-and-out fight. But I couldn't avoid my brother. If I

didn't answer the phone he'd probably just show up on my doorstep.

"Hello brother" I greeted when I answered.

He was quiet for a moment and I braced for an angry tirade.

Instead he said "I'm sorry Cam."

Uh what?

"I think I misheard what did you say?" I asked.

He made a frustrated sound well a grunt and repeated "I'm sorry."

"For what exactly?"

"Seriously Cam?"

"Well I want to make sure that you're apologizing for thinking that I would be the type of person who would jerk your best friend

around and not because you egged my shop. Please tell me you didn't egg my shop."

"It's Sunday afternoon. The shop is packed this time of day and any one of them would have called you by now if I'd done anything to Crave."

"Okay so you're apologizing for thinking that your little sister is an asshole?"

"Yes" he growled. "Stop giving me such a hard time. I know I came across as a jerk and I've apologized."

"It hurt Jay." As soon as I said it I realized it was true. It had hurt tremendously that my brother could think that. I hadn't let go of my anger until this moment because it would hit me that a person I loved thought I was capable of doing that to someone else.

"I know. I really didn't mean it the way it came out."

"Then how did you mean it?" I asked my voice soft.

He sighed and didn't speak for a few seconds. "Cam I know how you felt about Brody in high school. And I know how he felt about you."

"You mean hated me?"

"No I don't think he hated you at all. I'm pretty sure he was trying not to be the kind of asshole who went after his best friend's little sister."

I had to laugh. "Oh that's hilarious. He wanted me so he was mean to me to drive me away."

Silence was his only response.

"Seriously?"

"Cam he was too old for you back then. You were a sophomore when he was a freshman in college. It wouldn't have been right."

"But now it's okay?" I couldn't control the sarcastic edge in my voice.

"Honestly I don't think I could find a better man for my little sister. I'm more worried about you breaking his heart."

"Oh yeah because I go around breaking hearts on a daily basis." God he was pissing me off again.

"I don't think you would do it intentionally Cam. You're not like that. But Brody's life is different now. He's older. Settled. He has a daughter to think about. And you're just getting started. I know you want to open another shop. To grow your business. You're a smart woman and you have goals. Priorities. I'm worried that a single father won't fit into those plans."

It was my turn to respond with silence. I understood how J.J. could think that. We were siblings but I didn't share everything with him. Not the way I did Sierra.

"Did you ever think I'm so focused on my business because I haven't found someone I want to share my life with Jay? That I got tired of sitting home alone at night and decided to do something to fill that emptiness? I've dated a few men that were nice some not-so-nice but none of them were ever..." I trailed off because I couldn't find the words I truly needed.

"The one?" J.J. asked.

"Yes. The one. I've looked for that person. I just haven't found him. And after the last guy well I needed a break from even looking."

"What do you mean the last guy?" he asked. "Is there something I don't know about him? What did he do to you? I'll beat his ass if he hurt you."

I shook my head and laughed a little. "It's not that. I hurt him when I broke up with him. He loved me and I cared about him. But not enough to give up my dreams. That's how I knew it wasn't meant to be. If I truly loved him I would have figured out a way to make it work

when he asked me to move in with him. I don't want to ever be responsible for hurting someone like that again."

"So you stopped trying?"

"Yes. Just for a while. Until I meet someone who seems worth the risk." I cleared my throat because it suddenly felt tight. "Now that's enough mushy stuff for today. I have the afternoon off and I intend to spend it in utter sloth mode by eating pizza and watching movies."

"All right. I'm heading back home." He paused. "And for what it's worth I think you and Brody would be great together. As long as you don't punish him the way you punished me when I made you mad in high school."

"Oh really? And you think I won't punish you now?"

"Don't even think about it Cameron—"

Before J.J. could continue I said "Good talk brother. I'm sure I'll see you soon."

"Cam—"

I disconnected and tossed the phone on the couch beside me. Then I laughed. Maybe it was time for me to resurrect the punishment system for my dear sweet brother. Clearly he missed it.

An hour later I was impatiently waiting for my pizza to arrive. Since I hadn't gotten the delicious lunch my mother had undoubtedly cooked I was ravenous.

I bounded off the couch when the doorbell rang and hurried to the front door. When I opened the door money in hand and saw who was on the other side I froze.

Brody stood on my front porch extra large supreme pizza in hand. "Hey."

I recovered from the unexpected surprise. "New career?"

He grinned. "Maybe. This is a trial run."

I reached out to take the pizza from him but he tugged it back out of my reach.

"Nope. You still have to pay me."

"Here" I said waving the money in my hand toward him.

Brody shook his head. "Payment is information."

"Information on what?" I asked my stomach growling as the incredible cheesy aroma floated into the house.

"On why you left your parents' house in a snit today. J.J. was locked up tighter than a bank vault."

Suddenly my appetite waned and I backed away from the front door. Brody took that as an invitation to come inside and brushed by me into the living room. I shut the door behind him and followed him into the kitchen.

He set the pizza on the counter and looked at me. "Plates?"

I walked around him to the pantry and pulled out two paper plates. It was my day off. I definitely didn't want to wash dishes.

I handed the plates to Brody and stuck my head in the fridge to grab two Cokes. Thoughts zipped through my brain so quickly that I couldn't catch a single one. I didn't want to get between Brody and J.J. and I was worried that an honest answer to his request would put me squarely in the center. At the same time we definitely needed to talk

"Couch or table?" he asked.

I walked to the couch in the living room without a word and plopped down. Brody grabbed a handful of paper towels and brought them with the plates.

He sat on the opposite end of the couch handed me a plate and asked "What happened?"

I stared down at my pizza my stomach heavy rather than growling.

"That bad huh?" Brody asked.

I finally looked up at him. "Not bad. I feel awkward talking to you about this."

"Why?" He took a huge bite of his pizza and stared at me as he chewed.

I had to laugh because his cheeks were puffed out like a chipmunk's and there was no way I could take him seriously. I'd known him long enough to understand that he wasn't going to

let this go. I was pretty sure he was the only person I knew who was as stubborn as I was.

I waited until he swallowed before I answered. "It was about you."

"What?" he asked. Then he choked. Which was exactly what I wanted to avoid and the reason I hadn't answered until he finished the first bite.

I put my plate on the coffee table and leaned over to smack the palm of my hand between his shoulder blades.

After a few seconds he waved me off and grabbed his Coke. Once he'd settled and taken a few sips he turned to look at me.

"Why exactly was your brother fighting with you about me?"

Man I wanted to lie so badly. I didn't want to tell him the truth because I was pretty certain that

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despite what J.J. said Brody Murphy didn't have a thing for me. And it was going to sting when he admitted it after I explained what happened.

Fuck it. I'd been embarrassed in front of Brody before. I was also a grown woman. I'd live.

"J.J. warned me not to break your heart. For some reason he thinks you've had a thing for me since high school."

If I hadn't been looking straight at him I would have missed the change in his expression. I couldn't discern exactly what he was thinking but he no longer looked quite as relaxed.

"Is that so hard to believe?" he asked.

I nearly laughed but tamped down on the knee-jerk reaction. Based on the strange expression on Brody's face and the tension in his upper body he probably wouldn't agree that it was funny.

"Um well...yeah Brody. You weren't exactly flirty when I was in high school." My eyes flicked away from his. "Most of the time you acted like you could barely stand me."

He took a deep breath. "I should have known he would see right through it anyway" he mumbled.

Wait. What?

My eyes moved back to his and I knew they were huge. "It's true?"

I couldn't figure out how I felt. It was an amalgam of euphoria anger hurt and strangely fear.

Brody evaded the question. "This is what you fought with J.J. about?"

"Not exactly. It was because he seems to think I'm a man-eater leaving a trail of broken men in my wake. I would never intentionally hurt someone especially if I cared about them."

"So does that mean you care about me?"

I gave him a dry look. "How about you answer my question first and then I'll answer yours?"

He didn't reply right away but eventually he said "You've always been...special to me."

I could feel my eyebrows lifting as I stared at him. "And you're special to me too Brody" I stated my delivery as wooden as a two-by-four.

He huffed out a laugh. "Okay so I had a thing for you senior year but I knew better. You were too young for me. It wouldn't have been right."

"Had a thing for me?"

"You're not going to cut me an inch of slack are you?" he asked.

I cocked my head. "You should know better than that."

He shook his head and laughed. "And to think I missed this."

My skin felt too tight for my body. I pulled my legs up resting my heels on the couch cushions and wrapped my arms around my shins.

"You've been...cold to me since then. Until this summer. Can you blame me for being skeptical?"

Brody leaned forward and rubbed his hands over his face. "I had to make sure you kept your distance" he admitted.

"Why?"

He met my eyes and chills broke out on my skin. His gaze was intense as though he could see straight through me. Or he was inviting me to look into him. "Because if you didn't stay away I wouldn't have been able to keep my hands off you."

Oh my God. My nipples hardened and I was glad my legs were pressed against my chest so that he couldn't see the reaction he'd elicited.

"Do you realize how much it hurt?" I asked.
"Before then you were such a big part of my life. I spent so much time with you and Jay. I was lost when you put up that wall between us."

"I'm sorry."

His apology didn't magically heal me but it did soften my heart toward him. Just a little.

"Apology accepted." I cleared my throat. "So what exactly are we doing now?" I had to laugh at the expression on Brody's face and lifted my hands up. "I'm unarmed I swear."

"Unarmed?"

"You looked like I'd just pulled a gun on you."

He scowled at me. "Did not."

"Whatever you say."

Brody stared at me for a long moment. "Do you need a label on it?"

"Not as long as we're just hanging out" I answered with a shrug. "But it would be different if we were actually..." I trailed off.

"Dating?"

"Yeah dating. If I'm making out with a guy on a regular basis I like to have some kind of framework."

Brody suddenly looked very interested. "Such as?"

"Well if I've been dating someone for a few weeks I like to know if they're dating other people or not. I want to keep my expectations realistic. If he's seeing other people I'm probably not going to let myself get in too deep. And if I'm getting naked with a man then I better damn well be the only person he's doing that

with." At the look on Brody's face I asked
"What?"

"Keep your expectations realistic?"

"Yeah. If I really like a guy then find out he's not looking for a relationship just some fun then I'll be upset. If I know from the beginning that he doesn't want to get serious I'm okay with that but I'm going to keep my distance because I don't want to fall for a man who's banging every woman who'll give him the time of day."

"That actually happens?" Brody asked.

I laughed sardonically. "You were only married for seven years Brody. Don't act like you didn't see men like that in action before."

He shook his head. "I've seen it. I just never understood it. I don't think I have the brainpower to date more than one woman at a time."

This time my laugh sounded much more sincere. "I know exactly how smart you are Mr. Fifteen-Hundred-on-my-S.A.T's." He scowled at me again but I ignored it. "Anyway if you just wanna come over and hang out with me or go see movies together I'm cool with no labels."

Brody straightened from his hunched position and abruptly seemed much closer. "And if I wanted something else?"

Time for honesty. "Then that's a whole different conversation because you're not just some guy I met. You're Brody Murphy my brother's best friend my mother's honorary second son and someone I've always cared for deeply. It's a lot trickier."

"Can't we just be Brody and Cameron and leave everyone else out of it?"

"For a while sure. But if we leave it too long it'll only get more complicated."

"Will you give me a little time? Just you and me?"

I hesitated because my first response was that I would give him whatever he wanted. Instead I answered "I can do that."

He nodded. "Good. Let's start now."

Brody picked up his plate of pizza grabbed mine and handed it to me then settled back into my couch. He kicked off his shoes and reached over to pop up the built-in footrest of the recliner attached to the couch. "So what are we going to watch?"

I lowered my legs so I sat cross-legged rather than curled up into the fetal position and grabbed the remote. "I was thinking of a Marvel movie marathon since the next film just came out and I want to go watch it in a couple of weeks once the crowds die down."

"Sounds good" Brody said before he took a huge bite of pizza.

I scrolled through my movies picked the first Ironman and clicked on it. As the opening credits came on the screen I scooched back into the cushions and got comfy with my plate in my lap.

After a few minutes Brody said "Eat Cam."

I turned my head and found him watching me with an unreadable expression on his face. Rather than argue which I would usually do I turned back toward the screen and took a bite. I wasn't sure what to expect from Brody after we talked but this wasn't exactly it. We were doing something we'd done a million times before when we were growing up. It was nice but definitely not romantic.

Maybe he had a different idea of Brody and Cam than I did.

But it still felt good.

The ending credits on the first Avengers movie rolled and I turned on the lamp sitting next to me on the end table. My house was dark and it was after closing time at the shop. I'd nearly called Sierra several times during the evening but Brody convinced me to leave her alone. She would be coming home any time now and I was a little sad about that. I liked having her around but I knew Brody would leave when she walked in. He had to work tomorrow anyway and it was after nine already.

The remains of our pizza littered the table since we'd given up walking back and forth to the kitchen when we wanted another slice. There were also a few candy wrappers soda cans and napkins strewn about. Sometime around seven Brody called in and ordered us tacos from a local Tex-Mex joint and somehow finagled a delivery so the take-out boxes were amidst the mess. All in all we'd spent over six hours together eating watching movies and teasing each other. It was like old times only better because he wasn't as cool or distant with me as he had been before.

He also touched me. Not a lot but enough that I couldn't ignore the way it made my heart race or my skin prickle. A brush of his fingers on my arm when he wanted my attention. Or how he told me to lay my legs on his lap when I wanted to stretch out but he was in the only recliner portion of my couch. Then he'd rested his hands on my shins and I'd never been so glad that I'd remembered to shave my legs in my life.

"We'll have to pick this up next weekend" Brody said taking me out of my thoughts.

I winced. "I'd love to but I have to work." Hopefully my weekend hours would slow down a little once we trained Lee to manage the store.

"And I'll have Jacks. Maybe the next weekend she's with her mom?" he asked.

I hesitated. "I imagine I can arrange a night off in another week or two. I'll be home tomorrow night though if you want to come over."

Brody shook his head. "Jacks is coming back tomorrow afternoon sometime. I want to take my girl to dinner and let her tell me all about her weekend with her mom."

"We'll figure it out" I said. I swung my legs off his lap and stood up. The coffee table was as disgusting as it had been that morning but this time I couldn't blame Sierra. I grabbed the pizza box and started stacking paper plates and containers inside. Brody joined me and together we hauled everything into the kitchen. He held open a trash bag for me while I dumped it all inside and then insisted on carrying it out to the can beside the garage.

By the time he came inside I'd already washed my hands wiped down the coffee table and used my little handheld vacuum to suck the crumbs off the couch and the floor.

"Get lost?" I teased him as he went to the sink and squirted dish detergent into his palm. I shook my head but didn't say anything about

the fact that there was a hand soap dispenser literally right next to him that he could have used instead.

"Not lost. Just had a stare down with a raccoon. I wasn't sure if he was going to jump me or run away. I don't think he was either."

"Oh you met Gary."

"Gary?" he asked as he rinsed his hands and reached for a paper towel.

"The neighborhood sort of adopted him after his mom died. He was just big enough to survive on his own but some of us made sure to leave some food out for him from time-to-time. Just to make sure."

Brody laughed and walked over to me to toss his paper towels in the trashcan beside the counter where I stood. "Let me guess...some of us means Cameron McClane."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

Brody stopped in front of me and our eyes met. Anything I might have said vanished from my mind. "Raccoons carry diseases" he said. "Like rabies for instance."

"Meh. He was a baby at the time and he's friendly enough."

"He's not a baby anymore. He's huge probably around twenty-five pounds and he he hissed at me when I came around the garage. He was sitting on the trashcan trying to pull up the lid but his tub o'lard butt was planted on it. When he saw me I swear his eyes flashed red and he made a sound that I'll hear in my nightmares for the rest of this year."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Gary had never hissed at me but he'd never seen Brody before so it didn't surprise me that he would find his presence offensive.

I laughed until Brody's hands grabbed my hips yanked me against his body and his mouth crashed down on mine.

Laughter was the furthest thing from my mind then.

I didn't think and surprisingly didn't freeze. I wrapped my arms around Brody's neck plastered myself against him and kissed him back with everything I had.

I used to daydream about kissing Brody Murphy when I was thirteen. In my fantasies his lips would be soft and sweet. Gentle.

This was nothing like my girlish daydreams. No it was better.

This was incredible.

Brody's lips were soft but there was nothing sweet or light about the way he kissed me. His mouth was hot and voracious as though he wanted to eat me alive.

And to be entirely honest I would have damn well let him.

My lips parted beneath his and his tongue slipped into my mouth. He tasted like the soft white mints that came with our tacos. I moaned as his hands tugged me even closer shifting me so I could feel him growing hard against my belly.

Holy shit. Brody Murphy was turned on. Which turned me on even more.

My hands moved from his hair down his back. I dug my fingers into the muscles on each side of his spine and shivered when he groaned into my mouth. I ran them down to the small of his back. When I reached the bottom hem of his t-shirt I slipped my fingers beneath and skimmed them across his bare skin.

His back was hot and smooth beneath my fingertips. But there was a problem. After one touch I wanted another. And another.

Brody seemed to approve of my touch because he kissed me harder pushing me against the cabinets behind me. Then I was in the air and my ass hit the cold quartz countertop.

I yelped when my bare legs came into contact with the frigid surface but didn't break the kiss.

At least until the side door opened with a bang. I jerked back and gaped as Sierra stomped through the door. Not because her sudden appearance surprised me but because she appeared to be covered in at least three different flavors of melted ice cream.

She paused just inside the doorway her eyes taking us in. Then without a word she marched out of the kitchen her shoes squelching with each step.

"You okay?" I called after her my voice cracking as I tried to hold back a laugh.

"Fine. But you can blame that one's brother for my bad mood."

I knew my eyes had to be huge as I looked at Brody but he just shook his head. "Don't look at me. I had nothing to do with it. You're my alibi."

I snorted and bit my lip to stop the giggle that tried to escape. I waited until the wet squishing sounds of Sierra's shoes stopped and the door to the guest bedroom slammed before I released it.

"Did she have it in her hair?" I gasped my voice nearly silent as I tried to catch my breath.

"I think she had it everywhere. She was walking bowlegged."

That was it. I couldn't stop laughing. I leaned my forehead against his shoulder and wrapped my arms around my belly.

"Oh my God" I choked. "She's never going to let me have a night off again. No way in hell."

After a few moments Brody sighed and muttered "And this is how I got into trouble in the first place."

It took me a little bit but then it finally hit me what he said. "What?" I asked tilting my head to look up at him.

"You're trouble" he answered. He stared down at me and ran his fingers across my cheekbone.

"Don't act like you didn't already know. You've been around me for twenty years. It's not a big surprise. I'm just not sure why you said that now." I smiled up at him as I said it.

"It's your laugh
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" he replied still studying me closely.

"It gets you in trouble?" I asked.

"It makes me want to kiss you."

I had no idea what to say to that.

Brody grinned at me and stroked my cheek one last time. It took everything I had not to nuzzle my face into his touch like a cat. Or rub my entire body against his because I was pretty sure if I could spontaneously become a feline I'd be in heat.

"It's time for me to leave before we get carried away" he stated. He backed up a step and helped me off the countertop. "But I definitely want to see you again soon. It'll be a little tricky when Jacks is with me so we'll have to be creative."

Then he touched his mouth to mine and it was exactly like what I'd daydreamed about as a teen. Sweet gentle and oh-so-light. And it made goose bumps break out all over my body.

My brain was still frozen by his suggestion that we would "have to be creative" as well as his

good-bye kiss so I only said "Okay. Thanks for lunch. And dinner."

Our faces were inches apart and I watched up close the way his eyes warmed when he smiled at me. Forget turning into a cat. I was moments away from melting into goo.

"Lock up after me" he admonished.

Then he walked out the side door leaving me clinging to the kitchen counter because my legs were too shaky to hold my weight. It wasn't until I heard his car door shut that I straightened and moved to lock the door.

Once I checked all the rest of the locks in the house I knocked on Sierra's door.

"Come in." Sierra sounded both tired and irritated.

I stuck my head in the door and found her standing next to the bed wrapped in a towel and

holding another one that she was using to dry her hair. "Hey you okay?"

"Yeah" she answered with a sigh. "I'm okay."

"What happened?"

I could barely hear it but I was pretty sure she growled. "Ben Murphy happened."

"How did Ben cause you to end up covered in ice cream?"

She lifted the towel to her hair and scrubbed as she talked so I couldn't understand what she said.

"I didn't catch that" I told her.

Sierra groaned and tossed the towel on the end of the bed. "I said that Ben tried to help me throw the trash into the dumpster behind the shop. For some reason my being short and female equates with complete helplessness in his eyes. We were arguing and playing tug-of-

war with two very full trash bags when they busted open. Somehow I'm the only one who ended up covered in a million gallons of melted ice cream."

"I'm sure he was just trying to help." I recoiled when her eyes turned to me. "What?"

"He's a good guy. I didn't recognize it at first because he looks like a bad boy but he is. He's nice." She said it as though she really meant that he had fleas.

"Um I'm confused. Is nice a bad character trait in a man?"

She grimaced at me. "You know what happens to the nice ones when I get involved."

"I don't think I do. Why don't you explain it to me?"

Sierra grabbed a pair of panties out of the top drawer of the dresser and disappeared into the bathroom. "I don't do well with good guys Cam.

I chew them up and spit them out. I need someone who can stand up to me."

"That sounds like it came out of someone else's mouth" I pointed out with a frown.

Sierra came out of the bathroom dressed in a baggy t-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts with the towel wrapped around her head.

"Yeah well more than one of my ex's have mentioned it before so I'm pretty sure it's true" she said as she flopped face-first on the bed.

"Hey." When she grunted I said "Sierra look at me."

She lifted her face up and stared at me.

"You are one of the strongest smartest women I know. There are some men that can't handle that. And that's okay. That means he isn't the right man for you. But please don't discount someone who tries to treat you well. You deserve a man who wants to take care of you

even if you're more than capable of taking care of yourself."

Sierra groaned and let her face fall back to the mattress. "Okay."

"Don't ignore what I'm saying."

"I'm not" she mumbled into the comforter. "I agree with everything you're saying but it doesn't make the past go away. Let's just say that Ben caught me on a bad day."

I wished she would open up but I could tell by the expression on her face she was locked up tight. I knew she would tell me what was going on with her eventually but it seemed to take her longer to work up the gumption to talk about emotions. My only choice was to be supportive and wait.

"You know you can talk to me about anything right?"

She lifted her face up and rested her chin on her hand. "Yeah. I know. I'm just...not ready to say it out loud yet" she admitted. "I'll tell you about it. Just not tonight. Tonight I want to drink a glass of wine and go to sleep. Anything but think."

"Okay. Whenever you're ready to talk I'll listen. Want me to bring you that wine?"

"Nah. I'll get up in a minute and grab it. Go sext your man."

I gaped at her. "Excuse me?"

"Don't pretend you weren't about to climb him like a schoolyard jungle gym. Things were getting really hot in that kitchen. I may not have been in the best mood when I came home but even I could feel the sexual tension dripping from the walls."

I grimaced at her choice of words. "Dripping?"

"Bet it wasn't the only thing" she teased nudging me with her elbow.

"You're gross." I gagged a little. "Remind me why we're friends again."

"Because I always tell you the truth even when you don't necessarily want to hear it."

"And what's the truth?" I asked as I crossed my arms over my chest.

"That you've had feelings for this man for years and years and years. It's clear that he reciprocates so maybe it's time to take a chance and see where it leads."

"I already knew that" I replied.

"Yeah but you still need me for moral support. Eventually one of you is going to screw up and you'll need me to supply ice cream and a shoulder to cry on."

"I can supply my own ice cream" I snarked.

"Quit being such a pain in the ass and admit that you love me."

"Fine" I sighed. "I love you. God knows why."

Sierra's elbow nudged me harder. "I knew it."

"Okay you go get your wine. I'm going to bed. I have to get up early in the morning." I got to my feet and walked to the door. Before I left I stopped. "Thanks for taking over the shop so I could have a weekend off. I didn't realize how much I needed it."

Sierra smiled at me. "No problem. I really enjoyed it. I've spent so many years working on my laptop with my ass planted on my couch that I've forgotten what it's like to put in a full day's work and see actual physical results. Would you mind having me here for a while longer?"

"Of course not. It's nice to have some help. Are you thinking of extending your vacation?"

She paused for so long that I wasn't sure she would answer me. "I'm thinking of looking for a house to rent. Or buy. I haven't decided yet."

I knew my eyes were probably huge as I stared at her. Sierra loved living in the city. Preferably a city further north where there were actual seasons rather than nine months of summer three weeks of fall and two months of winter. There was a week or two of springtime in there somewhere as well but it wasn't the temperate weather that other states saw. More like Satan's furnace warming up.

"What about your job?" I asked. Even though I would love to have her here her statement worried me. I would love to be able to see her more often but this wasn't like her.

Sierra appeared thoughtful and maybe a little sad. "I mostly work remotely and it's not like it's a long haul to Dallas from here. Only a couple of hours. If I absolutely have to go to the office it's doable." Her eyes were shiny when she

smiled at me. "I missed you more than I realized. At least until tonight when you wouldn't let me wallow."

I ignored the wetness that wanted to flood my eyes and grinned back at her. "What are friends for?"

"Beats me."

She laughed when I flipped her off as I left the room.

15

Brody said he'd be in touch but I definitely didn't expect the phone call I got the next day around lunchtime.

My heart fluttered and my cheeks warmed when I saw his name on the cell phone screen.

"Hey" I greeted.

"Hey. I know the shop's closed today. Is there any chance you could have lunch with me?"

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. "Sure. I'd like that. Do you want me to meet you somewhere?"

"How about I pick up something from the cafe? You want a Reuben and curly fries?" he asked.

I sighed. "I would love that but I'm going to have to go with the grilled chicken plate with a baked sweet potato and broccoli."

"You're eating healthy food? I can't believe it."

"Laugh it up. One of these days your body's gonna catch up with your age and it'll be my turn to make fun of you. After pizza and tacos yesterday I have to be good today."

"Oh my body is already feeling my age. I have to work out more and watch the beer or I'll end up with a gut."

"Poor baby."

"Be nice to me or I'm going to order a Reuben eat it in front of you and refuse to share."

I gasped in mock outrage. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh yes I would."

"Fine. I'll be nice. What time will I see you?"

I could hear the smile in his voice. "I'll be by around twelve-thirty."

"Sounds good. See you then."

I couldn't wipe the dopey grin off my face after I disconnected the call and didn't lose it until Brody knocked on the back door a little over an hour later.

After one look at his face my good mood dissipated immediately.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I opened the door wider so he could come inside.

He didn't answer right away and I could practically see the wheels turning in his head. I also didn't think I'd ever seen him so angry.

Brody put the food on the stainless steel counter in the kitchen and turned toward me crossing his arms over his chest and leaning his hips back against the island. "If you were any other woman I probably would have rescheduled lunch. I wouldn't lay this shit on anyone else." He took a deep breath exhaling slowly. "But you're not anyone else. You're Cam and I've known you for over half my life."

I approached him and laid a hand on his arm. His muscles were tense beneath my fingers. "What's going on?"

"I heard from Monica just before I left the office to pick up our food. She wants to keep Jacks for the rest of the week maybe longer. I explained that wasn't our custody agreement and she needed to have our daughter home this afternoon. There was some argument about whether or not she was legally obligated

to bring Jacks back until I explained to her that if I had to contact the police with a copy of our legal paperwork I would. Apparently she either didn't know that was possible or she didn't believe I would dare to do something like that."

Damn that was heavy. And also scary.

"I'm so sorry. Please tell me she's bringing Jacks home today."

Brody reached out wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me into him. He buried his face in my hair and mumbled "She is. Or she will if she knows what's good for her. She seems to think that I'm as concerned about my reputation as my mother is about hers. In reality I couldn't give a fuck what some passing acquaintance thinks of me. I just want to have my daughter healthy happy and safe."

I returned his embrace and gave him a squeeze. "I'm so sorry Brody. I would have understood if you needed to cancel lunch. You didn't have to bring it."

He inhaled and if he hadn't been so upset I would have teased him about sniffing my hair. Instead I leaned deeper into his hug.

"Maybe but I needed this hug." He lifted his head. "And a kiss."

I smiled at him but I kept the contact light when I touched my lips to his. He didn't need to suck face with me right now. He needed comfort. Even if he didn't admit it.

"That's a little better" he said.

I touched his cheek. "It'll be okay."

"And a little better again." He leaned into my touch.

"Think you can eat?" I asked.

He nodded and released me so he could divvy up the takeout boxes. He also removed a

cupholder from another bag with two big Styrofoam cups.

"Let's eat back here" I suggested. People tended to peer into the windows when they walked by the shop and I didn't want either of us to be under scrutiny. Especially since his day wasn't going well.

There were two chairs against the back wall of the kitchen. When I moved to grab them Brody intercepted me and picked them up instead.

"Where do you want them?" he asked.

I gestured to the end of the stainless steel island in the center of the kitchen. Though most of the island was waist-height a small square at one end was set lower.

As we ate I could see the tension drain out of Brody. He seemed calmer. Once our food was gone he leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"Yeah. But I have a feeling it won't last."

I took his hand in mine. "Then I'll be here for you to vent to. Or to give you hugs. Whatever." I squeezed his fingers. "But if you want me to cut a bitch I'll need time to formulate a plausible alibi."

Brody laughed which is what I was aiming for. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"Let's just keep your options open okay?"

He laughed again but I could still see the lines of stress and anger on his face. His chuckles faded. "I'm going to spend all my free time with Jacks this week. I have a feeling that Monica will start playing the perfect mother soon and insist on having all of her weekends with her daughter." He frowned a little. "She's also supposed to have her for two weeks at the end of this month for vacation but after today

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after today I'm worried that she'll take her off to Europe somewhere and refuse to return."

I didn't say anything but for Monica's sake I hoped she wasn't that stupid. Sierra might have given up hacking after college but I could probably talk her into tracking the woman down and fucking up her life. Financially speaking of course.

"I'll be here if you need to unload. Or eat a shit ton of ice cream. I mean that's how I deal with my problems sometimes."

Brody gave me some serious side-eye.
"Sometimes?"

"Sometimes can mean all times."

"By definition it can't" Brody argued his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Look it up in the dictionary."

I sneered at him. "Whatever. I'm right and you're wrong. We both know it."

He laughed and reached over to tug my ponytail the way he'd done a million times when I was a kid. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed his teasing until I had it back. He irritated me and made me laugh all at the same time.

"I gotta get back to work" he said with a sigh.

"But what about dessert?" I asked aghast.

"I didn't buy any."

I gestured to the kitchen. "You are in an ice cream shop. One that serves incredibly delicious ice cream and sundaes made with from-scratch baked goods."

He leaned back and let his head fall against the top of the chair. "I'm never going to be able to stay awake this afternoon" he groaned.

"We can split something." I hopped to my feet.
"How about an Insane Brownie Fudge
sundae?"

"I'm probably going to regret it but it sounds like
something you would come up with."

I shot him a wry look as I started pulling
ingredients out of the cooler. I had a few
brownies leftover from yesterday so I decide to
use one of those since I would probably have to
throw them away soon anyway. I hated wasting
food but I also refused to serve stale brownies
or cookies in my shop. It was tricky.

Brody watched as I built the sundae his eyes
growing wide as I added more and more
toppings. "Is that for the two of us or are we
expecting more people?"

I laughed. "It's for the two of us. Some of this
stuff will have to be thrown away soon so I'm
trying to use as much as I can."

"Then I guess I'll eat as much as I can."

Once I finished making the sundae I brought it to the table and set it between us.

"Your spoon good sir" I said handing him a plastic spoon.

The first thing I did after I sat down was grab one of the maraschino cherries I'd placed on top and ate it.

Brody chuckled as he dug into his side of the sundae.

"What?" I asked around a mouthful of ice cream and fudge sauce.

"Some things never change."

"What?" I repeated.

"You always stole the cherries off of any sundae we shared."

I gestured to the three other cherries sitting on the concoction. "There are three more."

Brody stuck another spoonful of ice cream and brownie in his mouth but I saw the flash of his grin. After he finished the bite he said "I don't like maraschino cherries."

My hand arrested holding my spoon in front of my face and my mouth dropped open. "What?"

"You're saying that a lot. Do you have brain freeze or something?"

"How...how have I known you for twenty years and I didn't know that about you?" I paused and continued "And you ordered three on your sundae the other day!"

He shrugged and shoveled another bite into his mouth. For someone who claimed not to want very much of the huge sundae between us he sure was eating a lot of it.

I waited until he was finished staring him down the entire time.

"You always got such a kick out of grabbing it before I could that I didn't have the heart to tell you. Jacks loves them too so I always order extra now anyway."

I shook my head. "All that unnecessary guilt over the years and you didn't even care!"

"Guilt?" he asked.

"I felt bad!"

"But not bad enough to stop?"

"Of course not! The cherries are the best part!" I replied defensively.

Brody laughed so hard he started coughing and had to take a few sips of tea before he finally got it under control. Then his expression grew serious. "Thank you." When he saw the look on my face he explained "You took my mind off

everything that's going on today. It means a lot to me."

"Ice cream makes everything better" I stated.

"I don't think it was just the ice cream." Brody grabbed a napkin and wiped his mouth. "I have to get back to the office. Thanks for having lunch with me."

We both got to our feet and I realized I really didn't want him to leave. Which was weird. I always enjoyed time to myself. Maybe it was strange but I'd never liked someone in my space all the time. Except for Sierra. She was one of the few people who I could just be with sitting in silence each of us doing our own thing.

Brody had been another person until things changed between us my freshman year of high school.

"How late do you stay up?" he asked me.

Surprised by the random question I answered
"Eleven or so. Why?"

"Can I call you after Jacks goes to bed?"

I leaned into him a little. "I don't know. My mom
doesn't like it when I'm up late talking to boys."

The corner of his mouth kicked up. "We'll be off
the phone by midnight. I'm a lot older than you
and I have to work in the morning."

"You're that old?" I gasped. "Ewwww."

He didn't say anything else just gave me one of
those light sweet kisses right out of my
adolescent daydreams.

And truly that said it all.

16

Jacks was happy to return to her father. I knew
this because she came bouncing through the
door of Crave the next afternoon her dad in tow.
And she immediately started talking a mile a

minute about all the things her mom scheduled for her to do.

Unfortunately it sounded like Monica arranged lessons play dates and activities but never remained there with Jacks.

I think Jacks had fun but she did mention that she wished she'd spent more time with her mom. And I don't think she meant staying at her mother's house in Dallas but just time with Monica.

Brody smiled and said all the right things but I could tell he wasn't pleased with what he was hearing.

Once Jacks wound down and the flow of words stopped I said "Well I know your dad really missed you." I leaned forward. "He came by yesterday and ate most of a huge Insane Brownie Fudge Sundae with me because he was so sad. I thought he was going to cry all over it."

Her eyes widened and she looked at her father.
"Really?"

His eyes promised me retribution as soon as we were alone. Somehow I didn't think I was going to hate it.

He broke our stare down because I couldn't tear my eyes from his and looked down at Jacks.
"Yeah baby. I missed you a lot."

There was a softness in his voice that hit me right in the gut. The way he spoke to her the way he looked at her everything about him revealed his love for her.

I wanted that for myself. My entire life I'd seen my father look at my mother like that. And me. Even my brother.

I realized then that I didn't want just anyone to look at me like that. I wanted Brody to be that man.

Watching him watch his daughter—that was the moment I fell in love with Brody Murphy. True deep all-encompassing love. It was so much more than the adolescent adoration I'd had for him.

Jacks' laugh pierced the fog surrounding me. I blinked and realized that I'd missed whatever she'd said in reply to Brody's admission that he'd been sad while she was gone.

"You okay Miss Cam?" Jacks asked me.

I smiled at her. "Yeah. I'm good. So did you bring your appetite for ice cream?"

"Yeah!"

They each ordered two scoops and carried them to a table. Things were too busy for me to go sit with them but they had their heads together as they ate. Jacks looked happy to be home.

"I recognize that look" Sierra said as she sidled up to me.

"What look?"

She turned toward me. "You're in love with him."

"You can't tell that just by looking at someone."

"I can when that someone is you" she scoffed. "You look at him differently than you have any other guy before. You're...softer."

"Shut up" I muttered. "We haven't even had sex yet."

There was a choked sound behind me and I sighed. Kelly must have snuck up on us.

"What did I tell you about eavesdropping?" I asked her without turning around.

"That if I was going to do it I had to be sneaky enough not to get caught" Kelly replied.

"Well you're caught. Go clean something or take out the trash. The dirtier the job the better. It will teach you to be more careful next time."

Kelly had worked with me long enough to get used to my occasionally twisted sense of humor. She just laughed rolled her eyes and went back up to the counter to help three little girls who'd just come in with a woman that appeared as harassed as I usually felt when surrounded by three small people.

Running an ice cream shop I spent a lot of time around kids. Most of them were fun even when they were being a little naughty. But they're still exhausting even when you like'em.

I moved to help her but Jacks came to the end of the counter and called "Miss Cam?"

I changed direction and stopped in front of her. "You don't have to call me 'miss' sweetie. I'm Cam."

"Daddy says I should always call adults 'miss' 'missus' or 'mister'."

"Normally I would definitely agree with that but since I've known your daddy since he wasn't much older than you it makes me feel weird for you to call me 'Miss Cam'. How about I tell him I'd like you to call me Cam or Cameron and we'll see if he backs off a little?"

Jacks grinned at me. "Okay. I wanted to ask you if you'd come to dinner at our new house tomorrow night."

I glanced at Brody who was watching us with a grin that matched Jacks' on his face. "Did you guys get all unpacked?" I asked.

Brody nodded. "The moving company did most of it on Sunday but Jacks and I finished up last night."

I looked back to the little girl with a hopeful expression on her face and tried to smile. "I would love to sweetie but I don't know if I can. I

took the weekend off work and I don't want to leave my employees or my partner in a bind."

"Go have dinner with them tomorrow night. You can take a long break" Sierra called.

I twisted around and made a face at her.

"Thank you for the permission. I didn't realize you thought it was necessary."

She waved an ice cream scoop at me. "Don't sass me or you'll be grounded for a week young lady."

Jacks and every other patron in the shop laughed so I rolled with it. "Gee whiz Mom."

Everyone continued snickering as I followed Jacks to the table she shared with her father.

"Thanks for inviting me to dinner tomorrow night" I told him. "It looks like I'll be there. What time should I plan for?"

"We eat early so five-thirty would be good" he replied.

"You can help me with the salad" Jacks said.

"And one other thing" I began. "I appreciate that you're teaching Jacks to be respectful but I'd really be more comfortable if she called me 'Cam' or 'Cameron' without the 'miss' in front of it." I leaned forward and declared dramatically but at a low volume as though it were a secret "It makes me feel old."

Brody's grin widened and he laughed. As his daughter joined in I realized that she had his laugh. Open and infectious. I hadn't noticed it at first because of the different timbres of their voices but as their laughter rang out in harmony it became obvious.

I wondered how Monica could be so blind. To not see what a joyful blessing her daughter was and to want to spend every minute she could with her.

I didn't know Jacks well but I liked her. She was a funny

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it became obvious.

I wondered how Monica could be so blind. To not see what a joyful blessing her daughter was and to want to spend every minute she could with her.

I didn't know Jacks well but I liked her. She was a funny intelligent child with a mischievous streak. She reminded me a little of myself at that age. Or at least I hoped I'd been as fun as she was.

I wanted to spend more time with her and she wasn't my daughter. I knew without a doubt that if I had a child like her I would love every minute of it. Except maybe during those pesky tween years. And between ages fourteen and seventeen. I'd been a nightmare then.

"If you're okay with it I'm not going to tell her any differently" Brody finally answered. He

looked at Jacks. "Since Cam asked you to call her by her first name it's okay baby. Just like you call J.J. by his name."

"Though I would prefer you not call me uncle like you do him" I commented.

Jacks giggled again. "Okay." She paused. "What about Aunt Cam?"

Oh that sounded so damn wrong. Because my feelings toward Brody were anything but sisterly.

Brody didn't see my cringe but I could immediately see that he agreed with my initial feeling.

"Well J.J. is like another brother to me but Cam is a little different."

Jacks studied her father then me with serious eyes. She looked between us for a few moments before asking "So you're more like boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Uhhhh..." I had no idea what to say. I didn't know her very well and Brody and I weren't in a place in our relationship where I felt comfortable answering that question without his input.

I was thankful that Brody recovered from his surprise more quickly than I did. Jacks was definitely more observant than I'd been as a kid. I never would have noticed the vibes between two adults.

"Cam and I have been friends for a long long time but I'd like us to be more so I'm taking her on dates and spending a little time with her so she can decide if she feels the same way" he answered.

His honesty took me aback. I mean I didn't expect him to lie but Jacks was six nearly seven. I wasn't sure if I would have been as blunt.

Jacks nodded her expression grave. "That's good Daddy. I like Cam. She would definitely

make a good girlfriend." Shit I had to bite back a smile because I didn't want her to think I was laughing at her. But that was too damn cute. She leaned toward him and whispered "Be sure you bring her flowers open her door and tell her she looks pretty okay? That kind of stuff is important to girls."

Brody's eyes widened and it seemed like I wasn't the only one surprised by Jacks' words. "Who told you that?"

She rolled her eyes. "The only time Mommy doesn't complain about her dates is when they do all those things. And she goes on a lot of dates."

Okay that suddenly wasn't so cute.

I squatted down next to her. "I like those things sometimes" I admitted. "But I'd much rather date a man who treats me with kindness and respect than compliments me about my looks or brings me flowers. But every woman is different

and she has to decide for herself how she wants the men in her life to treat her."

And I immediately wondered if I'd overstepped. Brody hadn't asked me to say anything to her about this but I'd jumped right in with both feet. In the damn deep end no less.

Jacks nodded. "I want my boyfriends to treat me the way Daddy does. He listens to what I say and laughs at my jokes. And he always has fun things for us to do together."

My heart melted. I'd always thought it was a weird sappy way to describe mushy feelings but at that moment I completely understood.

"It sounds like your dad's got it goin' on" I commented.

She frowned at me. "What does that mean?"

"That he's the man. Top dog. Awesomesauce."

Jacks laughed. "Yeah. He does. You should definitely be his girlfriend."

"Uh I'll think about that." I ignored the choked laughter coming from Brody. "Now I have to get back to work but I'll see you both tomorrow night okay?"

"Okay." Jacks threw her arms around my waist and buried her face in my belly. "Bye Miss...uh Cam!"

When she released me Brody said "Jacks can you throw our bowls away. I'm gonna talk to Cam for just a second."

She skipped off to do his bidding without a word of argument. Brody turned toward me and I started speaking before he could open his mouth. "I'm sorry if I overstepped. It just...came out of my mouth. You know about the dating stuff."

Brody stepped toward me invading my space. "We will discuss this again when it's just you

and me but I have no problem at all with anything that you said. Or that you felt compelled to speak." He leaned in and I saw the heat in his eyes. I shivered which made his eyes crinkle in the corners. "I just want a chance to express my gratitude."

"You can say thank you" I replied feeling breathless and more than a little hot.

"Maybe I prefer to use my mouth for something other than talking."

Oh. My. God.

"Uh. Um." A bead of sweat slid down my hairline. "Do you think the A/C is broken in here? It seems awfully hot all of a sudden."

Brody leaned forward like he intended to kiss me but stopped short and closed his eyes. Just like me he'd forgotten where we were for a moment. And who was watching. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "We'll continue this later."

I had no words. My tongue refused to function and my brain was completely off-line. The only part of me that was functioning properly was my hormones. And they had absolutely no issue with continuing this discussion later especially if Brody didn't intend to use his mouth to talk.

He smiled at me and touched my hand before he turned away. My legs were shaky as I walked back behind the counter.

As I passed Sierra she whispered "I think we need to go lingerie shopping soon."

"Shut up."

She didn't say anything else but she also didn't hesitate to laugh behind my back as I continued on my way.

I couldn't flip her off with so many people in the shop but we'd been friends for so long I had no doubt she knew that I desperately wanted to.

Mostly because she was one hundred percent correct.

Brody Murphy would be seeing me in my underwear at the soonest possible opportunity.

17

"Why am I nervous?" I asked Sierra.

I dug into the bottom drawer of the desk for my purse and hauled it over to the mirror hanging on the wall. I had five minutes to touch up my minimal make-up pee and leave the shop.

I fished the make-up bag out of the bottomless pit I called a purse and swept powder over my forehead nose and chin. Then I took a peach-flavored balm stick and rubbed it over my lips. The final result wasn't exactly daisy fresh but definitely an improvement over the shiny haggard visage from moments ago.

I didn't realize until I put the make-up bag away that Sierra had never answered me.

"Hey" I said as I turned to face her. "You never answered my question. Why am I so nervous?"

She glanced up from her computer and shrugged. "I don't know. You shouldn't be. It's going to be a PG rated event since Brody comes with his own little cockblocker and you've known the man for twenty years. I mean it's silly to be so unnerved by the guy. He's just a guy. Nothing that special." She smacked her palms on the desk on either side of her laptop. "I mean so what if he has gorgeous hazel eyes and dimples? And so what if he's kind to little old ladies and small children? That doesn't necessarily mean he should make your brain turn to mush every time he looks at you. You're a grown ass woman. You've had boyfriends before. Lots of boyfriends. Some of them were even pretty serious. He's a poor woman's Zac Efron!"

By the time Sierra wound down I understood that her impassioned speech had nothing to do with me or Brody and a lot more to do with his younger brother Ben. Especially since Brody's

eyes were bright jade green rather than hazel like Ben's.

"Speaking of hazel eyes how is Ben?" I asked as I hefted my purse-slash-tote bag over my shoulder.

"How should I know?" she grumbled. As she spoke she scooted down in the chair crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me. Her body language screamed she knew exactly what I was asking.

I crossed my own arms over my chest and glared back at her. "Why are you so determined to hate Ben?"

"I don't hate him. We're actually friends. I uh actually think he's really cool and I like spending time with him. I just haven't had a male friend before."

My lip curled. "I don't think that's the problem at all. I think you like him a lot. And I think he likes you too. I'd bet ten bucks he's already asked

you out. Why haven't you said yes?" Her cheeks turned red and I knew I was on to something but she spoke before I could dig deeper.

"That was before" she mumbled her eyes dropping from mine.

"Before what?"

"Before I knew you were serious about Brody."

"What?" I asked. "How does that have anything to do with whether or not you go out with Ben?"

She looked at me again. "Look at my track record Cam. I've never fallen in love. And when a man gets serious about me I can't figure out a way to get out of there fast enough. How awkward do you think it would be if the same thing happened with Ben?"

"I think you're just looking for an excuse to keep him at arm's length. And you'd do the same even if he wasn't Brody's brother."

When she just looked at me I threw my hands in the air. "Sierra if you and Ben go out a few times and things fizzle it's not going to mean that Brody and I break up. This isn't high school. Brody and I don't have to pick sides. If you like Ben and it seems to me you like him more than anyone you've ever dated you should go out with him."

She shook her head. "You know what? It doesn't matter right now. I haven't decided if I want to risk it or not so it's a moot point." She glanced pointedly at her smart watch. "You're going to be late for dinner if you don't leave in the next thirty seconds."

I pointed a finger at her. "I'm letting you off the hook for right now but we are going to talk about this later. Even if I have to duct tape you to the couch."

Sierra waved a hand at me. "Don't threaten me little girl. I still have in my possession a certain video of you the week after finals our junior

year. I believe it contains quite a few interesting clips such as you stripping off all your clothes and jumping into the fountain outside one of the fraternity houses just before dawn."

"That was seven years ago. Why should I care now?"

Sierra merely arched a brow at me. She looked entirely too smug. Probably because she knew I would absolutely back down as soon as that video came up. Talk about humiliating college moments.

"Fine!" I pointed a much different finger in her direction. "You suck."

"Go to dinner. Flirt in that subtle way you have. And bring me back something."

I didn't deign to reply. I was still stung by her veiled threat to post that video. I had no doubt she would do it but it also told me quite clearly how she felt about Ben Murphy. And it wasn't a

casual attraction. Not if she was pulling out the big guns in her blackmail arsenal.

I winced when I saw the clock on the kitchen wall. Shit I was definitely going to be late. I hurried out the back door before anyone could delay me further.

I was starving for food and for Brody's presence.

The door to Brody's new house swung open and revealed a grinning Jacks.

"Hey Cam!"

"Hi Jacks. How are you today?"

She pulled the door open wide leaning over and sweeping her arm out wide in an old-fashioned bow. "I'm wonderful. Please come in."

I choked back a laugh and stepped inside. A mouthwatering scent wafted through the house as soon as she shut the door behind me.

Jacks threw herself against my legs and hugged my waist. "Dad's cooking cream cheese chicken enchilada casserole." She made a face. "And salad. He said you might judge him if he doesn't feed us vegetables."

I couldn't hold back my laugh this time. I even snorted a little. Jacks laughed with me but I could tell she wasn't sure why we were laughing.

"I wouldn't judge him sweetie" I told her. "I run an ice cream shop with not a piece of fruit or a vegetable in sight. Unless you count candied cherries."

"Now you've ruined my excuse for forcing her to eat salad tonight" Brody groused as he came out of the kitchen drying his hands on a towel.

Good Lord the sight of him did things to me. Crazy uncontrollable things. He wore a plain white t-shirt and a pair of threadbare jeans that clung to his hips and thighs. And he was barefoot. I don't know why but the sight of him in his element made my heart twist. He looked like home.

"Hey" I greeted him unable to think of anything else to say.

Brody's eyes were hot and I knew that his mind had gone to the same place mine had and he liked it. Crap. Shit. Damn. There was a six-year-old present. Even she wouldn't be oblivious to the sexual tension for much longer.

Relief flooded me when the child in question piped in "Do we still have to eat salad?"

Brody came closer and ruffled her long hair. "Yep. You still have to eat it."

I inhaled. He smelled like warm cotton and whatever soap or deodorant he used. I decided it was even better than the scent of the food.

Like Jacks he hugged me. I hadn't exactly been expecting it but I leaned into him and wrapped my arms around his waist. I managed to resist the urge to bury my face against his chest and smell him like a puppy. There was a good chance I would lick him too. Probably not a good idea with his daughter just a few feet from us.

"You smell like vanilla cinnamon and chocolate" he rumbled in my ear.

He. Was. Not. Helping.

I cleared my throat and released him. "Uh cream cheese chicken enchiladas smell really good."

"They're awesome" Jacks stated.

Brody smiled. "I know it's bad manners to brag but they are awesome."

I took another step away because the temptation to launch myself back into his arms was strong. "I didn't realize you cooked."

I didn't have personal knowledge of his finances but I was pretty sure he could afford to hire a personal chef. I knew his parents had one.

"I like cooking" he answered with a shrug. "Jacks usually helps me."

"He said I'm the best kitchen helper he's ever had!"

Well that explained it. He used it as time to spend with his daughter.

"We've taken a couple of cooking classes together" she continued.

It was official. I was a puddle inside. I had to do something to offset this.

"Next you're going to tell me that you clean your house yourself."

"That's going too far" he said with a chuckle. "I have someone come in and do the deep cleaning once a week. Though we do pick up after ourselves and do our own dishes around here. Right Jacks?"

She pulled a face and nodded. "Yeah. I hate it."

I rolled my lips in to keep from laughing. If I had a guarantee that my child would turn out like Jacks I'd be ready to have a baby tomorrow.

And where in the hell did that thought come from?

I'd never had baby fever before and this was freaking me the hell out. The room suddenly felt extremely hot.

"Uh could I get something cool to drink?" I asked. "It's still pretty hot out there."

"Want a margarita on the rocks?" he asked.

I wanted to yell Hell yeah!

But I settled for
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Hell yeah!

But I settled for "That sounds delicious."

He looked down at Jacks. "Wash your hands and then go set the table please."

Surprisingly she didn't argue. She scampered off in the direction of the hallway. As soon as she disappeared from sight Brody reached out and grabbed me. His lips hit mine and my legs immediately went weak. This wasn't one of the sweet kisses he'd been giving me lately. This was hotter and deeper.

I twined my arms around his neck and gave him more of my weight. To be honest I basically draped myself all over him.

"Dad I can't reach the plates!" Jacks called.
"Where's my stool?"

We broke apart both of us breathing heavily. Brody winced and reached down to adjust himself. I turned my head away so I wouldn't stare at the zipper of his jeans and imagine what lay behind it.

"Good idea" he murmured.

"What?" I asked still not looking at him.

"If you don't look at me I just might be able to keep my hands off you."

My head whipped around and I gaped at him but he'd already turned his back to me. And holy shit those jeans looked just as good on him from the back as they did from the front.

"The kitchen's this way" he called over his shoulder.

I looked around for the first time since I entered and noticed that the living room to my left was bright and cheerful. The walls were painted white and the couch was beige. There were also bright blue turquoise and yellow pillows on the sofa. The wood floors were a warm amber color and a rug sat beneath the sectional and coffee table in the same colors as the toss pillows only the hues were muted. The windows were covered with white blinds. The walls were still bare as though he hadn't had time to hang artwork yet and there were no curtains over the blinds. It was clear the house was still a work in progress but it managed to look comfortable and homey like you could lounge on the couch on Sundays and binge watch a show on Netflix.

I meandered down the short hall that led to the kitchen. I gaped when I saw what awaited me. Another smaller living space stood off to the left with a grey microsuede sectional. It was slouchy and appeared soft. It wasn't as sleek or pretty as the one in the other living area but I bet it was even more comfortable.

A huge flat screen TV was anchored to the wall facing the couch and there was a low coffee table in front of it. A dining area stood between the den and the kitchen. A rectangular table with six seats was set for three. Jacks and Brody were in the kitchen area and envy pure and sharp surged through me as I gazed upon perfection.

The long countertops were clean cool white quartz. Surprisingly they were a little cluttered with appliances cooking utensils and two bowls one full of apples oranges lemons and bananas and the other full of onions and garlic. I wondered if he'd already had all this stuff or if he'd just bought it for their new home.

The gas range had four burners and a cast-iron grill over a larger burner in the center. It also had two ovens. A stainless steel fridge with French doors a cooling drawer and freezer on the bottom fit perfectly between the cabinets.

And what beautiful cabinets they were. Pale greyish-blue with simple brushed nickel pulls. The center island was large enough for both food prep and people to eat at the bar on the opposite side. The stools were awesome a matte black with industrial-style screw seats.

It was my dream kitchen. And I wanted it so so bad.

"Just in time" Brody said as he bent down to pull a pan out of the oven.

It said a lot that I was so distracted by his kitchen I didn't take the time to check out his ass.

He carried the glass pan to the table and set it on a trivet. For some reason my mind snagged on that detail. Brody Murphy not only owned a trivet he used it.

I put my hand on the bar and ran my palm over the quartz. So so pretty.

"Cam?"

Still a little hazy from kitchen envy I glanced up at the sound of Brody's voice. I also kept petting the counter. Smooth counter. Clean counter. Want. Want. Want.

"Earth to Cameron McClane" Brody called.

"Hmmm."

"Do you like my counter?" he asked.

"Yep. It's so pretty...and shiny."

Brody stifled a laugh. "Do you think you'd like to admire it from afar while we eat dinner?"

"I guess so" I answered with a sigh.

Jacks was grinning when I finally sat down at the table. "I like our kitchen too" she stated.

"It's my dream kitchen. Down to the color of the cabinets and the tile on the backsplash." I

glanced at Brody. "Don't take this the wrong way but I want to move into your house. I mean I could just visit the kitchen but I think we'd all be happier if I lived here. The kitchen included. Do you have a room available for rent? I'd even take something under the stairs."

Brody just shook his head and started cutting up the enchilada casserole.

"Under the stairs?" Jacks asked confused.

"Like Harry Potter" I clarified.

"Who's Harry Potter?"

If this had been a sitcom there would be the sound of a record player screeching inserted in that moment. I stared at her. "You don't know who Harry Potter is?"

She shook her head wide-eyed.

I turned to Brody. "You have fallen down on the parenting job Brody Murphy. How does your child not know about the Boy Under the Stairs?"

He shrugged. "I was worried the books and movies were too scary for her."

I frowned at him. "Hmmm. You may have a point. We could try the first one and then decide if we should continue. How does that sound?"

"Movie or book?"

"Both."

He shrugged. "It's up to Jacks. I don't mind if she's interested."

I turned toward his daughter to find her watching us with serious eyes and I understood one thing. If this relationship between Brody and I continued to grow if we were going to get anywhere close to what I wanted we would need to handle Jacks and her feelings with care. She was the most important person in his

life and I never ever wanted to come between them.

"Does that sound okay Jacks?" I asked her.

She considered me carefully for a few moments before she nodded. "Yeah that sounds good."

"Then the next time I have a couple of evenings off we'll watch the first movie. And I'll loan you my copy of the first book before then. You and your dad can read it at night before bed." I lifted a hand. "But you have to promise me you'll take good care of my book. No dog-earing pages or coffee stains."

"I don't drink coffee" Jacks said with a laugh.

"Okay then. I guess I'll trust you."

Father and daughter both gave me the same look an expression I couldn't decipher on either of their faces.

But I felt warmth rather than disquiet so I decided not to obsess. Especially since my stomach was growling non-stop from the scent of the casserole in front of me.

To break the spell I asked Brody "Are you gonna feed me or what? I have to get back to work before Sierra walks off out of sheer frustration."

He grinned at me. "Then I guess I'll feed you. We'll save the 'or what' for another night."

Oh holy shit. The man was trouble.

18

My interactions with Brody continued to be fairly innocent in nature for the next two weeks. Mostly because we had a tiny chaperone every time we saw each other.

He called me almost every night and we talked and flirted over the phone. Sometimes for ten or fifteen minutes and sometimes for several

hours. We held hands when Jacks wasn't looking.

And we necked in the strangest places. Like the coat closet at his house. Behind my garage. And the bathroom at the shop.

It was almost...fun. And more than a little reminiscent of the scant high school relationships I'd had.

Except this time I was with Brody.

It was everything I'd ever wanted. Only better.

He wasn't perfect. He was stubborn about things like who paid for dinner or wanting to pick me up when we went out. He refused to talk about what life would be like when his daughter got older like when she hit puberty started dating or went off to college. As far as he was concerned she was going to be six and in pigtails until the day he died.

But he was still the Brody I'd always known and loved.

We cracked each other up when we watched movies with Jacks. And he gave me shit all the time just like he had during my teen years. But it stirred a different set of feelings in me than it once had. Looking back I realized he was never intentionally malicious. My own hurt over the fact that I didn't think he reciprocated my feelings had tainted everything he said and did.

My heart still raced when he looked at me. And he looked at me a lot. Long hot looks that made my skin burn with the need to touch him. Sweet soft looks that made me want to wrap my arms around him and hold on tight.

Then Wednesday night rolled around and Monica called. I was over at his place hanging out with him after Jacks was in bed. Well making out on the couch but we never took it further. I wanted to but Brody was holding back. While I was sexually frustrated I understood. Sex would change our relationship in a

fundamental way and he didn't want to push Jacks into something she wasn't ready for.

At least that was what I thought. Brody and I hadn't discussed it yet mostly because when we had time alone we spent it necking.

We'd been in the middle of a particularly hot and heavy kiss when his phone rang. I knew it was his ex by the way Brody's jaw got tight when he looked at the screen of his cell phone. His entire body tensed as soon as he lifted it to his ear and said hello.

Whatever she was saying he didn't like it.

"Monica I know it's your weekend but the custody agreement states you get her from Friday to Sunday not Thursday to Monday."

I couldn't hear her reply but Brody developed a deep crease between his brows as he frowned.

"I know it's summer and she's at the babysitter's while I'm working but she has activities and play dates that she won't want to miss."

His ex spoke louder and I could hear the angry buzz of her voice through the speaker even though I couldn't understand her words.

"Okay I will ask her what she wants to do because I know she loves you but this will not be a common occurrence. Understood?"

Whatever she said after that made his face turn absolutely thunderous. No not thunderous. Murderous. It was even more frightening considering I was straddling his lap on the couch when it happened.

His thighs tensed beneath me and I shifted ready to move off him. He was upset and needed space.

Brody shot me a sharp look his brilliant green eyes laser-like in their focus and grabbed my hip with his free hand keeping me against him.

Then to make sure I fully understood he shook his head.

"Listen to me Monica. You will not take our daughter out of the country. You can't do it without my written consent and I will not give it."

He paused and this time I could hear exactly what she said.

"I will take my daughter wherever I please! We're going on vacation to the South of France and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it."

My eyes widened. Oh shit. She'd put her foot in it now. I also understood that this was exactly what Brody was afraid of that Monica would take Jacks out of the country. It would be a lot harder to get her back if Monica decided she didn't want to return.

"If you'd bothered to read our custody agreement closely you would know that taking

our daughter out of the country without my written permission will land your ass in jail. It's kidnapping."

"She's my child! How can it be kidnapping?"
Monica screeched.

"Don't test me on this. You should know by now that I never bluff. If I find out you've taken her and I definitely will I'll call the airlines explain that you've kidnapped our daughter and there will be law enforcement waiting for you wherever you land."

After he finished speaking Brody lowered the phone from his ear his eyes burning with rage.

"What'd she say?" I asked.

"She hung up on me." His voice was low and dark. Deadly. His hands were gentle as he shifted me off his lap. He stood up. "Give me a few minutes please. I have some calls to make."

"I can go if you—"

His eyes cut to me. "Do not leave." When he saw the expression on my face he added "Please."

"Okay" I agreed still not thrilled with the way he just spoke to me. But now wasn't the time to take him to task. Once he'd handled everything we'd talk about it. Doing it now would only escalate the situation.

Hmmm. Maybe I was finally learning how to be a mature human being.

Brody used his thumb to scroll through his phone before he tapped something and lifted it to his ear.

"Lynn it's Brody Murphy. I apologize for calling so late but I need you." He paused listening to the person on the other end of the line as he paced back and forth from the den to the kitchen and back again. "Yeah it's something to

do with Monica." He laughed a bitter harsh sound that made me wince.

This time when he paced he headed back toward the master bedroom which was down a short hallway from the kitchen just on the other side of his office and the half bath.

His voice faded as he vanished into the bedroom. I could hear the muffled sound of his words but not the exact conversation.

I picked up the remote and browsed through the offerings on Netflix. There was one movie in particular that caught my eye. It was a thriller that promised to be both frightening and action-packed. Exactly what I needed as an outlet for my sudden bloodthirsty urges when it came to Brody's ex-wife.

I clicked on it and turned the TV down a bit so the louder parts wouldn't wake Jacks or interrupt Brody's phone calls. I settled in to watch for a while but soon lost interest.

Instead of turning the movie off I watched it with half an eye as I picked up my phone and opened the Kindle app. Maybe a book would be a better choice of distraction.

I sorted through my TBR shelf surprised at how empty it was. I'd been so busy at Crave that I hadn't had time to read as much as I usually did. In the past I would have close to a hundred books or more on my TBR shelf at any given time. Now

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it was more like twenty and half of those were about running a business marketing or budgeting.

Jeez when had I let all my hobbies fall by the wayside? Reading books experimenting with new recipes hiking at the local state park. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done any of those things. Except for when they were work-related.

"Jesus what are you watching?" Brody asked from behind me.

Startled I whirled around to find him standing a few feet from me staring at the television.

I did a double take then twisted my head to the side and squinted. It was the obligatory horror movie sex scene but this one was somewhat...creative.

"What is that?" I asked.

"I think it's a dildo."

"Oh my God is he putting that where I think he is?" I cringed in discomfort. "Why in the hell would they put what is essentially a soft porn scene in a horror movie?"

Brody laughed as I fumbled for the remote and stopped the movie.

"Aw c'mon. It was just getting interesting" Brody complained.

"Then you can watch it later by yourself." I sounded prim and miffed.

Brody walked around the couch and flopped down next to me. He leaned his head back against the back of the couch. With a sigh he closed his eyes.

"Come here often?" I asked him.

The corner of his mouth tilted up but he didn't answer.

I reached out and nudged his shoulder. "What's going on Brody?"

"Well I just called and woke up my attorney to let him know I'll likely be paying another enormous retainer. Also I had to call the private investigation firm I used before my divorce and hire them again to keep an eye on my ex so she doesn't abscond with my daughter to the South of fucking France."

I placed my hand on his arm. "I'm sorry."

Brody scrubbed his hands over his face. "Fuck. I have a gut feeling that if Monica takes Jacks out of the country it's the last time I'll ever see her."

"It won't be" I said. "If she does that I promise that Sierra and I will help you."

"Sierra and you?" he asked opening his eyes and looking at me in surprise. "Do you have some sort of training I was unaware of? Am I dating a secret badass?"

"Nope. Just someone with a smart friend and a lot of righteous anger."

"And what can Sierra do that this incredibly expensive private investigator can't?"

"More like won't" I mumbled. "Let's just say she could make Monica very uncomfortable if she disappears with Jacks." I cleared my throat because the way he was looking at me made it

feel tight all of a sudden. "Um Sierra can do things that most companies can't."

"Can't?" Brody asked.

"Um...more like won't."

He closed his eyes again and shook his head. "Maybe it's better if I don't know."

"Probably."

"Well since the mood is nice and ruined now there's something I have to tell you."

Wow that sounded ominous.

"Jacks told Mom and Dad that 'my friend Cam' was eating dinner and watching movies with us a lot. Mom wants to have a family dinner at their place next week."

That would definitely have ruined the mood if Monica hadn't called when she did.

"Uh I'm not sure I can" I said. "I may have...a lobotomy scheduled for next week."

Brody lifted his head and looked at me grinning. "A lobotomy?"

"Yeah" I answered with a nod. "I've been feeling pretty off lately and I think it will help."

"You're coming to my parents' for dinner next week" he commanded. There was no other way to describe the tone he used.

"Brody you know your mother hates me right?"

"She doesn't hate you Cam. That would require too much energy. She disapproves of you. But then again she disapproves of everyone since we Murphy's are so superior to everyone else."

"Disapproves of me?" I asked. "At your wedding she asked me if I bought my dress from a lady of the night."

Brody choked on a laugh. "Did you? I mean it was a sexy dress."

I smacked his shoulder. "Brody! Will you please take this seriously?"

"I am" he said chuckling.

I tried to smack him again but he caught my hand and pulled me across his lap.

"Okay so Mom disapproves of you more than she does most people. Mostly because you refuse to comply with her expectations. If it makes you feel any better she treats Ben the same way."

I pulled a face much like Jacks had a tendency to do. "It doesn't."

"Cam."

"Brody."

"Cam."

"Ugh. Fine. I'll go to dinner with you. And I'll behave in front of Jacks. But if your mom says anything nasty to me I'm sneaking into the living room and moving all her pillows and knick knacks around and I expect you to serve as a distraction."

His mother was adamant that nothing in the formal rooms of her house was out of place. If a single pillow wasn't properly angled on the couch she would spend a good five minutes fluffing and adjusting them. The pretty vases and figurines set about the house were in exact positions on each piece of furniture and any cleaning staff were required to replace them precisely where they'd been before.

If I went through her living room moving things around it would drive her nuts as she tried to get everything back the way she wanted it.

Maybe that meant I was petty but the woman had never been nice to me a day in her life and I'd known her as long as I'd known Brody. I

barely tolerated her and in this instance I would only because I knew it meant something to the man I loved. God that was going to take some getting used to. I'd spent a lot of time over the last ten years trying to get over my crush on him and now I'd actually gone and fallen in absolute unyielding love with him.

And there was the fact that she would escalate to calling me personally if I refused. Because Brody wouldn't lie for me. It was one of the things I both loved and hated about him. If I ever committed a crime he would hire the best lawyer money could buy for me but he wouldn't lie to the cops and give me an alibi.

It was both admirable and irritating.

"I'll call you in a couple of days with the details" Brody said studying my mouth.

When he leaned in I put my fingers over his lips. "Uh-uh buddy. No kisses for you. The mood has officially been ruined."

His eyes sparkled with mischief and amusement. "Then maybe you should give me a chance to rekindle it."

"I don't know. I mean I'll probably spend the whole time thinking of your mother."

He groaned and let his head fall back on the couch. "Damn. You've nuked any chance. Now I'll be thinking of my mother."

I grinned at him and patted his cheek. "That was kind of the point."

I shrieked when he dug his fingers into my ribs and ended up on the floor when I tried to escape his tickling hands.

"You asshole!" I yelled.

"Shhhh" he hushed me a finger to his lips.
"You'll wake up Jacks."

I pointed a finger at him. "You just wait. You will pay for that."

I leaped to my feet and attacked.

19

I stared in the mirror and tugged at the hem of my dress.

Tonight was dinner with Brody's parents. Happy happy fun times were sure to be had by all.

God how had I ended up in this situation? I hadn't even slept with Brody yet I was about to go have dinner with him his daughter and his parents. I hadn't had a 'meet the parents' moment with a guy in years. My last few boyfriends and I hadn't gotten that far.

Though his mother Marilyn detested me I'd spent a fair amount of time at their house growing up. Birthday parties barbeques and pool parties. And while Marilyn and Thomas considered themselves above most of Farley's citizens they did try to keep up appearances which meant they had to invite the local pediatrician and his lovely wife to their events. My parents were a huge part of the town and

knew nearly everyone. They had an active social life despite Dad's busy schedule at his office.

Now I was going back with their son. I already knew that I would get slightly amused tolerance as though I was a less-than-well-trained dog who'd piddled on the parlor rug. But Marilyn well she was the mistress of backhanded compliments and veiled insults. I would have to sit next to Brody and endure them for the rest of the night.

It hit me in the gut then the realization that I would have to 'endure' meals like this for the rest of my life if things worked out between us. I loved him and I wanted to live with him help him raise Jacks and grow old with him.

As I stared into the eyes of my reflection I wondered if it would be worth it. Facing the hostility condescension and barely audible comments about gold digging. I'd never considered it before because I'd been so deep in my own head and feelings for Brody.

Could I handle it?

I studied the woman with long blonde hair like her mother and dark brown eyes like her father and I knew without a doubt that I could handle any fucking thing they threw at me.

I would persist with kindness love and strength. I would brave any ugliness hurled at me. Because their thoughts and opinions of me didn't matter. I didn't have to live with that sort of stain on my soul.

I squared my shoulders and smoothed my dress down one more time. The lavender sundress wasn't fancy but it highlighted the curves of my torso without making me feel like I was completely on display. I had someplace to be and I'd spent enough time staring at myself in the mirror.

I went to the bed and scooped up my one designer bag. It was small beige and cute. Sierra had given it to me for Christmas a couple

of years ago. I also wore nude wedge sandals. It was likely that Marilyn would look down her nose at them but they were comfortable and they made my legs look awesome.

I'd gone all out on my appearance my nicest clothes make-up pedicure and sleek straight hair. Not to impress Brody's parents but because I liked the way Brody looked at me when I surprised him.

And I knew he'd like what he saw when I opened the door.

As though my thoughts conjured him the doorbell rang. I left my bedroom and put a little extra sway in my walk as I strutted past where Sierra sat on the couch.

She wolf-whistled. "You clean up good girl. Next you'll only wear white before Labor Day and have a 'cocktail hour' before dinner."

"I never wear white though a cocktail hour doesn't sound too bad. Maybe we should try it sometime."

"I say we reinstate Champagne Thursday only it's every day of the week."

I laughed and continued to the door.

"Have fun and remember to use protection!"
Sierra called out just as I opened the front door.

I was grateful that Jacks was waiting in the car and didn't hear that last comment. The wince on Brody's face made it clear that he'd heard it as well. Then his face changed as he took in what I was wearing.

"You look..."

I waited but he never completed his thought.
"Now that's the way to a woman's heart an unfinished sentence."

Brody grinned and it was nearly devastating. He wore a button-down shirt sans tie and a pair of shiny gray slacks that fit him like a glove.

"You're gorgeous always" he said tucking his hands into his pockets and rocking back on his heels.

"Much better." I stepped out of the house and called back. "Lock the deadbolt Sierra!"

"No way. I want the place to be robbed and vandalized. Sounds like a good time. I might even help."

I rolled my eyes and shut the door behind me. She would lock it even if she smarted off about it.

When I turned back Brody was deep in my space the flippy hem of my dress brushing against the legs of his pants.

"Actually the reason I didn't finish my thought earlier is because I was thinking you were a cruel vicious woman."

I lifted my brows. "What?"

"You wore this knowing that Jacks would be with us and I wouldn't be able to properly show my appreciation."

I shivered at the heat in his words and my toes curled. God we would have to resolve the sexual tension between us soon or we were going to spontaneously combust.

"Well I'll wear it again for you another time when we're alone and you can give me the demonstration twice" I murmured back.

His cheek brushed mine as he leaned forward and put his lips to my ear. "We'll be alone when Jacks goes to Monica's for two weeks."

While his words ignited a fire in my blood the knowledge that he had to let Jacks go with her

mom after the shit that woman had been pulling burned my gut.

"I'll be an excellent distraction I promise" I said.

Brody's hand landed on my waist and squeezed. "As much as I would like to continue this conversation we have to go. Jacks is being patient right now but any second—"

A car horn blared from my driveway.

"She's gonna blow the horn" he finished.

I laughed as he grabbed my hand and hauled me out toward the car. When he opened the passenger door

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" he finished.

I laughed as he grabbed my hand and hauled me out toward the car. When he opened the passenger door Jacks was sitting primly in her booster seat her belt in place. Yeah I'd have to keep my eye on her.

"All right daughter dearest. We clearly have to work on your patience" Brody admonished her an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"We're gonna be late and you know Grandma doesn't like it."

"Grandma?" I asked him quietly as he helped me into my seat. "Marilyn allows that?"

"She actually wants Jacks to call her Grand-Mère."

I bit back a laugh. "I didn't realize your mother's parents were French."

He shook his head. "When she tried to get Jacks to do that my lovely sweet daughter started calling her Meemaw."

I couldn't stop it. There was no way. I clutched my belly and laughed. "Oh my God. If I didn't know better I'd think she was related to me" I gasped rocking back and forth in the seat.

Brody grinned and I could hear Jacks laughing in the back.

When he came around the car and settled in the driver's seat he turned to me and murmured "I won't lie. I encourage that sort of behavior."

"What sort of behavior?" I asked.

"The kind of attitude you always had growing up. Even when you were pissing me off you were hilarious."

I grinned at him. "And you're encouraging that sort of thing in your daughter?"

"Absolutely" he answered.

I glanced over my shoulder at his daughter. "Hey Jacks. Do you think I'm a good example to follow?"

"No way!" she announced.

Then we both got the giggles and couldn't stop until we reached Grandma and Grandpa Murphy's house.

Despite my worries about tonight just thinking of Brody's parents as Gramma and Gramps made me chuckle.

I only hoped that it would make the evening more tolerable.

Marilyn Murphy was in fine form. She'd barely aged a day from my childhood and she was well into her fifties.

It always surprised me how someone so sour on the inside could achieve something akin to physical perfection. She was tall and slender but not skinny. Her skin was firm and mostly unlined. Her hair had once been a beautiful golden brown but was now blonde her one concession to going grey.

She greeted me with a close-lipped smile and a martini glass in one hand. The sight of the glass made me clench my jaw so I wouldn't laugh in her face. I doubted very much Marilyn would have been amused.

Thomas arrived shortly after and I realized then that their butler Vincent was nowhere in sight.

While Marilyn was "checking on the status of dinner" in the kitchen and Thomas was getting the three of us a drink I leaned toward Brody. "Where's Vincent?"

"He retired last year."

"Wasn't he a little young to retire?" I asked.

Brody smiled at me looking a bit bewildered. "Vincent was nearly seventy."

I gaped at him. "No way. The man looked like he was in his mid-fifties. Did your mom take him for Botox injections when she went for hers?" I

whispered because I didn't want Jacks to overhear.

Brody laughed then coughed when his dad entered the room. It was odd that Jacks was being so quiet.

While Brody and his father spoke I looked over at her. "You okay sweetie?"

She nodded her face grim. "I need to use the restroom." She got to her feet and marched down the hall.

"So Cameron how is your little shop doing?" Thomas asked me as he came over and handed me a glass of wine.

Brody's arm was stretched along the back of the couch behind me so his hand clamped down on my shoulder before the smart-ass reply flew off the tip of my tongue.

I smiled at Thomas and sipped my wine while mentally plotting my revenge against his son.

"It's doing really well Tom. My partner and I are looking at opening in another location. We're hoping to grow enough to become a franchise."

I nearly laughed at the way his lips trembled with the need to sneer. I wasn't sure if it was because I called him Tom or if because when Crave was franchised it would make me a very wealthy woman maybe even wealthier than the Murphys. That simply would not do.

"Oh dear Cameron. Franchising absolutely ruins any sort of food or beverage. Once you aim for uniformity you have to sacrifice originality."

I understood what Marilyn meant even if her words were redundant. Of course uniformity destroyed originality. They were antonyms.

"Excellent advice Marilyn" Thomas agreed before he drained the rest of his Scotch.

"You're looking very fit Cam. Have you been exercising?" Marilyn asked.

"A little" I answered. Brody's grip tightened on my shoulder for a brief moment before his hand relaxed so I decided to play nice. "You're looking well too Marilyn. Have you lost weight?"

She preened a bit as she sipped her martini. "I have. Thank you." She opened her mouth but before she could speak Jacks came running in.

"Hi Grandma."

"Jacqueline darling how many times must I ask you to stop running in the house?" Marilyn asked. Though she did move over to her granddaughter and put a light arm around her shoulder.

"One more" Jacks said with a mischievous grin.

Marilyn sighed but even I could see the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Wow a grandchild had softened Marilyn Murphy. I couldn't believe it.

"The next thing I know they'll be telling me she bakes cookies" I muttered beneath my breath.

Though I was mostly talking to myself Brody heard me. "I wouldn't go that far" he whispered back.

"It's time to eat" Marilyn announced.

Dinner went smoothly. Well more smoothly than I expected.

At least until Jacks said "I caught Daddy kissing Cam on the couch last night." She looked at Thomas. "Does that mean they're gonna get married?"

I choked on my wine and started coughing so I missed whatever reply her grandfather made. But judging by the expression on Brody's face he didn't like it very much.

Instead of confronting his father Brody looked at his daughter. "Remember I said Cam and I were going to try dating for a while?" Jacks

nodded. "Well sometimes when people are dating they hug and kiss to express their affection."

It was pretty clear that Jacks didn't think much of that ritual but she nodded and went back to her food.

Marilyn and Thomas let the subject drop but I should have known that wouldn't be the end of it.

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I didn't get a chance to talk to Brody on the drive home about his efforts to control me during the dinner with his parents. He had to drop me off at my house with nothing but a quick kiss just inside my front door.

By the time he called me just before bed I'd calmed down enough that our conversation was actually civil. And he agreed not to do that again.

It was strange to be completely honest with the guy I was dating and not have it turn into a fight. He listened to what I had to say and apologized.

Let me repeat that for the cheap seats.

He. Apologized.

Maybe Sierra was right and I'd spent too much time dating immature little boys rather than grown men.

Or maybe things were just different with Broderick Murphy because he was Brody the same boy I'd loved since I was eight and who'd grown into a fine man.

I knew my time with Brody would be limited during the week because he wanted to spend as much one-on-one time as possible with Jacks before she left to spend two weeks with her mother. That lasted two whole days before they showed up at Crave.

Apparently Jacks missed me.

Thursday night we all made dinner together and watched the first Harry Potter movie. Jacks and Brody had finished the book so she was eager to see the movie.

I was able to take the night off because we had hired Lee Prescott on the spot when she showed up for her interview. Well at the end of the interview anyway. We were desperate but Sierra and I realized right away what a gem Lyria Prescott was.

Figures that Natalie Phelps was right about who we needed.

I was also taking Friday night off to do my job as distraction. Lee had only been training for a week but she was a damn quick study. Plus Sierra would be helping her out.

I wasn't going to Brody's house with seduction in mind. I brought burgers and curly fries from

the local shack. I also brought a couple of bags filled with movie snacks ice cream sodas and DVDs.

At six sharp I rang the doorbell and waited. And waited. I beat my fist against the door. Still nothing.

Finally I dug my phone out of my purse and called him. "Hey Brody. Whatcha doin'?"

"Strange you should ask. I was just knocking on your door."

"Hmmm. Well I didn't hear anything. Probably because I'm at your house knocking on your front door."

Brody laughed. "This is what happens when I don't make concrete plans with you."

"Think you can get home pretty quick? The ice cream's gonna melt."

"You could come home" he suggested.

"You want me to haul five bags of food back out to my car and all the way home?"

"Good point. I'll be there in a few minutes."

He hung up without saying good-bye and I laughed to myself. Approximately six minutes later Brody's SUV turned into the driveway and he pulled around the house to the garage. I'd just finished picking up the last bag when the front door opened and he reached out to take them from me.

"Here let me take—"

I handed him three and then carried the other two past him inside.

"The ice cream will need an hour or so in the fridge to firm back up but it's hot enough out there that the burgers are probably still warm" I said as I made a beeline for his fridge.

Once I had the ice cream in the freezer drawer and the sodas on a shelf inside the door I went to the sink and washed my hands.

Brody was smiling at me when I turned around. A big goofy grin that I'd never seen on his face before.

"What?" I asked drying my hands on the towel lying on the counter.

"You came to cheer me up didn't you?" he asked.

I shrugged but didn't answer aloud.

"Burgers snacks ice cream and movies? Total formula to help a depressed friend. I remember the ritual well from high school. I'd come over to visit J.J. and one of your friends would be on the couch with you moping eating junk food and watching movies. Usually right after they got dumped. Though there was the occasional fight with a friend or just plain ole PMS."

"Wow spend a lot of time in the nineteen-fifties?" I asked him.

He had the temerity to laugh in the face of my irritation. "I didn't say all women performed that ritual. Just that I've seen you do it." He came toward me the smile still on his face but there was some deeper emotion there. Tenderness maybe. "And I'm grateful to be on the receiving end of it tonight because I wasn't sure what I was going to do when you didn't answer your door earlier."

He wrapped his arms around my waist and bent to press a kiss to my neck. I returned his embrace tucking my face against his chest.

"I brought Burger Barn" I said. "You hungry?"

Brody squeezed me. "I could eat."

We settled at the bar with Styrofoam containers full of cheeseburgers and curly fries.

"How did it go?" I asked him between bites.

"The usual" he answered with a shrug. "Icy greeting veiled hostility and negative comments about Jacks' cheap clothing and luggage."

My eyes widened. "She says stuff in front of Jacks?"

Brody shook his head. "No just when she's out of earshot."

"Also I'm stuck on the cheap clothes and luggage. Jacks is six-years-old. She's going to outgrow everything in a few months anyway. Including her luggage. Why spend a ton of money on it?"

"I agree with that philosophy" Brody answered with a sigh. "Unfortunately Monica and my mother share the same viewpoint and think I should dress Jacks according to her 'station' in Farley."

I rolled my eyes. "Six-year-old girls have stations? Are they like fire departments now?"

"See? This is why I spend time with you. You get me."

"Do you think she's going to try to take Jacks to France anyway?" I asked.

"I doubt it. But if she does the private investigation firm I hired should be able to intervene. Or at least stall her until I can call the police to handle the situation."

The burger in my stomach suddenly felt like a lead ball. How was Brody walking around like a normal human being? Jacks wasn't even my daughter and I was stressed out.

I was also doing a shitty job of distracting him.

I turned

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the private investigation firm I hired should be able to intervene. Or at least stall her until I can call the police to handle the situation."

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I turned put my feet on the floor and essentially stood between his thighs. Then I put my arms around his waist and gave him a hug. I didn't say anything else letting my embrace speak for me.

"Okay so I brought three movies" I said pulling away so I could see his face. "A comedy an action flick and a thriller. Which one do you want to watch first?"

"The thriller" he answered.

"Um are you sure? I mean won't that put ideas and worries in your head?" I asked.

"Why did you bring it if you weren't going to let me watch it?" he asked with a disbelieving laugh.

"Well I didn't think about it at the time! I just wanted to distract you from missing Jacks."

"Having you jump into my lap the first time something scary happens will definitely do that" he murmured tugging my body back toward his.

I shook off his hold and marched around the island so that it stood between us. "That's it. We're watching the comedy."

"Yes ma'am."

I pointed a finger at him and shook it. "Watch your tone Broderick Murphy."

"Oh are we going to play stern schoolteacher and naughty boy?" he asked.

"Gah!" I yelled throwing my hands up in the air.
"Forget it. Bring my food and I'll get the movie ready."

"Yes Ms. McClane. Please don't spank me."

"Shut up."

When I was sure he couldn't see me I stopped fighting my grin.

Operation Distraction was back on track.

After the comedy Brody talked me into watching the thriller. I know I know it was a stupid idea.

Why is that?

Because Brody was right before. When we watched suspenseful or scary movies I was a complete chicken. I would hide behind a pillow or blanket peeking around it like a little kid. Then when something startling happened I

would fling myself at the nearest person and hold onto them for dear life.

Needless to say my friends in college thought this was hysterical and would often rent scary movies just to torture me. Of course I was always stupid enough to watch them. Mostly because I couldn't resist a dare.

Which is exactly what Brody did. He dared me the dillhole.

We started out on opposite sides of the couch but within thirty minutes I was sitting so close to him that we were touching from shoulder to knee side-by-side.

When the killer lunged out of the darkness at the heroine of the story I screamed and the next thing I knew I was huddled in Brody's lap with my head buried beneath one of the throw pillows.

Brody the ass was laughing so hard that he couldn't breathe.

"Stop laughing!" I demanded yanking the pillow away from my face so I could smack him with it.

He didn't. At least not right away. He laughed so long and hard that tears were streaming down his face. I sighed and grabbed the remote to pause the movie.

"Yeah yeah. Yuk it up" I grumbled. "It's soooo hilarious."

Brody wiped his eyes as his guffaws faded into intermittent chuckles. Then he grabbed me in a bear hug. "Aside from Jacks you're the best thing in my life right now Cam."

Whether he meant it as a light-hearted statement or a declaration of something deeper I couldn't know for sure. But my treacherous heart leaped at his words filling me with warmth.

I didn't think. I didn't take a breath.

I reacted.

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I wrapped my arms around his neck tilted my head back and kissed him. I gave him everything I was feeling everything I was thinking in that kiss. I wanted him to know that I loved him and even with that love I was afraid. Afraid he would leave and break my heart. Break me. Afraid that he would stay and my life would never be the same. No matter what for better or worse Brody would change my life.

And he took it. He drank down my love my tenderness and even my fear as though he was dying of thirst.

I needed to be closer to him. So close that there was nothing between us. I didn't just want his bare skin against mine I needed it.

I craved it.

It was more than desire. It was necessity.

I shifted on his lap twisting until I straddled his hips. The new position put me above him and Brody tilted his head back refusing to break the kiss as I moved over him. He fused his mouth to mine and his hands grasped my hips pulling me closer.

But when I reached for the hem of my shirt he stopped me.

“Wait Cam. I wasn’t expecting you to—“

“I know. This is what I want.” I sat back on his thighs and looked at him. “But if you’re not ready we can—“

I squealed and clutched his neck as Brody grabbed my ass **STOOD UP** from the couch and started through the kitchen toward the back of the house...where his bedroom was.

“Brody put me down. You’re gonna throw your back out or something.”

He didn't deign to answer me or do what I said. Instead he turned and braced my back against the wall and kissed me again.

Any worries I had about my weight or damaging him disappeared. Once my brain was thoroughly fuddled he lifted his lips from mine and carried me the rest of the way into the dimly lit bedroom.

Where he dropped me on the bed. I fell back with a bounce and laughed. Until I saw Brody's grimace.

I sat up and reached for him. "Oh my God. You did hurt yourself."

He let me fawn over him for a second before he started laughing. I'd been had. I smacked him on the hip and he made an exaggerated oof.

"You're so mean to me" he said.

I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and dragged him closer to me. "Want me to be even meaner to you?"

His eyes sparked with humor and heat. "Sounds interesting."

I released him and backed up across the bed until I was on the other side. Then I stripped my shirt over my head dropping it on the floor next to me. Brody bit his bottom lip his eyes glued to the bare skin of my torso. And the lace-edged ice blue bra I wore. The material was sheer and I knew he could see my hardened nipples through it.

I didn't take my eyes away from him as I unbuttoned and unzipped my shorts before pushing them down my legs. They pooled around my ankles leaving me in nothing but a pair of white bikini panties.

Like Brody I hadn't intended for this to happen tonight or I might have dug around in my underwear drawer for a matching set.

I didn't care and Brody didn't seem to either. He sucked in a sharp breath when I reached behind me and unhooked my bra. He leaned forward and put one knee on the bed when the bra joined the rest of my clothes on the floor.

I inched back. "Nuh-uh. None of that."

He froze.

"You have to stay over there." I nearly laughed at the incredulous expression on his face.

"You're kidding." He sounded pained and maybe even a little angry.

"Nope. You asked for it."

I tried not to smile as I hooked my thumbs in my underwear but I knew I failed because Brody made a low growling noise.

"Not funny Cam."

"Maybe not for you." As I spoke I slipped my panties down my legs.

Suddenly Brody's expression changed. He didn't look angry. More like smug.

Then he stripped his shirt over his head.

I swallowed hard. Brody had filled out extremely well. In high school he'd been well-muscled from playing soccer and running track but he'd also been lean. He was still in great shape but his musculature had acquired more bulk than it had once had. He wasn't cut like a cover model but he was in better shape than any man I'd seen in the flesh. Except maybe my brother but I tried not to look at him half-naked.

Brody I could stare at all day.

I also wondered how in the heck I could ever think he would hurt himself carrying me the twenty-five or thirty feet from the living room to his bedroom. He looked strong enough to carry me for a mile if he had to.

He had chest hair. I liked that he didn't manscape like so many men I'd seen. I wanted to touch him. To feel the smooth heat of his skin in contrast to the crisp hair.

Before I thought too much about it I had one knee on the bed. Brody shook his head.

Oh I was onto his game now.

He put his hands on his belt and unbuckled it. As he did I brought my other knee up until I knelt on the bed my knees slightly spread.

If I'd been with any other man I never would have had the courage to sit in front of him in that position but the dim lighting and the fact that it was Brody standing across from me gave me courage.

I rested my hands on my thighs and arched my back just a bit.

And that was all it took.

Brody practically ripped his jeans down his legs taking his briefs with them. I didn't get a good look at what lay beneath before he lunged across the bed and dragged me against him.

At the first touch of his bare skin against mine my first instinct was to rub myself against him like a cat. I settled for running my hands over his shoulders and chest down to his bare hips.

I smiled as goose bumps broke out over his skin. I pressed my lips to his sternum. He released a sharp hiss when my tongue darted out and tasted his skin.

"Are we still playing?" I asked him nuzzling his pectoral muscle.

His flesh was hot beneath my cheek and I lifted my right hand to trail a finger down the center of his abdomen. The muscles clenched beneath my touch and I traced them.

"Brody?"

His fingers closed around my wrist pulling my hand away from his belly as I trailed my finger lower and lower. "Jesus Cam. I need a second."

I tilted my head back and stared at him. My eyes felt heavy and my body throbbed in time with my heartbeat. "Are you trying to torture me?" I asked.

"I was wondering the same thing about you" Brody murmured lowering his head.

This time when he kissed me it was slow and indulgent. My blood was still hot but the rest of my body seemed to slow down.

Brody turned me and laid me down in the center of the bed hovering over me as his mouth moved to my throat. My fingers tangled in his hair clutching him to me as his lips slid lower and closed over my nipple.

I gasped at the first lash of his tongue and arched my back when he sucked the tip of my breast deeper into his mouth.

Brody cupped my other breast his thumb and forefinger tugging at the nipple.

"You're definitely trying to torture me" I said.

I felt Brody's smile against my skin. "Only a little."

He straightened suddenly and pulled my knees apart. My first urge was to stick my hand over the area he just exposed. Mostly because I hadn't been expecting the move.

But before I could react in any way Brody scooted down the bed and bent over me. His tongue circled my clit and I almost shot off the bed.

It had been so long since anyone else had touched me much less so skillfully. Within a

scant minute I was embarrassingly close to climax.

Brody pressed two fingers inside me and closed his lips around my clit. The pressure inside me burst in a blinding rush.

I cried out and clutched at his head and shoulders. My body shuddered violently until I couldn't handle the intensity of the sensation anymore. I tried to squirm away but Brody pinned me to the bed and tortured me with pleasure.

When I came the second time I nearly ripped out a handful of his hair.

"Brody!"

This time he obeyed the command in my voice and lifted his mouth.

My body trembled one last time before I collapsed. My limbs felt boneless and weak. My

eyelids were heavy and I couldn't seem to force them open.

By the time I had Brody had pulled an unopened box of condoms from somewhere. Probably the nightstand. I couldn't move as I watched him rip it open and a long strip of foil packets fell out.

He ripped a packet off the strip and tore it open. I watched avidly as he rolled the latex over his dick. It was the first good look I'd had and I didn't want to miss anything.

Once the condom was in place I was no longer sated. I felt empty. Aching.

I lifted my knees and shifted my hips against the bed.

Brody paused kneeling before me with a strangely intense expression on his face.

"Come here Brody" I murmured.

He crawled forward until he was on his hands and knees over me. I reached out and tugged at his shoulders wanting his weight against me.

He resisted.

"What's wrong?" I asked cupping his cheek.

"It's been a...long time. I want this to be as amazing for you as it is for me."

If I hadn't been already in love with this man those words would have made me fall.

I lifted up my abs still weak from two orgasms and kissed him. When I lay back against the pillow I said "I'm going to admit something to you but I don't want it to go to your head."

He grinned at me. "I'm all ears."

"It's been over a year since I've had sex and it didn't go well the last time. So this has already been an amazing experience for me. Even if you last thirty seconds after that."

Brody grimaced. "I don't think it's going to be that bad."

I laughed. "Then we're good." I tugged at him again and this time he came down on top of me. "Besides if you're a two-pump chump this time we can always try again."

I couldn't control my laugh when I saw the look on his face.

But my mirth died away when his mouth landed on the base of my neck and he nipped the skin there. Suddenly I was very interested in what he planned to do next.

Wait why was I waiting on him to make all the moves?

I reached between us grasping his hard length and positioned him where I needed him most.

Brody groaned and his hips jerked. He slid an inch inside me and froze. I clenched around him

and writhed. He groaned again and thrust deeper. Tingles zipped along my skin hardening my nipples and making me gasp.

He held his hips still and used his weight to pin me to the bed. My fingers dug into his ass telling him without words that I wanted more. Instead of thrusting hard and fast like I wanted him to Brody lowered his head back to my breasts teasing my nipples with licks nips and sucks until I was all but begging him to fuck me.

Finally I could take no more and I shoved his upper body back a few inches. I kept pushing and twisting but I couldn't move him. "My turn to be on top."

I saw the flash of Brody's teeth as he smiled but he rolled over obediently and took my body with his.

Once I was on top I circled my hips slowly savoring the sensation of his dick deep inside me.

Brody's entire body tensed when I lifted up a few inches and let myself slide back down in a single slow stroke.

"Oh God Cam."

I leaned forward and kissed him as I repeated the motion taking him as deep as I could. Brody grabbed my ass with both hands and ground me against him making me moan into his mouth.

He was going to make me come again. My clit was so sensitive that the rasp of his pubic hair against me and the pressure he exerted with his hands was enough.

I rolled my hips faster until Brody began moving with me his grip on my ass controlling my body and angling me just right. He hit a spot inside me that made my vaginal muscles spasm around him and he made a rough noise low in his throat.

His face rigid with concentration Brody kept my hips at that angle and thrust up as he pulled me down. The hard steady rhythm was exactly what I needed to fly over the edge.

I threw my head back and my eyes closed as the orgasm tore through me. Just when I thought I'd hit the apex Brody's hands left my hips and tugged hard at my nipples.

The sound that escaped my throat was perilously close to a scream and I quivered from head-to-toe as the climax became something I'd never experienced before. Every muscle in my body locked down and I was vaguely aware of my hands clawing at Brody's shoulders as he kept thrusting inside me.

The rioting of my senses ebbed and I could hear his harsh pants as I tried to get my own breathing under control.

Suddenly Brody rolled. It was a little awkward since my legs didn't want to cooperate. I

whimpered when he pulled his rigid length out of my body and positioned me beneath him.

Then he was there again sliding deep inside me. My pussy clenched hard around him as an aftershock rippled through me.

"Fuck. I can't—" Brody's jaw tightened and he slammed into me once more. His mouth found mine as he came his hips rolling slow and deep against me.

As he moved small tremors wracked my body and I could feel my pussy tighten around him once more.

He sucked in a sharp breath and released my mouth throwing his head back as the last throes of his orgasm consumed him. I hoped it was as earth-shattering as my own climax. I lifted my head and nipped his throat with my teeth.

Finally we were both left breathless our bodies still fused together.

Brody looked down at me his eyes soft and I had to bite my tongue to keep from blurting out how much I loved him.

While I didn't expect him to be a dick about it I didn't want him to think it was post-coital haze talking.

So instead I quipped "If you were aiming for amazing I think you overshot the mark."

Brody chuckled. It was little more than a soft breath of air but his accompanying smile was different. Affectionate. Even tender. Beautiful.

He pressed another brief kiss to my mouth and whispered against my lips "Oh I'm just getting started."

Then he laughed again when my entire body shivered beneath him.

"We do have all night" I murmured in reply.

His eyes sparked turning brilliant emerald in the dim lamplight. "Yes we do. Though you should know you're not leaving until I'm ready to let you go."

Damn but I liked the way that sounded. Unfortunately I knew he would be ready to let me go far earlier than I would be ready to leave.

I bit my bottom lip. "I do have to work you know. Sierra will definitely be calling tomorrow wondering why I didn't show up."

"I'll tell her you're indisposed."

Despite the strange heady mix of emotions inside me I managed to smile. "Indisposed? Is this the nineteenth century? If so I believe we need a chaperone."

"Too late for that." Brody reached between us and held the base of the condom as he pulled out of me. I must have made a noise because he put his hand on my pubic bone and ran his thumb lightly over my clit and down to my

entrance. I took a harsh breath when he brushed a particularly sensitive spot. "But I think we should make use of my tub while we discuss your future kidnapping further."

I lifted my upper body so my weight rested on my elbows. "Will your tub fit the two of us?"

"Come find out" he invited as he climbed off the bed. I couldn't help but stare as he took the condom off and turned to walk into the adjoining bathroom. Now that my mind was no longer clouded with lust seeing Brody in his full naked glory was mesmerizing.

A bath abruptly sounded like a brilliant idea. I immediately envisioned myself in a huge tub soapy cloth in my hand and kneeling in front of Brody who sat back with his arms stretched along the edge of the bath. Like a sultan waiting for his harem of one.

Maybe I could call in sick tomorrow after all.

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It turned out that I didn't have to worry about telling Sierra I wouldn't be at work tomorrow.

After our bath Brody went into the kitchen to grab us something to drink and returned with two glasses of water and my phone.

"Your phone was beeping" he said as he handed both it and the glass of water to me.

I lifted the glass to my lips first because even after a bath I felt dehydrated. Probably because it hadn't so much been a cleansing activity as an excuse for us to feel each other up which led to sex on the bathroom rug after Brody had broken into another unopened box of condoms he'd unearthed from beneath the sink.

Afterward I'd teased him about having them stashed everywhere but he just shrugged and said "It's a good thing I did."

Since he was right I left it alone though I did make a point to check out his linen closet and pull out a third box of rubbers.

"Feeling ambitious aren't you?" I asked wagging the box from side-to-side.

He'd flushed but quipped back "The way I've been feeling the past few weeks we'll need every single box before Jacks comes back from her mother's."

That shut me up.

I lifted my phone and laughed when I saw what was on the screen.

Sierra had texted me thirty minutes ago and it read—Enjoy the weekend sexfest. You and Lee are on your own next week but I'll cover you til Monday.

I turned the phone toward Brody to show him and he grinned. It was a dangerous expression

because it told me he was thinking wicked thoughts.

"I guess this means you're all mine until Sunday night" he stated.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I'll need clothes and toiletries. Deodorant toothbrush. All that stuff."

Brody crooked a finger at me. After our bath he'd tugged on a pair of loose athletic shorts and nothing else. Unlike my teen years I got to stare to my heart's content. Which was a lot.

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I was also wearing one of his t-shirts. When I'd asked him if I could borrow something he'd told me to knock myself out and pointed at his dresser. So I dug around until I found a t-shirt he used to wear a lot his senior year.

The material was white and so thin and worn that my nipples were dark shadows beneath it. It also barely covered my butt.

When I came out of his bedroom wearing it I thought he was going to haul me right back in there. Or pull me down on the couch.

Instead he asked "Are you hungry?"

I plopped my butt on one of the industrial-style stools at his island. "Starving. What are you feeding me?"

"I thought it was your job to make food" Brody said crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back against the counter next to the fridge.

It took a second for his words to sink in because my brain was still hyper-focused on the picture he created. I took it back he could absolutely be on the cover of one of my romance novels.

Then the chauvinistic words sank in.

"Wow I think we need to discuss your attitude toward women. The nineteen-fifties were a long time ago."

Brody laughed his eyes bright. "At least you didn't throw something at me like you would have if J.J. said it."

"J.J. thinks women were put on this earth to serve him" I retorted.

"Not really" Brody answered levering himself away from the cabinet. "He says stuff like that because it riles you up so much. If anyone else says it he tells them to leave the Stone Ages behind."

"Brothers. Jeez."

He laughed again and opened the fridge. A container of black beans a bag of Mexican blend cheese salsa sour cream peppers and a few other ingredients appeared on the island. Brody came out and nudged the fridge door shut with his hip.

"Nachos sound good?"

"Great sex and nachos? I think you're my dream man." I clasped my hands together by my cheek and sighed dreamily.

He grinned and shook his head. "I don't remember you being this easy to please ten years ago."

"Well I've learned to adjust my expectations."

Brody pulled a cookie sheet out of a lower cabinet next to the stove and turned to look at me. "Adjust?"

"I guess the best way to put it would be to say I lowered my expectations. That way I'm not quite so disappointed when they aren't met."

Brody didn't say anything as he spread aluminum foil over the cookie sheet and started loading it with chips and toppings.

"I hate hearing that" Brody finally stated. "I hate the idea of someone hurting you. But I'm also glad because it means that you're free to be here with me."

Brody looked at me then and I realized that I wasn't the only one out on a limb here. And even if he never felt the same way about me he would never hurt me. Not intentionally.

"I'm glad I'm here with you too."

Brody slid the sheet pan into the oven and walked around the island to where I sat. I turned on my stool to face him and he stepped between my thighs. He brushed my hair back from my face then cupped the back of my skull with his hands.

"I never thought we'd be here" he said studying my face. "I might've dreamed it a time or two."

I rested my hands on his hips right on the waistband of his shorts. "Same here."

He leaned forward and kissed me lightly. "We're going to give this a shot right?"

"What are we giving a shot?"

"Us. A relationship. A committed relationship."

I was not expecting this talk. Not yet. We'd only been what could loosely be called dating for a few weeks.

I also wanted to say yes very very badly. But Brody and I weren't the only ones who were going to be affected by this.

"What about Jacks?" I asked. "How is she going to feel about you having a girlfriend? I know she was the one who suggested it but saying I should be your girlfriend is a little different than me actually being with you. Vying for your attention."

He rested his forehead against mine. "She's mentioned to me more than once that you'd be

a really good girlfriend. And that I shouldn't screw it up."

I laughed a little. "Yeah but once it's a reality she might change her mind."

"Jacks knows that she comes first for me. She also wants me to be happy. There will probably be an adjustment period but I think she'll be just fine."

"So we're really doing this?" I asked.

"We'll figure it out Cam."

The oven dinged and Brody kissed me one more time before he took the nachos out.

We divvied up the food and carried it to the living room.

"Wanna watch the action movie you brought?" Brody asked.

I stuck a huge chip in my mouth and nodded my head.

A little while later we were done with our food and lounging together on the couch. I had my head on Brody's thigh and his legs were stretched out so his heels rested on the coffee table.

The movie normally would have had my full attention we were done with our food and lounging together on the couch. I had my head on Brody's thigh and his legs were stretched out so his heels rested on the coffee table.

The movie normally would have had my full attention but my body was reminding me that I'd just broken a long dry spell and I was nowhere near satisfied.

I pressed my thighs together trying to ignore the ache between them. My nipples hardened and throbbed. I shifted on the cushion trying to ignore the way desire surged through my body. I wasn't sixteen anymore. I should be able to

make it through a damn movie without turning into a sex fiend.

Brody's hand rested on my shoulder. I was hyperaware of his touch as he ran his finger along my hairline. Then he swept it off my neck and behind my shoulder. My breath trembled as his finger trailed over the v-neck of the tee. Then his hand moved lower and the tip of his finger circled my hard nipple.

I was taking that as an all-systems go.

I sat up but before I could grab Brody as I intended he flipped me around so that I faced the back of the couch with my knees on the cushions.

His chest was plastered against my back and he crowded me against the pillows. I could feel the hard ridge of his erection against my ass and I ground back against him.

Apparently I wasn't the only one turning into a sex fiend.

Brody's mouth latched onto the spot where my neck met my shoulder and I shuddered.

"Please tell me you were squirming every few seconds because you wanted me to do something like this" he said as his hands slipped beneath the hem of the t-shirt to cup my breasts.

I made a noise in my throat when his fingers tugged at my nipples. The surface of the couch was cool against the heated skin of my stomach.

"And this fucking shirt has been driving me crazy all night. I could see your nipples through it as soon as you put it on." One of his hands moved down my torso until he cupped me between my legs. "And you're already wet."

I spread my legs wider as he ran the pad of his finger over my clit. Suddenly his hands left me and the shirt disappeared from my body. His weight pushed against my upper back until my

hard nipples hit the couch and I gasped at the sensation. The microsuede was smooth and cool like velvet. When Brody moved the tips of my breasts scraped against the material.

He reached between us and suddenly the silky athletic shorts were gone. I heard a condom wrapper being ripped open. His knuckles brushed against me as he rolled it on.

I arched my back when he put one hand on my hip and tipped my pelvis upward. My breath hitched as the tip of his cock probed my entrance. In one long slow motion he thrust inside. I braced myself against the back of the sofa and met the slam of his hips.

Brody wrapped his right arm around my waist and cupped my left breast as his mouth moved back to my neck.

I leaned my head back and reached up to cup the back of his neck. In this position I could only take what he gave me. His left hand descended to my clit. He gave it a couple of light taps and I

gasped at the sensation. I'd never had a man do that to me before. A zing of electricity shot through me starting from my clit.

I moaned as he did it again. His finger stopped tapping and began circling. I moaned and slammed my hips back harder against his. The angle was deeper in this position.

My fingers curled into the cushions on the back of the couch and I couldn't catch my breath. My legs shook as the pleasure built and built.

Brody slowed down his thrusts still steady and deep but not quickly enough to push me over the edge.

"Do not stop" I panted.

He bit the side of my throat and chuckled against my skin. It was a wicked sound. "I didn't stop. I'm taking my time."

My right hand released the back of the couch and I reached for his hair tugging it hard. "Do

not tease me right now Broderick Murphy. I'm not kinky enough to get off on orgasm denial."

"Hmmm..." he hummed low in his throat. "That sounds interesting. We should definitely explore that concept." His hips picked up speed and he slammed into me over and over as he increased the pressure of his finger on my clit. "Later."

I didn't hear a word he said after that because I came so hard I saw stars.

My head fell forward to the back of the couch as my body shuddered over and over. I was vaguely aware that Brody stopped moving in and out of me and that the grip of his fingers on my hips grew bruising. He groaned and his body finally relaxed.

Brody rested his forehead between my shoulder blades and I could feel the warm gusts of air from his mouth as he tried to gain control over his breathing.

My legs shook as a final spasm gripped me. Would it be like this every time we came together? If so I'd be dead before the end of the year. Or at least unable to walk.

When his erection began to soften Brody pulled out of me and I couldn't control the sigh that slipped from my mouth. Even after an amazing all-consuming orgasm I wanted him inside me.

I collapsed to the side and watched him walk into the powder room just down the hall. He returned a few moments later his chest gleaming with sweat.

He brought me a glass of water without asking which I appreciated because I was definitely thirsty after that workout. Even though I hadn't technically done much of the work.

When I finished the glass I set it on the coffee table and asked him "So did you actually hide condoms in the couch cushions? Because that's one conversation with Jacks I definitely want to miss."

Brody winced at my question. “Uh no. But I did stick a couple in my pocket earlier.”

I snatched his shorts off the floor stuck my hand in one pocket and pulled out a strip of three condoms. I dropped them on the coffee table next to my glass and reached into the other pocket. There were two more.

“A couple huh?” I asked.

Brody took the shorts out of my hand and slipped them on. I watched with interest because even though it was like a strip show in reverse it was still hot to watch.

Then he snatched the condoms out of my hand and tucked them back into his pocket followed by the packets from the coffee table.

“It pays to be prepared” he replied as he flopped down on the couch next to me.

I didn't have the energy to dress nor did I have the energy to move when Brody tried to tug me closer. He grunted as he hauled my limp body into his lap.

I ended up naked and straddling his lap my chest against his and my forehead tucked against his neck.

He ran a hand down my spine and I moaned a little. It felt so nice to be touched. Not just sexually but stroked. Cuddled. It was more than desire it was affection and I hadn't realized how starved I was for it until now.

I relaxed against Brody and sighed again.

"Going to sleep on me?" he asked.

"Thinking about it."

"Then we should do this in bed. I don't think I have the strength left to carry you back in the bedroom."

“That sucks” I muttered. “Because I think my legs are broken. Or at least useless for the next few hours.”

“Think we can prop each other up and stumble down the hall?”

“I guess I’m willing to try if you are.”

Brody scooped up the t-shirt and handed it to me. I didn’t bother trying to put it on only clutched it to my chest. Then he helped me stand up.

As I suspected my knees buckled a bit but Brody put his arm around my waist and helped me balance. I managed to put mine around his shoulders when he tripped a bit.

Together we staggered from the living room toward his bedroom. We shambled and swayed like two drunks at closing time but we made it to the bed. Brody stripped the comforter and top sheet down and I crawled beneath them. I

barely got out of the way before he joined me on the mattress.

I rolled into him resting my head in his shoulder and threw an arm over his waist. Then I lifted my knee and draped my leg across his upper thigh. It took me a second to realize he was as naked as I was and that his shirt had disappeared from my hands somewhere between the living room and bedroom.

I stroked his waist and kissed his sternum right above his heart.

“Night Brody” I whispered as I settled my head back on his shoulders.

“Night Cam.”

He reached over and turned off the lamp. And that was the last thing I remembered.

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The weekend was amazing. And not just because of all the sex.

Though we did spend hours in bed. I discovered that Brody liked it when I traced the tip of my tongue over his nipples and the line of muscle that extended from his hipbone to his groin.

I also learned that I liked nearly everything that Brody did to me.

But there was so much more.

We talked about everything. What he'd been up to the last seven years. What I'd been up to. Our favorite movies. What kind of music we listened to. I teased him relentlessly about the Taylor Swift songs I found on his playlist when we turned on some music while we cooked dinner Saturday night.

He claimed that Jacks was the TayTay fan but I heard him sing along with more than one song.

It was comfortable as though we'd been together for years but also new. We laughed and joked about things we shared in the past yet I got the tingles every time he touched me or looked at me a certain way.

The feeling was both strange and welcome. I knew the past version of Brody. The sweet and funny boy who'd been in my life between the ages of eight and fourteen. The arrogant and sometimes downright mean guy who'd broken my heart my freshman year of high school.

Now I was learning about the grown-up version of Brody. He was still arrogant and funny but that sweetness had returned. Just a little. He was considerate generous and kind.

It was almost as if I was getting to know an entirely different person.

Sunday afternoon I sighed and slipped back into the clothes I'd worn to Brody's house on Friday night. I had to go to work on Monday and I couldn't walk in without make-up and wearing

the clothes I'd had on the last time Sierra had seen me.

Then again it probably wouldn't matter because Sierra intended to take the day off and the shop was closed.

No. I had a home. I needed to get back to it. While I enjoyed my mostly naked weekend with Brody I still had my own life and just because something felt good...no great didn't mean that it was smart for me to dive right in.

"Are you sure you have to go home?" Brody asked tugging on a lock of my hair.

"Yes I'm sure. I need to take care of some things before I start work tomorrow. Like cleaning up the messes that Sierra probably left all over my house. And doing laundry."

He leaned into me our faces nearly touching.

"When can I see you again?"

"When would you like to see me?" I asked.

"Tonight."

I grinned at him. "I think I need a break for tonight if I have any hope of walking tomorrow."

"We could just—"

I gave him a look that said it all. There was no way he could stay the night with me and that we would both keep our hands to ourselves.

"Tomorrow night?" he asked. "Otherwise I'll just sit in my house lonely and alone."

"Isn't that redundant?" I asked.

Brody's face changed. "You can be with someone and still be lonely" he answered.

I hated that he experienced that with Monica but I was also glad because it meant he was here with me rather than still married to her.

Which was probably petty of me but it was true.

I closed the scant inch between us and gave him a soft kiss. Just when I was ready to give in and rip my clothes off and spend one more night with him he broke the kiss.

"You'd better go or I can't be held responsible for my actions" he said.

I backed up and grabbed my purse off the island. "Talk tonight?"

He tucked his hands in his pockets and grinned at me. I took that as a yes. I also memorized the sight of him standing in his kitchen in a blue t-shirt and faded jeans with his hands tucked in his pockets and his feet bare.

It was an image I wouldn't mind seeing regularly for the next forty or fifty years. Or maybe forever.

"Thanks for an amazing weekend Brody" I said still backing toward the front door.

"I thank that's my line" he replied.

"You talk about yourself in the third person?" I asked. "That's kind of weird."

"If you want to make it out that door you'd better stop looking at me like that. And stop being funny."

My only reply was to laugh and slip out the front door. I hadn't even made it to the edge of the porch before the front door flew open and Brody grabbed me. He pinned me against one of the posts that supported the porch and kissed the daylights out of me.

"I'm walking you to your car" he said both of us breathing heavily.

"Okay."

Brody stepped back and put his hand on the small of my back. He literally walked me to my car and opened the door for me.

Once I'd sat down and started it I looked back up at him. "Bye Brody."

"Bye Cam."

He shut the door and watched me from the sidewalk as I pulled away from the curb. I knew better than to fall into a serious relationship in such a short amount of time but it was so difficult to resist the temptation.

I knew I wouldn't be doing myself or Brody any favors by jumping into this with both feet. He had a little girl to consider. And I had to be smart. Brody meant a lot to my entire family not just me. If we got hot and heavy too soon we'd be asking for trouble.

I had totally forgotten about Sunday lunch with my parents. For the first time in years I didn't show up without making previous plans.

I was in the middle of a shower when my cell phone rang. It hit me then. It was Sunday
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well into mid-afternoon. And I hadn't gone to Sunday lunch with my parents.

I slipped getting out of the tub and nearly faceplanted on the floor of the bathroom. Cursing naked and soaking wet I scrambled to the counter where my phone sat. Sure enough my mother's name was on the screen.

I hesitated before I picked it up. She wasn't going to be happy with me. But any irritation she felt now would only be amplified if I ignored the call and returned it in a half-hour.

I took a deep breath and released it before I picked up the phone.

"Hey Mom. I'm sorry about today."

"I'm guessing you spent the weekend with Brody since he didn't show up today either."

I bit my bottom lip. "Um...."

"Cameron you are a grown woman. I'm not going to take you to task for having a boyfriend. Or spending the weekend with him. Though I would ask that next time you let me know in advance so I don't make enough food to feed eight people and then have only three show up."

"I won't."

"And please for the love of God tell me you're using protection."

I sighed. "Yes Mom."

"Don't take that tone with me Cameron Diana McClane."

"Sorry."

"Should we expect both of you next week?" she asked.

"Yes but Jacks will still be with her mother then."

"Lovely. Then we'll expect the two of you for lunch next Sunday."

I knew better than to argue. "Of course."

"So did you have a fun weekend? Sierra came to lunch and mentioned that you left on Friday and she hadn't seen you since."

"Bye Mom. Love you."

I intended to hang up the phone without an ounce of remorse. My mother always said I could talk to her about anything but I had to draw the line somewhere.

"Love you too hon. See you next week. Be sure to remind Brody that we'll be expecting him."

"I won't forget again Mom. I promise."

"I remember how that first rush of passion is sweetie. I'm surprised you came up for air today."

"I'm hanging up for real now" I said.

I heard her laugh as I disconnected the call. Oh my God. I knew my parents had sex. And they were always matter-of-fact about well the facts of life.

But that didn't mean I wanted to share a dish session with my mother. Or listen to her reminisce about how she boned my dad when they first hooked up. Which is exactly where that phone call was heading.

I shuddered as I thought about it then I grinned. The next time J.J. was driving me crazy I was going to bring up this conversation.

Hee hee.

I dumped the last of my clothes in the washer and closed the lid. The dryer was already rumbling as my sheets dried.

I'd been surprised when I arrived home. Sierra had kept the house nearly pristine which was unlike her. I'd have to make sure she didn't feel like she had to be a perfect guest. I didn't want to stress her out while she was here.

As I looked around my house I realized that for the first time in a long time I had nothing to do. The house was clean. My laundry would have to run for at least another hour before it was done.

And I was alone.

Before Brody had come back to town I'd lived for days like this. Times when I could just sit around and do nothing. They'd been few and far between. Now between Sierra's help the new assistant manager we'd hired and Brody my entire life had changed in just a few short weeks.

I had time to myself and I finally understood.

I'd been lonely.

I hadn't noticed because I was always so busy but I'd been living my life one day at a time alone. I needed affection. Conversation. Company. I didn't just need or want a boyfriend. I needed friends. People I enjoyed spending time with in general that weren't related to me by blood.

I wouldn't be able to go back to the frantic existence I'd had before. I'd been so hyper-focused on my big dreams that I hadn't noticed the rest of my life was empty.

In this moment in my quiet house it was obvious that I needed to change my priorities. No matter what happened with Brody I couldn't close myself off again.

It was my time to live.

Since I finished my laundry and cleaning so early I decided to meal prep. I'd been meaning to do it for ages but never found the block of time required.

I dug chicken breast out of the freezer and thawed it out in the microwave. Then I mixed up a quick marinade with olive oil lemon juice garlic and a few other dried herbs. Once I'd cut the chicken up and dumped it in a bag with the liquid I closed it up and stuck it in the fridge.

I scrubbed peeled and cubed several sweet potatoes. I tossed them with oil and stuck them in the oven to roast. I'd nuke a big bag of frozen broccoli later and add it to the containers.

Two hours later I'd just finished cooking up the chicken breast and put it in the glass containers I'd bought for this specific purpose and never used.

I put several in the fridge but kept two out. I hadn't seen Sierra in a couple of days and I needed to check in.

I also needed to get out of the house because the longer I sat around with nothing to do the stronger the temptation to call Brody became.

It was a little early for dinner but the food was still hot so I grabbed the two containers and took them with me. I stopped at the local taco joint for a couple of half-and-half teas. East Texas restaurants tended to make sweet tea with so much sugar it was nearly syrup. So Sierra and I had to compromise and get our tea with half sweet and half unsweet. It was usually perfect then.

I parked behind the shop and carried the food and drinks inside. I managed to time it just right during the lull between the afternoon and after-dinner crowds. When I walked in the door I surprised Lee who was pulling a container of ice cream out of the walk-in freezer.

She jumped and bobbed the container. "Cam! I wasn't...I mean we didn't realize you were coming in today."

Lee was only a few years younger than me but it felt more like a decade.

"I brought an early dinner for Sierra. How's your first weekend shift going?"

"It's been busy but educational" she answered. She seemed almost hesitant.

I wanted to tell her not to stress out about talking to me but I had a feeling it wouldn't help. I vaguely remembered Lee from my high school days. She'd always been a little quiet a lot sweet and sometimes surprisingly sassy. I also recalled one occasion where I'd seen her go off on one of her brothers because he'd played some sort of prank on her.

She would have to warm up to me in her own time. I was hoping it would only take a week or so because when she forgot to be nervous around me or Sierra for that matter she was hilarious. Lee had a sly sense of humor and

when she didn't suppress it she made me laugh.

"I'm giving you a week" I declared.

Her eyes widened and I realized how my statement sounded.

"Don't look so scared Lee. I mean I'm giving you a week to stop treating me like your boss."

"But you are my boss" she replied hesitantly.

"Yes but I'm only three years older than you not twenty. You don't need to treat me with deference. Unless you wish to address me as Your Highness. That would be kinda cool. Especially if I started wearing a tiara."

Lee laughed and shook her head. "I never know if you're serious."

"Only about half the time" I answered with a shrug. "But you can never be sure which half it is. I like to keep my family friends and co-

workers on their toes. Makes life more interesting."

Her answering smile was slow as if she wasn't sure how to take me. "So in other words I shouldn't be scared of you or show you too much respect or you'll run right over me?"

"Now you're getting it."

She laughed. The sound was quiet but still pleasant.

"All right I'm going to borrow Sierra for a little while and feed her dinner. I'm not sure if you've experienced it yet but she can get hangry."

Lee shrugged. "She's less moody than my brothers even when she's hangry so I wouldn't notice."

"How are your brothers?" I asked as I followed her back to the front of the store.

"Still hellions even though they're all supposedly grown" she answered.

I laughed. I remembered the Prescott boys. There were four of them all older than Lee. No wonder she tended to be so quiet. They probably ran roughshod all over her.

"I'm sure your mama keeps them in line."

For the first time since we hired her I saw a hint that Lee had a spunky side. She actually rolled her eyes. "They have her fooled. Totally and completely. She calls them her angels."

As I recalled Mrs. Prescott was a tall athletic woman who looked like she could kick ass and take names. And I often saw her leaving the grocery store with one of those cardboard six-packs for wine bottles. Of course if I had four kids like the Prescott boys I'd probably drink a lot of wine too.

"Mama's boys. The lot of them."

She chuckled and moved behind the counter to put the container of ice cream in the cooler.

"What are you doing here?" Sierra asked.

I lifted the bag that held our food. "I brought you some dinner."

"And your new boyfriend isn't attached to your hip?" she asked. "Or your lips for that matter?"

"Har har. Do you want food or not?"

"Depends. What did you bring me?"

"Chicken sweet potatoes and broccoli."

Sierra sighed. "Nothing fried? Or covered in cheese sauce?"

I shook my head. "Not today. But if you play your cards right I might make you some cheese sauce tomorrow."

"But will that help the broccoli you brought me today?"

"Do you want the damn food or not?" I asked cocking my hip and staring at her.

"Well since it's here and I'm starving I guess I'll take it" she said with a sigh. She glanced at Lee and Kelly. "Will y'all be okay for a little while?"

Kelly looked out at the nearly empty dining area. "Yeah it's pretty slow right now."

I turned and headed toward my office. Usually I would eat in the kitchen but I knew Sierra would want to talk about my naked weekend with Brody and I definitely wasn't going to do that where my other employees might overhear.

Sierra followed me and took her apron off when I unlocked the door and went inside. I set the food out as she hung the apron up on one of the hooks by the door.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah why wouldn't it be?"

"Um because I expected you to still be all over Brody until it was time to come to work tomorrow. Did y'all already have a fight?"

I stared at her in surprise. "A fight? Why would we be fighting?"

"I don't know" she said waving her arms around. "You tell me."

"Sierra everything's fine. Brody and I are adults. We can spend time away from each other to do things to live our lives etcetera. Just because we're having sex doesn't mean we have to spend every waking minute together."

"Maybe not

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etcetera. Just because we're having sex doesn't mean we have to spend every waking minute together."

"Maybe not but usually after the first time people have sex they go through a sort of honeymoon phase where they want to be around the other person all the time. I'm sure you've at least heard of that before right?"

"Yes I've heard of it before" I answered dryly. "I've even experienced it once or twice."

"Then why are you cooking me dinner instead of eating it off of Brody's naked ass?" she asked.

My lip curled a little at her words. Brody had a very nice ass but I didn't necessarily want to eat food off of it.

"Please you said you'd eat bonbons off Chris Evans' butt when we watched The Avengers that one time. And you haven't been in love with him for over half your life."

I put the glass container with her food on the other side of the desk and stuck a fork in it.

"First of all you said that not me."

"I did?"

"Yep. I don't judge you for that at all but I don't think I'd eat anything off anyone's ass thank you."

"Are you sure? I could have sworn that was you" she said.

"Enough Sierra. I didn't say it."

"Fine" she replied as she flopped down in the chair. She studied the food for a moment. "This actually looks pretty good. Thanks for making me dinner."

"You're welcome." I sat in my chair and opened my own container. The food was still hot and smelled just as delicious now as it had at the house.

Sierra took her first bite and raised her eyebrows as though she was shocked. "Wow."

"Don't act so surprised. You know I can cook."

"Yes but I didn't know you could cook healthy food that actually tasted good."

I rolled my eyes and didn't respond. If I let her bait me into an argument my food would be cold before I had a chance to eat it.

"So why are you home again?" she asked.

I finished chewing the bite of chicken I'd just stuck into my mouth. "Because I can't dive into this headfirst."

"Why not?" Sierra asked. "I mean if it were any other guy I would completely understand that and tell you that you were being really fucking smart. But this is Brody. I thought you were going to eat yourself into a sugar coma when he married that chick while we were in college."

I shot her a narrow-eyed glare. "I thought we agreed not to talk about that again."

"Can you gained five pounds in a week because you ate nothing but junk food while you moped on the couch. This guy means a lot to you. It's obvious he did even back when you pretended like you couldn't stand him."

"I couldn't stand him back then" I stated forgetting all about my determination not to be drawn into an argument with her.

"You always said that. And you acted like it but I could tell it wasn't one hundred percent true. Every time you told me stories about your childhood and you said his name you looked different."

"How could I look different?" I scoffed. "Other than making a face every time I mentioned him."

"You would always smile when you talked about the things he did or the trouble you got into together. And you looked...softer."

I couldn't say anything about that so I took another bite of my dinner.

Sierra sensed my change in mood and changed the subject. Partially anyway. "So how was your weekend? Really I mean."

I hesitated before answering. "It was amazing."

Sierra studied me. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I'm afraid it might be" I admitted. "I didn't want to leave today."

"Then why did you?" Sierra asked looking at me like I was stupid. "I told you I could handle the shop for the weekend."

"Because I can't treat this relationship the same way I've treated others. Brody is different and I don't want to screw it up."

"The fact that you're aware of that means you won't let it happen" she retorted.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"You're also not the only person involved in your relationship. Brody has some responsibility in this too."

"I know I know" I replied. "But that doesn't mean I shouldn't do everything I can to make this work."

"How do you know that doesn't include spending every waking moment with Brody Murphy?"

"It's time to change the subject" I stated. She was giving me a headache. "How are things going with Lee?"

"She's a great worker and extremely bright. But she's quiet. And I think sometimes I scare her."

I laughed. "I doubt that. She has four older brothers and they're all completely nuts."

"As in crazy or just bad boys?" she asked.

I shook my head. "They weren't bad per se. Just rambunctious. Always up to some sort of mischief. And there wasn't a month that didn't go by without her mom bringing one of them into the office for some cut sprain or broken bone. With anyone else my dad might have thought it was abuse but those boys played rough and they didn't cut Lee any slack." I laughed a little. "I saw her take down the youngest brother once. I'm not sure what he did but it was my senior year of high school. He was a junior and she'd just started her freshman year. He was a foot taller than her and outweighed her by at least thirty or forty pounds maybe more and she took him down like that." I snapped my fingers in demonstration.

"Wow. I would never have thought she had it in her."

"It's always the quiet ones" I said with a grin.
"Which makes me glad she's working for us. I

bet she'll be able to keep any misbehaving high school kids in line when they come in."

Sierra finished the last bite of her dinner dropped her fork in the container and leaned back in the chair rubbing her neck. "God how did you do this for the past few years? You've been essentially working seven days a week."

"When you love your work it's not work" I answered with a shrug.

"I love my job but even I need a day off once in a while."

"What's your point?" I asked.

"That it's not healthy for you to work seven days a week for months and years on end. You need time to rest. Time to have a life."

I sighed and put my fork in my own container. "I know. I figured that out."

"When?"

"Recently."

"How recently?" Sierra asked.

"Earlier today" I mumbled.

She tilted her head back and laughed. "Did it hurt?"

I scowled at her but she kept laughing anyway.

"I finally realized that I needed to have a life. Not just a boyfriend or a man in my life but friends. Hobbies."

"You don't have hobbies?" she asked clutching her chest in mock horror.

"Oh and you have a lot?" I shot back.

Sierra did exactly what I anticipated and deflected. "Well since you've had your epiphany why don't you rethink your decision not to spend time with Brody tonight?"

"I don't know. I think I'll let him decide."

Sierra gave me a confused look but I didn't clarify.

"Okay well if you're done I'm going to take my dishes and go home."

"Should I check for a sock on the door before I come in tonight?" Sierra asked as she rose and handed me the container that once held her dinner.

"What do you think this is the eighties?"

"With you I never know."

I rolled my eyes and stacked the containers in the reusable grocery bag I'd used to carry them in with. "You're a nut."

"Yes but I'm your nut." She studied me. "I wonder if Lee's brothers are hot as well as

crazy. That could be fun. Think she'd introduce me to them?"

It was my turn to laugh. I shook my head.
"They're all married. To women even scarier than their mother."

Her eyes widened. "Really? What happened to the wild ones?"

"They were captured and tamed."

She grinned. "So sad when the bad boys are reformed."

"Maybe someday you'll have a bad boy of your very own to domesticate" I said.

"A girl can dream."

I carried everything out to my car forcing myself not to go back out to the front to check on things. Sierra and I had hired Lee for a reason. I had to loosen my grip on the business a little at some point. I was only one person and there

was no way I could take care of every teeny tiny detail and not lose my sanity.

It was time to get back to that life I was telling Sierra I wanted.

25

As I finished washing the last dish and stuck it on the drain board my cell phone rang.

I picked it up and couldn't stop the dopey grin that spread across my face when I saw Brody's name.

"Hey whatcha doin'?" I asked when I answered.

"Thinking about you."

My dopey grin got even wider. "Oh really? I like the sound of that."

"Did you get your stuff done?" he asked.

"Yeah I did. I'm actually getting a little bored."

"Ah. Does this mean we can talk on the phone for a while?"

"Actually I was thinking you could come over and watch movies in my basement. My parents won't be home until tomorrow morning. We could you know do stuff."

Brody chuckled. "And what sort of stuff might that be?"

"I don't know. Maybe fool around a little."

"Hmmm I don't know if that's enough incentive."

"Fine I'll share my ice cream with you" I offered.

"Ice cream?" he asked his tone bored.

"Well it's a new flavor I thought you might like. Are Heath bars still your favorite?"

"Yes."

"Then you might want to come over."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Um do you want to uh..."

"Spend the night?" he finished for me.

"Yes."

"Yes I do" he agreed.

"Then I'll see you in ten minutes."

I took those ten minutes to freshen up and put on a cute camisole edged in lace and a pair of thin cotton shorts. Then I changed back into the tee and shorts I'd been wearing before. Then I stripped down to my bra and panties and stared at the contents of my closet for way too long.

So long that the doorbell rang.

"Shit."

I grabbed the first thing within arm's reach and slipped it on. It ended up being a cotton dress with narrow straps. It was loose and comfortable. The kind of thing I wore when I intended to hang out around the house or go grocery shopping.

I walked to the front door barefoot and opened it. I was immediately confronted by the sight of Brody squared off with a huge raccoon. The animal was so chubby that his belly nearly brushed the ground when he stood on all fours.

Brody stood motionless his hands out to his sides. "Why is he looking at me like that?"

"Shit. I forgot to put out his food this weekend."

Without taking his eyes off the raccoon Brody asked me "Is he planning to eat me in retaliation?"

I bit back a laugh. "I doubt it. He's just a little guy."

"Are you laughing at me right now? If I get bitten by a pissed off raccoon with rabies you will nurse me back to health. If you don't I'm telling your mom that you stood idly by and laughed while the damn thing chewed on me."

I gasped. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me."

I growled and yanked the lid off the tin I kept on the table by the front door. I tossed the dog treat I dug out of it across the porch and onto the ground. With the scritch of little claws the raccoon lumbered off the porch and went after the treat.

"Okay get in here" I said. "And close the door behind you."

As soon as Brody stepped inside I turned and headed toward the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To feed Gary so he won't pop out and scare the shit out of Sierra when she comes home in a little bit."

I heard the front door close and Brody followed me. "Is this something he does regularly?"

I shrugged one shoulder and I went into my pantry to grab the stainless steel bowl from the top shelf along with the food I used to feed Gary. "Only if I forget to feed him."

I'd just placed the bowl on the counter and opened the container of dog food when I heard a feminine shriek from out front followed by a strange hissing noise.

That was all followed by Sierra screaming my name as she pounded on the front door.

"Open the door Cam! There's a hissing rodent on the front porch!"

"Go let her in" I commanded Brody.

"No way."

I groaned and shoved the bowl of food against his belly. "Fine. I'll let her in. You go put that on the back porch."

He opened his mouth to argue so I just pointed at the back door without a word.

"Shit. Fine."

As he marched toward the back door I hurried to the front. I could hear the sound of Sierra's key jiggling in the lock but the door was still secured. I flipped the deadbolt and unlocked the knob. Then I jumped back as the door flew open and Sierra tumbled inside cussing and panting.

I planted myself in the doorway and put my hands on my hips. "You should be ashamed of yourself Gary."

The creature on my front porch went from aggressive to cowed in one blink. I sighed when

he put his little hands over his eyes as though I wouldn't be able to see him if he couldn't see me.

"Your food is on the back porch. I'm sorry I forgot."

Gary lowered one paw and stared at me a hopeful gleam in his eye.

"Go on. Go eat. I won't forget again."

I stepped back inside and grabbed the door. By the time I pulled it shut Gary was gone.

When I turned around Sierra and Brody were standing behind me staring at me in shock.

"What?"

"Did you just tell off a raccoon?" Sierra asked.

"Yes. He's a smart bugger."

"He's rabid" she grumbled. "I can't believe you're still feeding him."

"He's a little guy. How badly could he hurt you?"

Sierra's eyes bugged out of her head. "That damn thing probably weighs thirty or forty pounds! Haven't you seen that video of the woman fighting off the raccoon in her backyard? I don't want that to be me!"

"It doesn't matter. Brody fed him so he'll move on to the next house on his route."

"He has a route?" Brody asked. "Like a paperboy?"

"More like a pub crawl. He gets fed at several houses in town. I mentioned that before right?"

They were both staring at me and shaking their heads as if they couldn't believe what a sucker I was.

I ignored both of them and headed toward the kitchen. Fortune wasn't in my favor because they followed me snickering.

"Both of y'all can just zip it

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snickering.

"Both of y'all can just zip it" I grumbled as I grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge.

Sierra was still smirking when she said "I'm going to shower and go to bed. I'm not used to being on my feet all day. My fingers may be strong from typing but my legs are weak from being a paid couch potato."

Brody and I said goodnight to her and she disappeared down the hall to her room.

"Want something to drink?" I asked Brody.

"Water would be good."

I got a bottle for him and crossed the kitchen to hand it to him. He used his left hand to take the bottle but the fingers of his right hand wrapped around my wrist keeping me from pulling away.

I didn't resist but stepped closer. "What?"

Brody's fingers stroked the inside of my wrist so light it was nearly a tickle. "Why'd you change your mind about tonight?"

"I missed you" I admitted.

"You didn't have to leave at all. Or I could have come here if you needed to be home to do stuff."

"I know."

"Then why did you insist on staying away for the night?" he asked. His green gaze was probing but patient.

I took a deep breath and let it out on a long sigh. "Because I didn't want to make the same mistakes with you that I've made in the past."

Brody cocked his head. "Meaning?"

"I haven't dated a lot but I always just went with the flow. If I wanted to spend time with the guy I did. If I wanted time to myself I let him know."

"And what's wrong with that approach?" Brody asked.

"It got my heart broken a couple of times and broke another heart in the process. Things with you...are different. We have a past relationship and you're close with my entire family. I feel like I need to be careful."

"So you didn't want to leave?"

I shook my head but he just raised his eyebrows at me his expression expectant. Ugh. I hated it when he did that. If he wanted a verbal response when we were kids that was

the exact expression he wore. I wondered if it drove Jacks as crazy as it drove me.

"I didn't want to leave" I said aloud. Then I took it one step further and confessed something to him that might have him running away. "I'm not sure I'll ever want to leave."

Brody's fingers tightened on my wrist and he pulled me a little closer. "And you didn't want to admit that?"

"No" I whispered.

"Why?"

His mouth was less than an inch away. I could feel his breath against my lips.

"Because it's too soon. We've only been officially dating for a few weeks."

His lips brushed mine all too briefly then moved slightly away. "We get to decide what's too soon. And we've known each other for twenty

years. It's not like we met for the first time less than a month ago."

"This is different" I argued. "If we move too quickly and realize it was a mistake there are a lot of people that could be hurt beyond the two of us. Jacks my brother my parents. I don't want to screw it all up. I love that you're close to my family and I love Jacks."

"And me?" he prompted tugging me even closer until my body leaned into his.

My heart picked up and my breathing turned shallow. Shit. I wasn't ready to say this out loud. To him.

Was I?

"Hey" he said. His fingers released my wrist and lifted to my cheek. "Whatever you're feeling you can always be honest with me. Whether you think I'll want to hear it or not." A smile curved his lips. "And as I recall you always used to tell

me exactly what you thought when we were both teenagers."

"I—" I stopped and licked my lips my eyes glued to his. "I do love you Brody but—"

I didn't get to finish my thought because he kissed me again. It was just as light as the previous caress but it shut me up.

"I love you too."

Wait. What?

"What did you say?" I asked.

Brody grinned. "I believe we just declared our love for each other."

I had no idea how to respond to that. I knew I loved Brody. When I was younger I loved him the way a child loved.

But now it was different.

The love I had for him was deeper. All-encompassing. He was no longer the perfect boy on the pedestal. He was a man with flaws. Who made mistakes.

But he also made me laugh. And I felt safe with him as I did with my father and brother. Since the moment I'd met him I sensed that I could tell him anything and he would listen without judgment. He would help me if I needed it.

"So what did you want to do tonight?" he asked.

I blinked at him my mind still swirling from everything he'd said.

"Earth to Cameron. Are you in there?"

I scowled at him. "Way to ruin the moment Broderick."

His grin turned positively wicked. "I wasn't the one standing here drooling."

My fist found his gut though I kept the contact light. "I changed my mind. You're a jerk. I don't want you here."

He wrapped me in a tight hug laughing in my ear. "You're a horrible liar."

I groaned when he squeezed me a little tighter the way he used to when we were younger. He'd give me bear hugs so tight that I couldn't breathe.

"Fine" I gasped when he released me and let me drop back on my feet. "I'll let you stay for a little while. But no sleepover. You've ruined it."

"Bet I could change your mind" he murmured into my ear.

The pure promise in his voice made me zone out again. I didn't shake myself out of it until he laughed again.

"We'll see" I replied. "Let's get our drinks and a snack. I DVR'ed a show that I love."

We did all that and curled up together on the couch to watch the show. After about ten minutes of Brody asking me question after question I stopped the episode and started the first one.

I'd discovered another flaw in Brody Murphy—he ruined movies and TV shows.

But I could live with it.

26

It was official.

I was in love with Brody Murphy and he was in love with me.

We were a couple. Together.

If I were any giddier about it I'd be doodling Mrs. Brody Murphy and Mrs. Cameron Murphy all over my paperwork at the office.

We'd also officially made Sierra sick. She'd gotten called back to Dallas for work and wasn't

sure when she would be back. It was probably a good thing because she and Ben had one hell of a fight the night that he told her he loved her. I hated that they weren't speaking that Sierra was running from the love that Ben offered her but I couldn't fix it for her.

I had hope they would work it out but a little space would be a good move for her. Sometimes Sierra needed a fresh perspective and distance to see a situation differently. I had faith she would realize what she'd found in Ben. Plus the closet romantic in me loved the idea that if no when she and Ben got married we might share a last name. Like sisters.

Maybe I was getting ahead of myself when it came to Sierra and Ben but I didn't think so. When it came to the idea of marrying Brody I was almost certain he was thinking along the same lines. We weren't going to rush but he made it very clear that was where he saw us heading.

I loved Jacks and her attitude toward me suggested she liked me a lot but she was six. It wouldn't be right for her to come home from a two-week vacation to find me living in her house as if I belonged there.

Speaking of coming home from vacation today was the big day.

As nice as it had been to have a little honeymoon period with Brody I knew he missed his daughter. I missed her too. She was a lot of fun and she reminded me so much of Brody when he was younger.

And she reminded me a little of me.

I could also see that Monica's handling of the situation was causing major strain in Brody as well. Every time he called to talk to Jacks Monica wouldn't answer. The first time it happened she didn't call him back until he left a message that his next call wouldn't be to her but to his attorney. Which had been a good twelve hours after his first call.

After that it would take her at least an hour sometimes two or three to return his calls.

He was careful not to say anything about it to Jacks because he didn't want to upset his daughter. But there were several occasions where he asked her about whatever activity her mother used as an excuse for the delay in calling back and Jacks had no idea what he was talking about.

As the two weeks wore on I could see him becoming grimmer and grimmer. He spent a lot of time on the phone with his lawyer and the private investigator he hired to keep an eye on Monica.

He didn't talk about it very often but I knew he was still worried his ex would load his daughter up on a plane and have her in another country before he could do anything about it.

He didn't shy away from the topic when I brought it up but he wasn't verbose either. So I let it lie.

I'd offered to let him have the evening alone with her but it was Jacks herself who blew that out of the water. She told Brody last night that she wanted her first dinner at home to be the three of us. And that she wanted me to make hot dogs cheese fries and maybe even some chocolate hazelnut swirl ice cream.

I was nervous.

Well not exactly nervous. Just jittery.

Why?

Because Monica was bringing Jacks directly to Brody's house. In fact she'd insisted on it.

I'd offered to come over after the drop off but Brody wouldn't hear of it.

So now I was dressed in a pair of cuffed khaki shorts and a bright aqua t-shirt. I'd been tempted to do something fancy with my hair or add a little more make-up than usual but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

I wasn't sure how to handle this. I knew Brody and Monica had their issues but I didn't want to contribute. And honestly I didn't like the woman. I didn't know her well but I remembered the few times I'd been around her and each time she gave me the impression of a spoiled vindictive woman who refused to compromise.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that it didn't matter if I liked Monica or not. I needed to put on my big girl pants and be nice to her because she was Jacks' mom and if my relationship with Brody went where I hoped it would she'd be in my life. A lot.

I had everything ready to go. The cheese was shredded the green onions were chopped and bacon pieces were fried. We'd be having frozen

French fries baked in the oven but Jacks wouldn't care.

I'd put the hot dogs on just a few minutes before we were ready to eat steaming them first and then broiling them in the oven. I know I know grilled hot dogs sound awesome but for some reason I liked these better.

As I fidgeted on the couch Brody sat next to me scrolling through channels on the TV. I wasn't sure if it was my nerves or the fact that he didn't even pause long enough to read the descriptions of the shows before moving on but it was driving me nuts.

"Can you pick something please? I'm getting a little motion sick."

Brody stared at me in consternation. "I'm sorry?"

"You're going through the channels so fast it's making me dizzy."

He studied me with wary eyes as though he wasn't quite sure if I was trying to be polite or if I was so irritated that I was fighting back the urge to yank the remote out of his hand and whack him on the back of the head with it.

If he voted for the second option he'd be right.

Slowly Brody held the remote out to me.
"Maybe you can find something. None of these shows look interesting."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him how he would know since he didn't watch any of them for more than the time it took to blink.

I bit the snarky response back and said
"Thanks."

I'd just selected a show about game wardens in Texas when the doorbell rang. Brody was on his feet and heading for the door before I even put the remote down.

I got to my feet and followed him. I heard the door open and Jacks' piercing squeal. As I rounded the corner and came down the hall I could see Brody kneeling on the floor squeezing Jacks tight.

Monica stood behind them her arms crossed over her chest. Even though it was a Sunday afternoon she was wearing a pair of white slacks that belted at her waist and a severely tailored rose-colored blouse. The blouse had tiny white flowers all over it. Her dark brown hair hung to her shoulders in a sleek shiny bob and stylish oversized black sunglasses covered the upper part of her face.

When she looked up and saw me her entire body stilled. I couldn't see exactly what direction her eyes were pointed but my skin burned so I was pretty sure it was because she was glaring at me.

I came forward and forced myself to smile. "Hi Monica."

One of her eyebrows arched above the rim of her sunglasses. "Hello. Cameron is it?"

I nodded and stopped a couple of feet behind Brody and Jacks. As I watched them I couldn't decide what to do with my hands.

Brody straightened from his crouch and reached out to grasp the handle of Jacks' suitcase.

"Thanks for bringing Jacks home" Brody said. "It sounds like she had a great time."

Monica smiled but it was insincere. "No problem. I would love to be able to do it more often."

I saw Brody's shoulders tense infinitesimally.

"I'm sure we can discuss it sometime."

Monica's face shifted and once again I felt my skin practically blistering beneath her regard. "We definitely will."

Shit. Fuck. Damnation. That sounded like a threat. And she was

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Shit. Fuck. Damnation. That sounded like a threat. And she was without a doubt staring me down.

Monica glanced down at her daughter. “I’ll see you soon Jacqueline” she said leaning over to press a kiss to her forehead.

She said her daughter’s name with an accent one I couldn’t quite place. Maybe French? It sounded more like Jah-clean rather than Jack-a-lyn as most Americans might say it.

Jacks made a face. “Mom” she muttered.

Monica heaved an exasperated sigh. “I am not calling you by a boy’s name darling. You were named after your great-grand-mère.”

I held my breath to keep from laughing. It appeared Monica and Marilyn Murphy had something in common—a desire to be French. Monica’s family had been in Texas for generations. By now the descendants of that family should be calling their grandparents Mawmaw and Pawpaw.

Jacks didn't say anything else but I could see the defeated cast to her face and the way her shoulders drooped.

"Jacks Cam has something to show you in the kitchen. Why don't y'all go in there while I talk to your Mom for a minute?" Brody suggested.

Jacks nodded gave her mother a quick hug and trudged down the short hall that led to the kitchen. I followed even though I really REALLY wanted to know what Brody was going to say.

But I couldn't. I had to make sure Jacks was distracted. Even without a word or look from Brody I knew why he asked us to come into the kitchen.

He wasn't happy with Monica and he didn't want to have the discussion in front of his daughter.

"So what did you have to show me?" Jacks asked.

For crying out loud Brody. Why couldn't you have given me a suggestion when you tossed me to the wolves? Or in this case wolf.

"Uh dinner" I said. "We made exactly what you asked for. Hot dogs and cheese fries." I leaned forward and whispered "And I may have brought your favorite ice cream for dessert."

Jacks' face lit up. "Yeah! I've missed your cooking. Both Mom and my grandparents have a chef and everything's always fancy and tastes weird. And when I ask for regular food Mom gets mad."

I could hear the murmur of their voices growing louder. Not good.

"Hey let's go out in the backyard. Your dad said something about getting a pool and we should figure out the perfect spot for it."

"Really?" Jacks asked her voice vibrating with excitement.

Ha! Take that Brody. You shouldn't have thrown me to the wolves.

"Yep" I lied.

Jacks practically skipped out the door that led to the backyard. As I followed I heard Monica's strident voice but it echoed so much in the hall that I couldn't make out her words. Brody's deeper voice cut through but it wasn't as loud.

"Do not start this shit Monica because you will not win."

I shut the door behind us. Jacks didn't need to hear her parents fighting. Hell I didn't need to hear it.

Jacks and I walked around the backyard for about ten minutes before Brody appeared on the deck.

"Hey what are y'all doing?" he asked.

Jacks jumped up and down and clapped her hands a few times. "We're picking out the place for the pool!" She ran toward him and jumped into his arms.

"What pool?" he asked looking at me.

It was Jacks that answered. "Cam said you said you were getting a pool."

He looked at me and his expression said I was definitely in trouble. I shrugged and crossed my arms over my chest. I was in trouble?

He had no idea what it was like when I was pissed off.

Well maybe he had a little idea since he'd grown up around me but I was an adult now.

And a hell of a lot more devious.

"I think you should put it right by the deck"
Jacks continued oblivious to the looks flying between the adults around her. "That way you

still have some yard behind it and we can play soccer and stuff."

"Uh..."

"Y'all can play all the soccer you want I'm just gonna lounge by the pool in my bikini and drink something fancy and tropical."

At my announcement Brody's expression changed completely. "I think you're right Jacks. But it'll have to be a fairly small pool or it'll take up the whole yard."

"Small is okay" Jacks agreed. "But maybe with a slide?"

"Sounds good darlin'. Why don't you go wash your hands and set the table so we can eat?"

Jacks gave her father a pleading look. "Can we do a picnic in the den and watch a movie while we eat instead?"

Brody pretended to think about it for a long moment before he answered "Yeah that would be okay but you have to help me clean up all the crumbs after."

"I can do that!" Jacks exclaimed before she ran into the house.

I sauntered toward Brody. "Caved like a house of cards" I teased. "You're nothing but a big marshmallow."

Brody leaned his elbows against the railing on the deck. "Actually it was the image of you in a bikini that gave me the final push."

Speaking of pushing I nudged his shoulder with my hand. "You'd give your daughter whatever she wanted just to see her smile at you the way she just did."

He grabbed my wrist and yanked me closer. I fell against him with an oomph. "Don't ever tell her that or she'll abuse her power for evil rather than good."

I laughed tilting my head back so I could look up at him.

Brody brushed his fingers over my cheek. "I love you you know."

God would hearing those words ever stop affecting me?

"I love you too" I replied. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah."

"So when things are fine you and Monica yell at each other?" I asked.

Brody sighed. "Obviously."

I squeezed him a little tighter with both arms. "C'mon. Spit it out. You'll feel better."

"Monica has a problem with me having a girlfriend who spends so much time with our daughter."

I frowned a little. "She has a problem with me?"

"I don't think it's you per se" Brody replied. "It's more of the fact that there's another woman in Jacks' life that gets her full attention. Until I started dating you she was the most important woman in her life. Now she feels like she's being replaced and she doesn't like it. Jacks doesn't give her as much attention and she talks about you all the time."

"Doesn't Monica realize that to get attention from her daughter she has to give it?"

"Monica is all about Monica. Her parents were persistent in teaching her that she was the center of the universe and she hasn't forgotten the lesson not one little bit."

I made a face. "Ugh. How could she not see what a special little girl her daughter is?"

Brody shrugged. "Anyway there's nothing she can do. Not without getting off her ass and

she's as lazy as she is selfish. She's not going to make the effort unless she has to."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help okay?"

"You're already doing it" he answered. He hugged me a little tighter. "Just by being here."

I smiled at him again. "Ha! I told you I could make people happy by my mere presence."

"You were ten at the time" he deadpanned.

"Doesn't mean I wasn't right" I pointed out.

His only answer was to kiss me.

27

I hadn't believed that Monica would actually approach me. She was haughty aloof and snobby. Maybe she was confrontational with Brody but I doubted that she would behave that way with me.

I discovered that I was wrong the next Monday when I was alone at the shop prepping for the following week. And boy when I was wrong I was damn wrong.

I was scrubbing the heck out of the floor something I did once or twice a month. We mopped every night but sometimes dirt and sticky splatters remained on the bottom edge of the tile that ran around the base of all the walls in place of baseboards.

Which meant that I was on my hands and knees when she knocked on the front door of the store.

I looked up saw Monica standing there in a lavender sheath dress that clung to her figure in all the right places but skimmed just enough that it wasn't trashy.

"Seriously?" I muttered.

Not only was I on my hands and knees but I was also wearing my oldest rattiest t-shirt and

shorts because I was using bleach water to scrub the tiles and I didn't want to ruin any of my nicer clothes.

Monica shoved her sunglasses up onto the top of her head and gave me a pointed look as she knocked again.

Ugh. I tossed the rag I was using in the bucket and stripped off the rubber gloves I was wearing. They were bright yellow and had a white ruffle dotted with sunflowers near the elbow.

Monica gave them a disdainful look as I dropped them next to the bucket.

I didn't roll my eyes but it was a near thing. If she hoped to make me feel small by sneering at the fact that I worked hard she was definitely going to fail. I was proud of how much I'd accomplished and all of it through my own sweat and effort.

I was pretty sure that Monica hadn't worked a day in her life.

I unlocked the front door and planted myself in front of it. "Hello Monica."

"Cameron." She didn't say anything else as if she was waiting for me to speak or do something. When I didn't she asked "Aren't you going to invite me inside?"

"I haven't decided yet. How about you tell me why you're here? I'll have a better idea of what I want to do then."

She seemed taken aback by my words. I didn't want to provoke her but she had no reason to come see me unless she intended to stir up trouble.

Or use me to make peace with Brody in which case I didn't want to do. If she wanted to improve her relationship with her ex-husband she needed to approach him directly. And apologize.

"I want to talk to you about Jacqueline" she said.

"Okay" I replied without moving from my spot in the middle of the doorway.

"Are we really going to have this conversation out here on the sidewalk?"

"We don't have to" I answered. "We don't have to speak at all."

Monica sighed a sound of pure frustration.

"Look Broderick isn't listening to me about this so I thought maybe you would be more reasonable. Obviously I was wrong." She shook her head but continued. "Bottom line I don't think it's a good idea for you to be spending so much time around Jacqueline. It will make it more difficult for her when her father and I get back together."

My train of thought screeched to a complete halt. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Monica gave me a self-satisfied smirk.
"Broderick and I will be getting back together.
And your continued presence in Jacqueline's
life until that happens will only confuse her
further."

I threw my head back and laughed. Monica
stared at me with equal parts confusion and
irritation.

"I'm not sure why you find this so funny." Her
tone was haughty and she squared her
shoulders leaving her spine rigid.

"I find it hilarious" I said. "And also pathetic."

Monica's eyes narrowed. "Pardon me?"

I stopped smiling then and stared at her. "It's
clear to me that you're attempting to manipulate
his life and therefore your daughter's by coming
to me in an effort to stir the pot."

She gaped at me. "Why do you think Broderick won't let you stay the night? It's because he knows that Jacqueline wouldn't understand when they move back home."

"Brody doesn't ask me to leave. I chose to because Jacks is a six-year-old girl and I don't want her to feel like she has no choice in when I become a more permanent part of her life."

Monica's eyes widened.

"Now I will be sure to let Brody know you dropped by and I appreciate your faux concern over my feelings. Wait you don't care about my feelings. But that's fine. Please excuse me I have more work to do." I reached out to grab the door to close it.

"I'll pay you a hundred thousand dollars to disappear from his life."

I paused and closed my eyes. Who the hell did this woman think she was?

Monica seemed to mistake my stillness as interest in her offer because she continued "I'm sure that amount of money would make your life a great deal easier."

I lifted my head and stared at her. "Keep your money. Brody and Jacks are worth a lot more than that."

She took a tiny step closer and it took all my willpower not to punch her in the face. "Fine. Two hundred and fifty thousand. I'm sure that's what you make in five years at this place."

She wasn't far off the mark. Even as the owner of the shop I only paid myself a modest salary. The rest of the money went back into the business. I could have given myself a larger paycheck but I wanted to pay Sierra back for her investment as quickly as possible. As my best friend I didn't want to be indebted to her any longer than I had to be.

I leaned forward slightly and the look on my face must have been frightening because she

retreated a bit. "No amount of money you could pay me would be enough. I love Brody. And your daughter. I can't be bought. Or scared off." A speculative look crossed her face and I laughed. "And good luck finding skeletons in my closet. The few I have are no more embarrassing than anything else I've done in my life."

"I will get you out of his life" Monica replied.

"You'll try" I corrected. "And you'll fail. Because unlike you I'm not afraid to work for what I want. And when all else fails I will play as dirty as I have to when someone messes with me or the people I love."

"You have no idea what dirty means" she threatened. "But you will."

"I'm sure you're familiar with dirty" I shot back. "And you may be a nasty vindictive snake but you're missing something I have."

Her gaze skimmed over me and she scoffed. "I doubt that."

"You're missing people in your life who truly love you. Who would do anything for you regardless of what was in it for them. I don't have to pay people to help me. I only have to ask."

"This is a waste of time" Monica said stepping back and pulling her sunglasses back down over her eyes. "But you will wish you'd taken the money. I guarantee it."

"Bye

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Monica. I hope you don't trip and fall into a lake. I'd prefer the opportunity to shove you myself."

I shut the door to the shop and locked it. I could feel her eyes on me as I walked away pulling my phone out of my pocket as I went. I stopped by the front counter leaned my hips back against it and lifted the phone to my ear after I selected Brody's name from my contact list.

I met Monica's gaze without flinching. I wanted her to know exactly what I was doing.

She tossed her head and stalked off before Brody picked up.

"Hey Cam. How's my woman today?"

An honest answer was the best choice. "I've been better."

"What happened?"

"Nothing much. I've been cleaning the base tile in the dining room on my hands and knees all morning and your ex just came by to try to bribe me to stay away from you. When that didn't work she threatened to "play dirty". Whatever that means."

Brody was silent. "I'll be there in ten minutes. Is she still there?"

"No. She left after I closed the door in her face and picked up the phone to call you."

"I'm guessing that's why the private investigator is calling me right this moment. If she comes back don't interact with her. If she doesn't leave call the sheriff. I'm on my way."

"She's gone Brody. You don't have to come here and—"

"I'm already on my way out to my car. I'll be there in five minutes."

I shut my mouth. While part of me hated that I was interrupting his workday with this drama the rest of me was relieved and happy that he was willing to drop whatever he was doing to ride to my rescue.

"I love you Cam."

"Love you too."

He disconnected and I lowered the phone staring at it.

I hadn't expected Brody to stop whatever he was doing and show up immediately. I figured he'd come by at lunch or later tonight but not right this moment.

I couldn't recall any of my boyfriends doing that before. Or maybe I'd just never bothered to call them because I knew I couldn't count on them.

I glanced up when a movement in the front window caught my attention. I saw a tall lean man across the street standing in front of a grey sedan. When he saw me looking he nodded his head.

Hmmm. I was betting that was the private investigator Brody hired. I wondered why he was still following Monica. I thought that he'd only asked him to keep an eye on Monica while Jacks was with her.

I nodded back and saw the quick flash of his teeth as he grinned at me. Since Brody was on his way I went back into the kitchen and washed my hands and arms up to my elbows. I'd been wearing gloves but I still smelled like bleach.

When I reached up to brush my hair out of my face I realized it was a bird's nest on my head. Crap.

I ran back into my office where I had a mirror on the wall and took a moment to release my hair brush it and smooth it back into a ponytail. I blotted my face with a tissue and then added a little pressed powder. Sadly there was nothing else I could do at the moment to improve my appearance.

It was just as well because I heard Brody knock on the back door. I hurried down the hall to the kitchen and lifted my eye to the peephole. Dad had insisted on having it installed when I started the business. At the time I'd thought he was

being overprotective but today I had a whole new appreciation for it.

Brody's angry face stared back at me.

I unlocked the door and threw it open. In the next breath he was inside with his arms around me. The door swung shut behind him locking automatically. Another feature Dad was adamant I have and that I'd cursed on occasion. But today I was glad for it.

"You okay?" Brody asked releasing me so he could lean back and look at me.

"I'm fine" I assured him. "I was upset while she was here but now I hope she slithers back under a rock."

"Slithers?" he asked his lips twitching.

"Well she did remind me a little of a snake getting ready to strike."

Brody shook his head. "What did she say?"

"Ugh. Do I have to repeat it?" I asked.

"Absolutely."

I sighed. "Well first she tried to convince me that you were getting back together and that my continued presence in Jacks' life would only confuse her. Then she offered me a hundred thousand dollars. When I told her that the two of you were worth more than that to me she offered me a quarter of a million dollars. After I turned that down she threatened me with vague and nefarious deeds."

"Nefarious?" Brody asked. The muscles in his jaw ticked and I could hear his molars grinding.

"Evil bad malicious. Don't you read?" I teased trying to lighten the mood. It wouldn't help matters in the least if he got upset and went off on his ex.

"And then?"

"I told her that I hoped she didn't fall into a lake because I wanted a chance to push her in myself."

And that did the trick. Brody stared at me as though I had three heads. "You said that?"

"Yeah. It's difficult to tell what her exact expression was but the best I could tell she appeared severely constipated."

Brody chuckled. "I bet she had no idea what to say to that. Monica isn't used to hearing the word 'no'."

I shrugged one shoulder. "Then it's past time for her to learn what the word 'no' sounds like." Then I frowned at him. "If she's never heard the word how did you end up getting divorced?"

"I never told her no. I just told her that I wouldn't stay married to someone who constantly cheated on me. She chose to ignore me. So I filed for a divorce. And during that time we only

spoke through our lawyers. It's only been the past few months that she'll deign to call me."

"I don't get it" I said.

"What?"

"How is Jacks such a wonderful well-adjusted child when one of her parents is like...well Monica?"

Brody sighed and released me putting a little distance between us. "I do everything I can to shield her from any tension between Monica and I. And I try not to say anything derogatory about her mom when she's around. Or ever. I don't want to get into the habit of badmouthing Monica because it would make it a lot easier to slip up in front of Jacks and say something I shouldn't."

I nodded. And yet again here was proof that Brody was better at this whole adulting thing than I was. But I also saw his point and I was going to try to follow that. It wouldn't be good for

me to say negative things about Jacks' mother either. I didn't want to put her in a position where she felt that she had to choose between the two of us.

"So what are we going to do?" I asked him.
"Because I have a feeling I provoked her today."

"We'll have to wait and see. And I'm going to talk to her and let her know that I don't appreciate her approaching the woman I love and offering her money to leave me."

I had a feeling that would go over as well as my conversation with her had today.

"Whatever happens" he continued reaching out and taking my hand. "We'll deal with it together okay?"

I had to hand it to him. When he said that to me I believed him completely.

Too bad he lied.

When Brody called me later that night I was smiling. On the nights that we didn't have plans together he called me in the evenings and we talked. It wasn't the same as seeing him and holding him but it was still better than nothing.

"Hey you're calling earlier than usual" I said by way of greeting.

"Yeah. Something came up and Jacks is with her grandparents tonight. I was wondering if I could come over."

He didn't sound very enthusiastic but I wrote it off to the trouble Monica caused earlier.

"Sure. I'd love to see you."

"I'll see you soon" he said.

Sierra was still in Dallas but she was supposed to be coming home later tonight. She said she would call me when she was on her way but I hadn't heard from her yet. She hadn't

mentioned Ben but I hadn't asked. I figured that conversation would be better face-to-face over ice cream.

When the doorbell rang I pulled the door open and pretty much jumped on Brody.

"Hey! I'm glad you were able to come over tonight."

I got my first obvious clue that something was wrong when he didn't give me his trademark tight squeeze. Instead he set me away from him his hands gentle but insistent.

"Brody?" I asked.

He took a deep breath but I already knew what was coming. It didn't lessen the pain when he said "I think we need to take a step back for a while."

"What?"

His eyes were distant and cold chips of emerald ice. "Jacks said something today that concerns me and I think it's best if you and I take a break from seeing each other until I'm sure that she really is okay with it."

I opened my mouth and then shut it immediately. What could I say to that? If I argued I was being selfish and didn't take Jacks' feelings into account. If I didn't argue then I didn't really care about him either. Proverbial rock meet hard place.

"What did she say?" I asked. "Did I do something to upset her?"

Brody shook his head. "As much as I hate to admit it Monica was right. You and I are moving far too quickly for Jacks to adjust. I thought she was handling it until today. She asked me if you were going to be her new mommy and if that meant she wouldn't be able to see her real mommy anymore. Then she started crying."

My heart broke a little. I never wanted that sweet girl to hurt. It was clear that she needed more time to figure out what was going on.

My lips were numb when I asked "How long do you think this break will need to be?"

"I don't know" Brody answered. "But it will be a while. I want her to feel confident and calm when you're around not scared or uncertain of what your role in her life will be."

I wanted to say something anything to change his mind. To convince him that we could make it work that I would do anything to make Jacks feel better.

"What about Sunday lunch?" I asked. "Are you still going to bring her? She'll be seeing me then." I couldn't prevent the last sentence from coming out with a bit of snark.

"We won't be there this weekend because we're going to take a short trip before school starts. But after that it's really up to you."

And just like that he pissed me the hell off.

"Up to me?" I asked my eyes narrowing.

"If you think it's best if we don't come I'll defer to your—"

I lifted a hand stopping his words. My heart ached and my blood pounded furious and hot through my veins. "Won't Jacks also wonder why I'm suddenly not in her life at all anymore? I agree that she should be your first priority in this mess but it was my impression that jerking my presence out of her life completely and without explanation might hurt her more."

Brody's jaw flexed and some of the iciness in his eyes melted. I couldn't read his expression but just looking at his face hurt.

"Then we'll be at your parents' for lunch the following Sunday." He drew in a deep breath and blew it out. "Please understand that I want

to make sure that Jacks is handling the changes in her life. I don't want her hurt."

"But fuck my feelings right?" I bit my lip hard after that question burst from me. Shit. I had to stay calm. Yelling and hurling accusations at him wasn't going to fix this mess.

His devotion to his daughter was a part of the reason I loved him so much. Because I'd daydreamed about how he would treat our children.

"Cam—"

"I'm sorry" I whispered. Pressure built in my chest filling my lungs and squeezing my heart. "That was unfair. I'm just..." I trailed off. I didn't want to admit that this was close to crushing my heart. That this didn't feel like a temporary solution

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but the prelude to a permanent break.

And this was also exactly what I was afraid of. I'd opened my mind and heart to him and he was turning away. Now I would have to be a grown-up and see him on Sundays around town or when he brought Jacks in for ice cream. And I would have to act like it wasn't killing me inside each and every time.

Brody's hands landed on my shoulders holding me tightly. I realized then that I'd closed my eyes.

"I'm not breaking up with you Cam" he insisted. "This isn't forever."

"So you're going to call me at night and maybe go to lunch with me when Jacks is in school or doing something else?"

Brody didn't answer but that was an answer in and of itself.

"That's what I thought" I said quietly. The pressure in my chest swelled until I couldn't contain it anymore. I took a deep gasping

breath and my eyes filled with tears. "So tell me again how this isn't a permanent break."

I shrugged off Brody's hands and struggled to hold back the tears. I wanted to scream and rage and tell him how unfair he was being. I didn't think this was about Jacks at all but whatever the reason was he wasn't willing to tell me.

Somehow I found the strength to stem the flood of tears. I inhaled and the air was sharp in my lungs. Everything burned. My heart. My lungs. My belly. The pain overwhelmed my body but there were no wounds.

I thought I'd been hurt by the men in my life before but this was different. This was more than hurt feelings or anger. This was true heartbreak.

"Do me a favor Brody. Give me a couple weeks before you bring Jacks into the shop. I don't want her to think that I'm angry with her."

"She wouldn't—"

"She might if I turn around and walk away at the very sight of you" I said. "When you're ready to be honest with me I might be willing to listen. But I don't believe for a single second that you're making a clean break like this because you don't want to hurt Jacks. If that were the case you would still spend time with me when she wasn't around. That's a convenient excuse. Whatever this is you're lying to me about it."

Brody's silence was my only answer.

"Okay then. I guess we know where we both stand. Just don't expect me to be waiting here if you change your mind."

I backed into the house and shut the door between us. I couldn't stand to look at him anymore.

I twisted the deadbolt and locked the doorknob. Then I leaned my head against the cool wood and tried to catch my breath.

I heard Brody's muffled curse through the door. He sounded as upset as I felt but I couldn't bring myself to care.

My worst fear had come true. I was in love with a man who didn't want me but I would have to see him constantly because he was practically a part of my family. I couldn't avoid him. I would have to see him and spend time around him on a regular basis.

I would have to watch as he moved on even if I hadn't.

I tried to breathe quietly to control the sobs rising in my chest but it was as impossible as stopping a tsunami. I gasped the sound incredibly loud in the stillness of my house. Then the tears erupted hot and fierce.

I collapsed to my knees my forehead still pressed to the door. I had no idea if Brody was still out there but it wouldn't matter if he was. There was no way I could stop crying even if I

knew for a fact that he was listening to every sound.

Fuck it. Let him hear. Let him know how badly he'd hurt me. I hoped the knowledge hit him square in the chest.

Brody was a good guy to the core. Knowing that he'd caused me pain would eat at him. And it was petty as hell but I was glad. If he wasn't as heartbroken as I was at least he would feel some small measure of it.

Somehow I managed to make my way to the couch. I curled up in one corner my knees to my chest and I cried until I was nearly sick. My eyes felt swollen and my head pounded.

As the storm of tears stopped I hobbled to the bathroom in the hall. My arms and legs were stiff as if I'd been sitting on the couch for hours rather than minutes.

I couldn't look at myself in the mirror when I flipped on the lights. I didn't need to see what

agony had wrought on me. Instead I grabbed a tissue from the box on the counter and blew my nose. Then I washed my face with cool water.

It helped but not enough. My eyes still felt raw.

There was only one thing for me to do at a moment like this.

I called my best friend.

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I had no idea how fast Sierra drove or if she had already been in her car and on her way home when I called but she showed up an hour later with chocolate pizza and a mysterious black box.

"What's in the box?" I asked her sniffing from my second bout of crying since I called her.

"A head" she replied.

"How very Seven of you."

She carried everything into the kitchen and pulled a six-pack of Dr. Pepper from the box. There was no telling why she decided to carry it in there.

"Tell me what happened."

I explained everything not just what Brody said but what I thought too. That he didn't want to take a break but end things completely. She listened without speaking though her face grew darker with each sentence.

When I finished she shook her head. "I can't believe he did this."

I went to the pantry and found the paper plates I kept for the nights I didn't feel like doing dishes. Which was pretty much every night. "I don't know why but neither can I."

"He's completely into you. When you're in the room no other woman exists."

"I feel like there's more to this story" I admitted.

"Want me to find out?" Sierra asked.

God was that tempting. Sierra could find out just about anything if she wanted to. Most of the time through pure research. And the rest of the time through a little creative computer work. I didn't ask and she didn't tell.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. As confused and hurt as I was I couldn't invade Brody's privacy like that.

"Well if you change your mind let me know. We can get to the bottom of this."

"What am I going to do?" I asked her. "I'll have to see him. He comes to my parents' place every Sunday for lunch and he brings Jacks into the shop. I don't want him to stop doing that because I don't want to hurt Jacks. She's too young. She won't understand why I'm suddenly not there."

"Right now you're going to eat junk food and let me cheer you up. Then eventually you're going to get through it. And Brody is going to realize that he's an idiot and kick himself in the ass. Repeatedly."

"You think?"

I put pizza on plates while Sierra popped open a couple of cans of Dr. Pepper. She handed one to me and then tapped her can against mine. "I know" she answered.

We spent the rest of the night eating pizza and chocolate drinking soda and watching Food Network. It was easy and soothing junk food and television with my best friend.

It helped. A little.

After we cleaned up and went to bed I lay under the covers and stared at the ceiling. When had everything gone wrong?

Just this morning he'd dropped everything to come riding to my rescue even though I hadn't necessarily needed it. Even if Jacks was struggling with our relationship there were ways for us to be together without rubbing her face in it.

No there had to be more to it than that.

But did it matter? Brody had made his decision without talking to me. Whatever the problem was he didn't want my help dealing with it.

I turned over on my side as tears welled in my eyes. I didn't know what hurt the worst: that he left me or that he didn't think I could handle whatever made him feel like that was his only option.

Or maybe Brody hadn't truly been in love with me after all.

I grimaced and closed my eyes the tears trickling down the side of my face. None of this mattered. It was done.

We were done.

Obsessing about it wasn't going to make me feel better.

I took a deep breath and wiped my face. I couldn't change this. It was on Brody.

I could only do what I thought was best. And as much as it hurt it was best for me to let this go. Or at least work on it. It wouldn't happen overnight but I would do my best.

This time when I closed my eyes I was more at peace. Sleep didn't come quickly but eventually I was able to rest.

Getting up to go to work the next morning was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do. I just wanted to hide my head under the blankets and stay in bed all day.

But I had a mortgage and a car payment. Oh and food was a necessity.

I was just making myself breakfast when the doorbell rang. I tried to ignore the way my heart leaped. I hadn't heard anything from Brody since yesterday so it was unlikely he was standing on my doorstep.

My mother's face greeted me when I peeked out the peephole. And she didn't look pleased.

When I opened the door I didn't get the lecture I expected. Instead I got a tight hug and a kiss on my cheek.

"Hey honey. How are you holding up?"

I blinked at her for a second. "Um okay."

She came inside and shut the door behind her. "Cameron you don't have to lie to me. I know you have to be upset." She paused studying my face for a moment. "Though I am a little sad that you didn't call me yourself."

"About?"

My mother frowned at me. "About you and Brody breaking up."

Now

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studying my face for a moment. "Though I am a little sad that you didn't call me yourself."

"About?"

My mother frowned at me. "About you and Brody breaking up."

Now I was frowning. "Who told you?"

"Your brother. He said that Brody was grim when he came back from talking to you last night." My mother hugged me again. "I'm so sorry honey. I thought for sure that you two would—"

"Brody was grim?" I asked anger stirring within me. "Wow I'm flattered he was so disturbed by the fact that he broke up with me."

She left one arm around my shoulders and walked me toward the kitchen. "Let's have a cup of coffee and talk about it okay?"

I really didn't want to conduct a postmortem again but I knew my mother only wanted to help.

A few minutes later I was seated at the bar in the kitchen with a cup of coffee in my hand while my mother made me breakfast.

"Not that I don't appreciate it but why are you here cooking for me instead of at the office with Dad?" I asked her as I sipped coffee.

Mom dropped bread into my toaster and pushed the lever down. "I hired someone to help out around the office so I can have time off once in a while. When I saw how much it

helped you when you hired Lee I decided it was a good idea."

I smiled. "Good. You deserve some time to yourself."

"And then when I have grandchildren I'll be able to spend time with them."

I choked on the coffee. "You do realize that neither J.J. or I are married right? Or even in a relationship."

Mom cracked eggs into a bowl and started whipping them with a fork. "You don't have to be in a relationship to have a baby Cam. There's always in vitro fertilization."

I gaped at her.

Then she started laughing. "You should see the look on your face."

"Not cool Mom" I grumbled. "I'm emotionally compromised right now you really should be nice to me."

My mother grinned at me. "I have every confidence you'll get through this."

"Yeah but it's not going to be easy."

"I'm sure it won't honey." She poured the eggs into a hot pan and mixed in some shredded cheese. "Would it be better if I asked Brody not to come over for Sunday lunch for a while?"

I sighed and drank more coffee. "No. Jacks loves coming to see you and Dad. It would hurt her."

This time when Mom smiled at me it was tender. "You're a good person Cam."

"Only because I had excellent examples" I replied.

Mom made more toast and buttered it while the eggs cooked. A few minutes later she brought two plates over to the bar and set one in front of me. She grabbed some forks and sat next to me.

I took the fork she held out to me. "Thanks Mom. For breakfast and...everything else."

She put a hand on my knee and squeezed gently. "You'll get through this and be just fine Cam. I know it."

"Again I had excellent examples."

Who knew that having breakfast with your mother could help the heartbreak?

Sierra stumbled into the kitchen as we took our first bite her hair a ruffled mess. Her bleary eyes were barely cracked as she made her unsteady way to the coffee maker.

"Good morning Sierra" my mother said.

Her only response was a grunt.

Mom and I shared a look and it was a struggle to bite back a laugh.

Sierra stuck a pod in the machine and turned it on. I got up from my chair and grabbed a mug from the cabinet and stuck it beneath the spout just in time to catch the first few drops of coffee.

"Thanks" Sierra whispered.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Too much pizza kept me awake last night."

"You mean it wasn't the text you were waiting on that came through at 2 a.m.?" I asked.

Her half-closed eyes shifted to me and they shone with sorrow and tears.

"I'm sorry" I whispered touching her shoulder. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Her eyes closed and she took a deep breath. When they opened again the tears were gone. "It's okay. I'm okay."

"I'm sorry I dumped on you as soon as you got home. Whatever it is—"

Sierra shook her head. "Not right now okay? I can't talk about it now." She focused on the thin stream of coffee pouring into her cup slowly but surely. "Go eat your breakfast before it gets cold."

I squeezed her arm gently and went back to the bar to sit down next to my mother. Sierra leaned over the counter in front of the coffee machine and put her head on her crossed arms. When it hissed its final bit of steam and the drips of coffee stopped Sierra straightened took the mug and left the kitchen without another word.

"I see some things never change" my mom commented.

"Yeah. We prefer not to speak before coffee" I replied.

Mom laughed. "I don't know where Sierra gets it but I know you got it from your father. He's a bear without his morning caffeine."

I lifted my coffee mug and waited for my mother to tap hers against it. "Here's to an awesome mother who makes coffee and breakfast for her daughter when she has a broken heart."

"I could do no less for my favorite daughter" she replied.

"I'm your only daughter Mom."

"That doesn't automatically make you my favorite daughter though."

I hadn't thought I'd be able to laugh any time soon but my mother proved me wrong.

She was definitely awesome. And I was lucky to have her.

A couple of weeks ago I received a letter from the company that owned my mortgage. It had been sold. While it was unexpected I didn't think anything of it.

Until the morning after Brody broke up with me when I got another notice this time that my car loan had been sold too.

To the same company.

Though I hadn't seen her since she'd gotten up that morning I knocked on Sierra's door letters in hand. Even though it was a Tuesday we'd both been able to take the day off because Lee had proven herself to be an incredible help.

I hated to bother her because I knew she was trying to get some work done but this seemed too convenient to be a coincidence. Especially since Monica had threatened me not too long ago.

"Come in" Sierra called.

I stuck my head in the door and nearly laughed aloud. Sierra was lying facedown on her bed her laptop in front of her. Her haphazard messy bun was lying on the side of her head.

"You alive?" I asked.

"Barely" she answered her voice muffled by the comforter.

"Could I bribe you to look up something for me?" I asked. "I'll make you a cup of coffee."

"Only if it's a big one."

"That's what all the girls say."

"Shut up and tell me what you need. Then go make me some coffee."

I laughed and sat down on the bed next to her. "I got a letter from my mortgage company a few days ago saying that my loan had been sold. I didn't think much of it until I got another one

today from the bank that carries my car loan. It's been sold as well. To the same company."

Sierra's head popped up and she looked at me. "Well that's interesting."

"Think you can find out who owns the company?" I asked.

She gave me a droll look. "Contrary to popular belief I cannot hack into any and all systems. However you could probably Google the company and find that out on their website. Or at least who the CEO and COO are."

"Gee you're so helpful" I drawled.

Sierra sighed and sat up reaching for her laptop. "Give me a sec and I'll see."

I waited on the end of the bed as she typed away. She frowned and turned the screen toward me. "Recognize this guy?"

"Ronald Shelton? No but—"

Sierra turned the computer back around and started typing away again. "Hmmm. Let's see what social media has to say about Mr. Shelton."

Her eyes widened as she clicked and typed moving way too fast.

"Is my internet speed even fast enough to keep up with you?"

Sierra's eyes flashed to me. "I got this."

I lifted my hands and shut my mouth. A few moments later she huffed out an incredulous laugh.

"See someone you know?" she asked.

An enlarged Facebook picture was on the screen. In the center was Ronald Shelton with his arm around none other than Monica Murphy. She stood between Ronald and Brody with a small smile on her face. She looked

confident even self-satisfied. But she didn't look happy even with the smile on her face.

"Ronald Shelton is Monica's uncle. He owns several companies including the loan company that bought your mortgage and car loan."

"I guess this is the playing dirty thing that Monica mentioned." I shook my head. "I honestly didn't think she had it in her. I mean I expected something but to me 'playing dirty' is TPing someone's house egging their car or forking their yard. Maybe letting all the air out of their tires."

"Forking their yard?" Sierra asked. "Sounds kinda dirty."

I laughed. "I'm surprised you didn't already know about that kind of thing. It's right up your alley. Lee's brothers did it to Coach Turner when she was in high school and he screamed at her after a track meet. You stick plastic forks in the yard and break them off in the ground. It can mess up your yard and lawnmower."

"Whoa. What did the coach do?"

"He caught them right after they finished the first box of a hundred. They spent the next day using needle-nose pliers to pull them out of the ground. Then they mowed and trimmed his yard."

Sierra laughed. "I have got to meet Lee's brothers. They sound like kindred spirits. Avenging wrongs. The only difference is I don't get caught. And I usually mess with things like their email or social media accounts or lock them out of their bank websites." She looked back at the computer screen. "So what do you think her plan is?"

"They're probably going to call in my loans" I said my tone dark. This was bad. I had enough money in my nest egg to pay off my car loan. It would wipe me out but she wouldn't be able to come after me over it. Of course I'd probably end up living in my damn car if they called in my mortgage.

"Can you pay them off?" Sierra asked.

"My car loan yes. My house no way."

She studied me for a long moment.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm afraid you're going to get upset with me if I say what I'm really thinking

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no way."

She studied me for a long moment.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm afraid you're going to get upset with me if I say what I'm really thinking so I'm trying to come up with a better way."

"Just spit it out."

"Will you let me help you? Please? I have the money to pay off both those loans for you."

I shook my head. "I can't take your money."

Sierra groaned and threw her hands up in the air.

"But I would be happy to set up a contract that includes a repayment schedule and an interest rate."

She blinked at me several times before she smiled brightly. "I'm okay with that. As long as you let me give you a really fair interest rate. Something low. How do you feel about zero percent?"

"You aren't going to give me a zero percent interest rate."

"Fine. One percent."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm paying four percent on my house right now and three-point-five on my car."

I'm not taking advantage of you with one percent interest."

"Okay I'm going to be completely honest with you" Sierra said. "No matter what interest rate or loan term we agree upon any interest you pay me will go into a savings account and be spent on your Christmas and birthday gifts every year."

"God you're so cheap you'll use my own money to buy my gifts!"

"Zero percent and you don't have to worry about me spending obscene amounts of your own money on you every year."

"Why are we friends?" I asked.

Sierra shrugged. "I'm not sure. You're the only person besides your parents who's willing to put up with me."

"Fine. Zero percent but the term length will reflect the lack of interest."

"Awesome! Then you'll have your house paid off in fifteen years instead of thirty."

I shook my head. "How long do you think it will take to have the paperwork drawn up?" Sierra opened her mouth and I wagged a finger at her. "We will have an official contract drawn up by your business manager or lawyer or whoever handles this sort of thing for you."

"Well I don't really have anyone who handles things for me except for Mr. McFadden who disperses my trust and keeps an eye on my investments."

"Then ask Mr. McFadden if he can do it or recommend someone."

"Look Cam I trust you to pay me back."

"I know you do but I don't want to take advantage of you so we're going to do it this way."

"Fine. Can I go back to my contemplation of my inner eyelids?"

"Of course."

Sierra started to lean back then sat up again. "Actually I'm going to call Mr. McFadden now. I have a feeling Monica will move quickly on this."

I shrugged. "Maybe maybe not. Brody broke up with me remember? She probably thinks she's won." I took a deep breath. "Because she did."

I understood it all then. Why Brody broke up with me. That he truly had meant for it to be temporary. Though he had to have known how upset I would be afterward. And that I might not be willing to give him another chance.

"That ass" I whispered. "I can't believe him. I can't believe he didn't talk to me about all this before it got this far."

"Who?" Sierra asked.

"Brody Murphy. He thought he was being all noble and saving me like some damsel-in-distress."

"Are you going to set him straight?" she asked a smile spreading across her face.

"Damn right."

I waited until the next day to confront Brody. I didn't want to have this conversation-slash-fight in front of Jacks. She didn't need to know what was going on between her father and mother and I didn't want to put her in the middle.

So I did something I normally never would have done. I showed up at his office. I called his assistant Kara first thing in the morning and asked if he had any free time in his schedule right before lunch. I was hoping he hadn't mentioned that we'd broken up and it paid off. I told her that I wanted to surprise Brody.

Kara penciled me in for the half-hour before his lunch and promised not to mention it to him. I felt horrible for lying. I would make it up to her somehow. She came into the shop for ice cream from time-to-time so maybe I could give her free ice cream for...six months. Okay maybe a year.

I parked my car in front of Brody's office. I hadn't been here before. Mostly because his father worked here as well and I really didn't want to deal with him. His parents had taken our relationship surprisingly well but I sensed his mother wished he were dating someone more like her. And his father had the attitude that I would give up my business as soon as I got married which wasn't going to happen.

I may not have aspirations to be CEO of a multimillion-dollar contracting firm but I did have goals and they were fairly ambitious.

I arrived for my "appointment" with Brody at eleven-thirty on the dot. I didn't want to be early

and run the risk of Brody seeing me before Kara showed me into his office.

Kara's smile was bright when I came in but her eyes were tired. "Hey Cam. Good to see you. I'm so glad you're here. I don't know what's going on with him but he's been a beast for the last couple of days. Maybe lunch with you will sweeten his mood."

Oh I seriously doubted that. I intended to read Brody the riot act but I wasn't sure I wanted to make up after all was said and done. When Monica made her threats Brody hadn't talked to me about it. He hadn't tried to work out an alternative plan with me or even let me know what was happening.

He'd dumped me. He made the decision without my input and left me heartbroken.

I wasn't entirely sure I could forgive that.

Maybe that made me a petty person or inflexible but my parents always encouraged open communication. They wanted us to feel comfortable talking to them about anything. But they also led by example. They talked about everything under the sun. J.J. and I rarely saw them argue but when they did they resolved the disagreement fairly quickly.

I'd had a good example of how to work together in a relationship. So had Brody. He spent enough time with our family growing up that he saw the same things I had. He knew how to communicate openly and honestly.

But he'd chosen not to talk to me. That's why it hurt so much when I realized why he'd done it.

"Well he's free right now and at his desk so why don't I show you in. I'll hold his calls until you leave so you can get out of here and have a nice long lunch."

There was a twinkle in her eye and I knew it was because she thought we were going out for a quickie rather than food.

I forced myself to smile at her and said "Thanks. That'd be great."

She rose from her desk and walked to Brody's door. I made sure to stand off to the side behind her when she knocked and stuck her head in.

"Your eleven-thirty is here" she murmured.

"Go ahead and show them in Kara." Brody sounded tired. And frustrated. There was a short pause. "Sorry about earlier."

Earlier? What the heck happened earlier?

Kara stepped back and I nodded to her as I entered the office and shut the door behind me.

Brody's office was bright and neat his furniture new but not luxurious. His desk was L-shaped and he sat his head bent as he shuffled a few

papers organizing them before he put them into a manila folder and shut it.

When his head came up I nearly winced. There were dark circles beneath his eyes and he looked as though he hadn't slept for the last forty-eight hours since we'd broken up.

If he was doing what I thought he was he probably had been overextending himself.

"Cameron" he said blinking several times. He rubbed his eyes and looked at me again as though he couldn't believe that I was standing in front of him. "What are you doing here?"

I reached down and clicked the lock on his door. He looked destroyed. As if he'd suffered a mortal blow but his body didn't understand that the fight was over. Seeing him like this made my decision for me. I was going to give him hell. When I was done he would never ever again make a decision that affected both of us without talking to me. Then after a sincere apology and

maybe even a little groveling I was going to forgive him.

Because he loved me as much as I loved him.

If he didn't he wouldn't look so horrible.

"You're a dumbass" I said.

Brody blinked some more. "Excuse me?"

I walked further into his office and leaned a hip against his desk. I looked down at him and repeated "You. Are. A. Dumbass."

He opened his mouth but I didn't let him speak.

"Did you really think that I wouldn't wonder why both my mortgage and car loan were sold to the same lender? Or look into it?"

His mouth closed with a click.

"You were adamant that you weren't going to let Monica control your life or Jacks' life. But now

here we are. You broke up with me because she threatened me. You didn't talk to me about it. You didn't give me a chance to make any decisions for myself about my life. And that's not okay Brody."

"It wasn't supposed to be permanent" he replied.

I shook my head. "Wanting to back off until the situation was resolved I would have understood. But you made a unilateral decision that affected both of us without consulting me. And you know you know that's not how a healthy relationship works. I've heard Mom lecture you and J.J. both about how important communication is for a couple. Not just talking but listening too."

"If you're so upset with me about this why are you here?" he asked getting to his feet. "Do you think I wanted to do things that way?" He laughed a harsh sound. "It wasn't just your house and car that she was holding over my head Cam. She's trying to set me up so that I

lose custody of Jacks. And I'm not falling in line like she thinks I am. I've made a plan and set things in motion to make sure that none of that happens." He shoved his hands through his hair and turned his back on me. "When all is said and done Monica will only have supervised visitation because I don't trust her not to try this shit again. I always thought she was too lazy to go this far but I underestimated how vindictive she would be."

"How's she setting you up to take Jacks away?" I asked. There was a lot of information in that speech but I focused on the first thing that caught my attention.

"She sent some things home with Jacks after their vacation. I didn't think anything of it until she started threatening you and me." He turned to face me. "Want to know what I found?" His expression was haunted. "She bugged me. Or paid someone to do it. She sent a picture home with Jacks of the two of them together. Jacks insisted we put it in the living room. I found out later it was because Monica insisted on it. She

wanted Jacks to put the picture somewhere where she and Daddy could both see it. She manipulated our daughter so she could spy on us. But that's not the worst of it" he stated.

Shit how much worse could this get?

Brody's next words convinced me that it could get a lot lot worse.

"Once I found the bug I decided to check out everything that Monica sent home with Jacks. Clothing. Toys." He grimaced. "I found drugs hidden in a stuffed animal. I'm pretty sure that Monica's plan to have Jacks permanently removed from my custody was to call the police and claim she found it when Jacks came back for another visit."

My heart sank. "Oh my God. Why would she do something like that? And where did she get the drugs?"

Brody shrugged. "I don't know how she got the cocaine but she does live in Plano so it's not as if she couldn't find someone."

"It's cocaine?" I asked my voice high. What would have happened if Jacks found it? Or it busted open inside the stuffed animal? I knew next to nothing about illegal drugs but I was pretty sure that situation wouldn't have a happy ending.

"The private investigator I hired is helping me document everything. We're getting ready to file for an emergency injunction and to report all this to the police. I know for a fact that Monica likes to dabble in this sort of thing

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but I was pretty sure that situation wouldn't have a happy ending.

"The private investigator I hired is helping me document everything. We're getting ready to file for an emergency injunction and to report all this to the police. I know for a fact that Monica

likes to dabble in this sort of thing so I wouldn't be surprised if she has more at her place."

"What happens if she calls the police or CPS before you're ready?"

"She's negotiating with me for more money" Brody admitted. "My best course of action until everything is in place is to play along. That's why I ended things. Monica is smug. She thinks that she has the upper hand here. I have to keep it that way. At least for a while."

"You know I would have understood all this if you'd just told me what was going on" I replied. "I would have agreed to a fake separation. I'm pretty sure I could pretend to be heartbroken quite well if necessary."

"Cam." Brody said my name as though that should be answer enough.

"I am so fucking mad at you right now" I stated. "And I hate being mad at people. It gives me a headache."

Brody reached out and took my hand. "I'm sorry."

"I can't even get my petty revenge because I don't want to hurt you more on top of what Monica is doing" I griped.

"Um I'm okay with that."

I glowered at him. "Of course you are."

"Do you think you can get over being mad at me? Eventually?" he asked.

"I didn't know for sure when I realized what you were doing and why but when I saw you today I knew I could."

Brody's shoulders relaxed.

"But it could take a while" I continued. "Maybe even a few months. Or a year. Or two."

His body tensed again. "A year or two?" he asked.

"You fucked up big time Brody. Not because you put Jacks first. I would never be mad at you for that. Not even because you decided the best thing to do would be to break up with me. Your mistake was not talking to me about it. What happens the next time Monica starts her shit? Or something else happens? If we go the distance you know that I'm going to expect you to be open with me."

Brody didn't let go of my hand even though my words made him look even more beaten down. "I'm almost afraid to tell you why I did it?"

I frowned at him but didn't say anything else.

"You're already mad at me and I'm a little worried that this will push you over the edge" he admitted. "I'm too young to die and I have a daughter to think about."

I rolled my eyes. "I wouldn't kill you. That would be letting you off too easily."

Brody's eyes flared with mirth but the expression disappeared quickly. "I've been a single dad for a while now even before Monica and I separated. She never really had much to do with Jacks. She always hired nannies to take care of the day-to-day stuff. Then when we separated I promised to keep supporting her as long as Jacks came with me. She has a trust fund but she blows her monthly stipend within a week of its release. I knew having a daughter would make it hard for us. And there's Monica. Just when I think I know her she mutates. Like a virus. I was worried that if I told you what was really happening you would leave me."

"You thought that I'd decide you were too much work?" I asked. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'd loved this man since he was just a boy. How could he believe that about me?

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"Seriously?" I asked him. I jerked my hand loose and jumped to my feet pacing back and forth in front of his desk. "Do I really strike you as that flaky?"

"No of course not" Brody answered. "But I know it's a lot. I'm not a good bet. I have a daughter who will always come first. An ex who likes to make my life hell. And parents you despise. Three strikes I'm out."

I threw my hands up in the air and made a loud sound of frustration. Why were men so dense?

I whirled toward him. "Think for a second. If our situations were reversed would all of those things be enough to make you walk away from me?" I asked.

Brody stared at me as though he was finally seeing me for the first time. "No."

"Then why would you think that about me?" I asked. God I wanted to be mad but really I was

hurt. It hurt so badly. I wanted to be his rock. He could depend on me.

"Because I'm a dumbass" he answered with a sigh. Brody got to his feet and came toward me. "I'm so sorry Cam. I fucked up. Bad."

I shied back from him as he reached for me. "Give me a minute. I need space right now."

His face fell and he dropped his hands to his sides. "I ruined it didn't I?"

I sighed a short harsh sound. "No you didn't ruin it. I still love you even if you're not the brightest bulb. But I'm so mad at you right now that I'll brain you with something if you get too close to me." I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. I needed to calm down and think. As far as first fights went this was one hell of a doozy. "How much longer do you think it will take you to get your ducks in a row and implement your sly plan?"

"A couple of weeks maybe."

"Come see me in a couple of weeks then. I'll probably be less angry by then."

"Probably?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I'm not precognizant. I can't tell you what the future holds."

A smile quirked Brody's mouth. "And if I tried to convince you to stop being angry at me?"

"Then I'd say you have your work cut out for you."

The smile widened. "I'm widely known to be an exceptionally hard worker."

"Hmmm. We'll see."

I rose up on my toes and gave him a kiss on the cheek stepping back before he could grab me. His hands brushed my arms and he frowned at me.

"Now I have an appointment with Sierra at the bank. We can continue this conversation in two weeks. Or when your ex issues are resolved. Whichever comes first."

"Why are you meeting Sierra at the bank?" he asked.

"Because she's going to become the new owner of my mortgage. I'm arranging to pay off my car loan too."

His eyes widened. "Sierra has the money to do that?"

I grinned at him. "She does. She has a trust fund and a job that pays extremely well. She also invested in Crave."

He studied my expression. "I thought about offering to do the same thing for you but I didn't think you would let me."

"I probably would have said no at first" I admitted. "But as long as you arranged it so I

could pay you back I would have caved eventually." I lifted a hand and cupped his cheek. "We've known each other for a long time but that doesn't mean we're both still the same people we were as teenagers. I'm still stubborn and prideful but I'm also reasonable. I've finally learned the art of compromise."

"I made a fucking mess of things didn't I?" Brody asked.

I patted his cheek and lowered my hand. "That's okay. I'll probably make a mess of things at one point too. But buttering me up is still a safe bet."

Brody grinned. "I'll do that."

I backed away until I reached the door but he didn't move or follow me. Before I grabbed the knob I said "I don't mean this in any sort of bitchy way but please hurry up and handle this stuff with Monica. I miss you."

"I miss you too."

I wanted so so badly to run across his office and throw myself in his arms but I knew I wouldn't leave if I did. And I wouldn't be able to stay away.

Jacks deserved to have Brody in her life on a daily basis. He loved her above everything else and he worked hard to be a good father.

I slipped out of his office and shut the door behind me. Brody was working to protect himself from his ex-wife's machinations.

It was time for me to do the same.

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The next two weeks were strange. Sierra and I concluded our business and she was technically the owner of my mortgage. She also remained stalwart in her refusal to let me pay her back with interest. So now I was making the same monthly payment on my house but I would have it paid off in less than half the time.

I would never admit it but Monica Murphy had done me a favor. Every cent of my mortgage payment was going to the pay-off amount. I no longer had an escrow but my taxes and insurance were manageable enough to handle on my own.

There was also the fact that Sierra and Ben had made up from their fight. She hadn't told me the whole story until after it was all over but she was the happiest I'd ever seen her. And obviously in love.

Financially I was doing well. When it came to my love life well I didn't see or speak to Brody. At all. It sucked.

But he communicated with me in a way that I had soundly come to expect from him in the two decades we'd known each other.

Sierra showed up at the shop the following Monday with a huge bouquet of flowers. Not roses or lilies but sunflowers and well a bunch of other flowers with names I didn't know.

There was no card and all she would tell me was “These are from a secret admirer.”

As my best friend I knew she wouldn't deliver flowers from just anyone.

“How did he talk you into delivering these to me? I thought you hated his guts.”

“Oh I did” she answered. “At least until you told me what his ex was up to. I'm still kinda mad at him but he agreed to let me fuck up Monica's life a little once he's done his thing so I no longer think he's a complete asshole.”

“And how are you planning to fuck up her life?” I asked.

“Well I won't be forking her yard that's for damn sure” Sierra mumbled.

“Ha ha you're hilarious. No I'm more worried she'll end up broke and homeless and sleeping on Brody's parents' couch. They love her.”

Sierra waved a hand. “They wouldn’t put her on the couch. They have 5 guest bedrooms.”

I frowned at her but she ignored me.

“Fine enjoy your petty revenge” I said using a snooty tone as if such things were beneath me.

“I think you’ve been around Brody’s parents too long.”

I gasped in outrage and clutched my chest.
“Take that back.”

“Nope” she said with a shake of her head. “I call’em like I see’em.”

“Sierra” I growled.

“Is that any way to talk to the woman who owns your house and your business and quit her job to move to town and live near you?” she asked making a tisking sound. “For shame Cameron.”

“You forget that I know I’m the only beneficiary in your will. I’ll get them both back as soon as I find a cliff for you to accidentally fall off of.”

Then the rest of her words filtered through.

"You quit your job? When? Why? I thought you loved it."

She lifted a hand. "Whoa slow your roll there little lady. One question at a time."

I nearly smacked her arm but she seemed to read my mind and stepped just out of reach.

"Just tell me."

She sighed. "I didn't tell you because at the time I wasn't sure I was going to move here permanently. I'd already quit my job but I wasn't sure I could handle being in Farley if Ben and I couldn't work things out. Then I realized that I'd let other people and their hurt feelings control my life for way too long so I decided that I'd move here anyway. I spend most of my time working from home or in the office here anyway so it's not like I'd see him much."

I didn't point out that she'd see him at lunch at my parents' on Sundays because it was a moot point.

"And I quit my job because I realized that I dreaded going into the office for the last two years. Even more after Barnes became my boss and started taking credit for my work." She paused. "I guess I should have asked you if you were okay with me working here with you full-time. At least until we get another location up and running. Then I can work there if you can't stand me. Crap I didn't think this through."

Before she could say anything else I threw my arms around her neck and hugged her.

She squeaked and held the flowers out to the side so they wouldn't get crushed.

"Of course it's okay for you to work her. I've loved having you here. And now I'll get to see you every day like I did in college." I released her when she started making dramatic choking sounds. "I've missed you like crazy dumbass."

Sierra rolled her eyes pretending that she didn't have tears in her eyes. "Take the damn flowers and shut up. Your man was incredibly sweet when I snuck into his office to pick them up."

I didn't get a chance to respond because Sierra's cell phone went off and she answered it turning on her heel to walk down the hall where she disappeared into my office.

The flowers weren't the only things that Sierra brought in.

When I went back to my office later I found a framed photo on my desk that definitely hadn't been there before. It was a picture of Brody Jacks and me. At first I wasn't sure where it might have been taken. Until I saw that we were sitting on my parents' couch. No doubt my mother had snuck the picture when we weren't paying attention. Brody and I were sitting close together looking at each other and laughing. Jacks sat in my lap and she was laughing too.

It was a beautiful picture.

My mother must have sent it to Brody so he could print it out and frame it. Now it sat on my desk in my office.

I yearned to call him. To thank him for the picture. To tell him I missed him. Just to hear his voice.

I settled for adjusting the picture frame so I could see it when I sat at my desk to work on the computer.

"Like it?" Sierra asked from the doorway.

I looked up and smiled. "Yes I do. Let me guess you snuck this out with the flowers too?"

She nodded. "He has one just like it on his desk."

Oh he was definitely buttering me up and he was using my best friend to do it.

"You have the dopiast expression on your face. You're totally going to let go of the stupid thing he did aren't you?"

"Yeah I think I am."

"If it were any other man I think I am."

"If it were any other man I'd try to talk you out of it but Brody's a good one. He's just as clueless as the rest of them but he's not afraid to admit when he's wrong."

I gaped at her.

"What?" she asked hunching her shoulders and crossing her arms over her chest.

"You're actually advocating that I don't hold a grudge against him? I can't believe it. You've held a grudge since your first boyfriend broke up with you in the sixth grade."

"I have not!"

"Sierra you hacked his Match dot com account and sent screenshots of his messages to his mother."

"He was sending out unsolicited dick pics! Who does that? Dicks that's who! He deserved it."

"Did you know he was sending them out before you hacked him?" I asked.

Her face turned bright red. "Actually I did. Because he sent one to me when he came across my profile and realized who I was."

"Wow. This I did not know. Then he definitely deserved it. But you still hold grudges."

"Whatever" she said. Sierra pushed off from the doorjamb and made her way to the chair across from me. "I still think you should forgive him. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place and he made the wrong decision."

"I know" I answered. "I just want him to think twice so he'll make the correct decision next time."

"And people think I'm the evil one. You have them all fooled."

I shrugged. "It's not my fault if they form their own erroneous assumptions."

"God stop bringing out the SAT vocabulary words before noon. It's painful."

"Okay back to you working here. You're always welcome to work with me but we'll have to redefine our partnership. Right now the paperwork says you're a silent partner."

"Oh I don't want to be in on the business decisions. I'm not good at stuff like marketing. But I wouldn't mind redesigning the website." She paused. "I do think we need someone in charge of marketing or at least increasing our social media platform. And Lee just happens to fit the bill. We've already hired her. We can ask

her to put together a marketing plan and some social media content and if we like what we see we can give her a raise and let her take over that aspect of the business."

I mulled that over for a minute. I kept up with our social media accounts and tried to post several times per week but my pictures weren't always great and I knew next to nothing about composing pictures or editing them. Now that I'd hired Lee and Sierra was more involved I would have the time to learn but my heart would never be in it.

"I'll talk to her" I agreed.

It sank in then. My best friend wasn't leaving. And we were going to work together for the foreseeable future. We could get pedicures together go shopping go to the movies. Expand our business. We would no longer keep touch via texts and phone calls or have visits that never seemed long enough.

There were so many possibilities.

"What is it?" Sierra asked.

"You're going to be here. I'll get to see you almost every day. And I'll finally have someone to go do things with."

She made a face. "Ugh. You expect me to leave the house? Why don't you make Brody do that?"

"Because as much as I love him and even though he's one of my best friends you're a woman. You get me. There will be times when I need you more than anyone else."

A blush touched Sierra's cheeks and I knew I'd embarrassed her. She wasn't much on sharing her feelings so this was verging into taboo territory for her.

"I guess" she mumbled.

I didn't say anything else but I was already thinking about what she and I could do together

next week. I would be sure to schedule myself a day off in the middle of the week and tell Lee that she would be on her own. Sierra and I tried to work with Lee as often as we could but she had handled the shop alone a few times so we both felt comfortable letting her do so more often. She was sweet quiet and damn smart. She learned how we ran the store within a few weeks and now that she'd been there for about two months she fit right in. If Sierra and I ever opened up another location I knew that she would be a perfect fit to manage it. She needed a few more months to learn the complete ins and outs of the shop but she was still amazing.

"I need to send Natalie Phelps some flowers" I commented.

Sierra picked up my train of thought in a snap. "Screw flowers. We should send her a male strip-o-gram. Lee has been a blessing."

I shook my head. "No way. I refuse to be responsible for an elderly woman's heart attack."

Sierra leaned forward a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I heard that Suzy Pratts saw her at La Bare's in Dallas when she went for her bachelorette party."

"No way." I leaned forward as well. "Unless she has pictures it didn't happen."

Sierra grinned as though I'd challenged her. "You're right. I think I'll ask Suzy."

"Sierra..."

She laughed and hopped to her feet. "Oh this is too good. Tell me why I didn't move to a small town sooner? It's a hotbed of gossip and eccentric characters."

"Because you don't want to be one of the eccentric characters everyone gossips about?" I asked.

"Good point. Considering how many churches are in Farley you'd think more people would be

worried about the stain on their soul from gossiping so much."

I laughed. "Are you kidding? Church is the perfect place to go if you want to catch up on the town gossip."

"Really?" she drawled. "How delightfully hypocritical. Maybe we should start attending with your parents on Sundays. I'm curious what's being said about us."

"I will say this much. Most of the people gossiping at church would repeat whatever they said behind your back directly to your face. In a nice way of course."

It was Sierra's turn to laugh. "Man I've been missing out. Next Sunday?"

"No way."

"I've heard that Brody Murphy started coming to church with your parents and he brings Jacks with him."

I mulled it over. "Not while we have all this unfinished business between us. Once the dust has settled we'll see." I pointed a finger at her. "But that means you have to get up before noon on Sundays. Service starts at eleven."

"That may be a deal-breaker" Sierra admitted. "You know I'm not a morning person."

"Hey you're the one who brought this up."

"Well I changed my mind."

I laughed. "Too late. I'm telling Mom you suggested it."

"Don't you dare" she warned.

I made a show of picking up my cell phone.

"Cameron don't do it."

"What'll you give me?"

"A knuckle sandwich if you keep pushing me. Bitches get stitches remember?"

"I'm hurt. I thought it was hoes before bros."

"That too" she said.

"Fine. I won't tell her. Yet."

Sierra growled. "Tell me why we're friends again."

"Because we're too mean for anyone else to want to hang out with us."

"Good point."

I glanced at the clock. "We have to get back to work. I want to get home before dinnertime tonight."

Sierra reached across the desk and snatched my cell phone out of my hand. "Fine by me. I'll just hang on to this."

"Sierra give that back."

"Maybe I'll text Brody and ask him for some dick pics."

I was on my feet in a flash. "Sierra."

With a wicked cackle she dashed out of my office. I couldn't suppress my own maniacal laugh as I chased after her.

Thank God it was a Monday and we were the only ones here because it would have been embarrassing for anyone to see us acting like a pair of idiots.

33

A week later I was ready to say "Fuck it."

I missed Brody. Following the delivery of the flowers and the picture there'd been nothing else. After spending most of the day making ice cream and prepping for the week ahead I was sitting in my office staring into space.

I was supposed to be working on profit and loss statements but I just couldn't seem to get my mind into gear.

Probably because all my thoughts were focused on a tall dark-haired man with piercing green eyes. Eyes I hadn't seen in three weeks. I missed seeing them light up with humor or turn hot with desire.

I also missed the way he held my hand and the way he snuggled with me on the couch when we watched television. The way he cuddled with me at night.

And the sex.

I missed that a lot because it had been a lot longer than three weeks since I'd had it.

Sierra and Ben tried to be circumspect around me but knowing they were doing all the things I wanted to do with Brody did not help my mood. I tried really hard not to let it show but Sierra caught on and now they were spending their

time together at Ben's house. She made it a point to stay home with me on my nights off which I appreciated. Now that I'd had Brody in my life I realized how lonely I'd been before his arrival.

I was getting ready to leave the shop when Nate the postal worker who delivered our mail knocked on the front door. I went over and unlocked it.

"Hey Nate. How are you?"

"I'm good Cam. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Do you want a shake or something?"

I often offered to make him a shake or smoothie when he was working in the summer. Or even a glass of ice water because I knew that walking around downtown in this heat had to be extremely uncomfortable.

"No thanks. I have something I need you to sign for."

I took the electronic pad he gave me and scribbled my name across the signature line.

Nate handed me a stack of magazines and envelopes and then laid an envelope marked as Certified Mail on top.

"Thanks Nate."

"Have a good one Cam. See ya tomorrow."

He turned and walked away whistling merrily as he went.

I carried everything inside and locked the door. I decided to take everything into the office and sort it out before heading home. Otherwise I'd have to come in early tomorrow to deal with it.

I sorted through the stack of mail separating magazines and catalogs from envelopes. Who the heck still sent catalogs anymore now that online shopping was a thing? Then I looked

through the various-sized envelopes. Bill. Bill. Another bill. A credit card offer. The usual.

However what wasn't usual was the certified letter at the bottom of the stack.

Who was Ernie Muffleson? Sounded like a fake name that Sierra would come up with which instantly made me suspicious of what the envelope might contain. The only reason I opened it was because it was too small to hold anything weird or dangerous.

There were only a couple of sheets of folded paper. I slipped them out and opened them.

It was a letter. No one had sent me a letter in years. I'd actually complained about the lost art of letter writing to Brody not long before he broke up with me.

And as soon as I started to read I knew exactly who'd written this letter to me.

My Dearest Cameron

I hope I started this letter out to your satisfaction. I know you're particular about the letters you get from people.

The reason I'm writing to you is because I miss you like crazy. Text messages and phone calls seem too inadequate. Even this letter is inadequate when all I want to do is see you hear your voice. Touch you.

I know the last time I saw you that you were angry with me. And it was justified. I can only tell you how sorry I am and promise never to do something so stupid again.

I hope by the time we see each other again you'll have forgiven me. And that you liked the flowers and picture I sent you.

In case you aren't aware of it I also love you like crazy too.

Yours Always

Brody

It was the first and only love letter I'd ever received. It wasn't filled with romantic prose or sweeping declarations of undying love but it was filled with exactly what I needed.

I didn't need poetic words or dramatic statements of adoration.

These words written from the heart and the emotions that brought them forth were what we would build our lives on.

With careful hands I folded the letter and slipped it back into the envelope. I wondered if this would be the only love letter I would get from Brody.

Even if it was it wouldn't matter. Because he didn't just write these words he lived them. Every day of those short weeks we were together he showed me how he felt. His actions spoke far more than anything he could say or write.

I realized my cheeks were damp and grabbed a tissue to dry the tears. I couldn't tell him he'd made me cry with this letter. I'd never live it down.

Without giving myself time to think I grabbed my phone to text him.

I miss you. I'm giving you 7 days. If you haven't made your move by then I'm sneaking into your office dressed as a repair guy.

I hit send and within seconds I could see the dots at the bottom of the screen that signified he was typing.

So you got my letter?

I laughed. I could almost hear the smirk in his voice.

I did. I'm thinking of framing it and hanging it somewhere highly visible when my brother comes over.

More dots.

Do you want him to kill me? Or just tease me without mercy?

Ouch. That was almost insulting. Before I could reply he was typing again.

Ignore that. It was stupid.

I laughed and sent my own reply.

You were *this* close.

He didn't answer right away but I figured he was probably at work and got interrupted.

I'd like to be that close. This will be over in a few days and we will be. I promise. I have a client coming in but you'll be hearing from me soon.

My heart thumped hard in my chest at the thought.

Good. I'll see you then.

His reply was an emoji blowing a kiss. Feeling goofy I sent him a bunch of hearts in several different colors. When he didn't reply a wave of sadness washed over me.

I hoped he was right about everything being over soon. I knew I wouldn't last much longer before I made good on my threat to wear a disguise and sneak into his office.

If anyone had ever told me I would need a man as much as I needed Brody Murphy I would have called them a liar.

Then I would have to apologize after the week I spent waiting to hear from him. Every day every time my phone would ring my heart would stop for a split second.

I worried about him and Jacks every single day. I wanted to know they were both okay. That Monica hadn't succeeded in her evil scheme.

I also wondered what Monica had done when she realized that she no longer had leverage over me. I almost wished I could have seen her face when she heard the news.

I only hoped that my actions hadn't pushed her to jumpstart her campaign against Brody.

I wrestled the urge to call Brody every single day and tried to keep busy. My house and the store had never been so clean or organized mostly because I spent every waking minute doing something. And there were a lot of waking minutes because I was having trouble sleeping.

Lack of sleep was also directly contributing to my foul disposition and almost daily headaches.

Speaking of I had a horrific headache at that very moment. It felt as though a ghost had found a non-corporeal ice pick and shoved it into my head via my eye.

Every time I blinked or my heart beat it hurt.

After the third time I sucked in a sharp breath from the pain

Sponsored

Sierra looked at me and tossed her bar mop towel down on the stainless countertop.

“Go home” she commanded.

"I'm fine" I shot back.

"You're not. You look like crap and based on your pupils I'm pretty sure you have a migraine. Go home take some meds and rest. It's slow for a Tuesday and if I get desperate I'll call in one of the other girls."

"But the after dinner rush will start—"

Sierra pointed a finger toward the back. "Go. Home. Or I'll call your dad and tell him you have a migraine and you're refusing to take anything for it."

I winced. My father being a doctor never hesitated to tell someone to stop being a stubborn ass and take their medicine. He was especially short on patience with adults who refused to treat medical issues that they had. Children he had more tolerance for because he reasoned that medication was an unknown and they were frightened of it.

I caved. "Fine I'm leaving."

I untied my apron and carried it back into my office. Within a few minutes I had my purse over my shoulder and I was headed out the back door.

"Call me if you need me" I yelled to Sierra. Then I hissed and cringed at the pain it caused. Man I was in worse shape than I thought.

"I won't need you" she yelled back. "I'll check on you when I get home."

I knew when I was beat. I also discovered I'd been had when I got home. My father waited on my covered front porch his medical bag on the ground next to him.

I parked and climbed out of the car. As soon as I was close enough I said "I'm fine Dad. Nothing a little ibuprofen and some rest won't cure."

"Then you won't mind if I decide that for myself."

I sighed. "What happened to the days you just assumed I was faking it when I told you I didn't feel well?"

My dad chuckled as he grabbed his medical bag and stood. "Those days ended when you graduated high school and I knew that you didn't want to skip class."

I made a face at him and unlocked my door. "Why didn't you let yourself in? Did you lose your key?"

"No. I was enjoying the summer day for a little while. Fall will be here soon enough. Plus your mom has it so cold in the office that it resembles the Arctic."

In this part of Texas cooler temperatures didn't hit until around Halloween. Sweater weather was usually around Christmas. So fall was a long ways off.

I didn't call him out on it just let him into the house. He waited patiently as I hung up my keys and my purse. He didn't say anything when I left the light off. Though my windows were covered by blinds they let enough light in that the house wasn't all that dark. And with this headache the idea of turning on anything more than a dim lamp made me want to cry.

"Go lay on the couch" my dad commanded. "I'll be right back."

During high school I used to get migraines like this at least once per week but they'd vanished once I'd graduated. That was about the time my father deduced that my triggers were stress and sleep deprivation.

I'd experienced both of those in spades the past week.

I did as my father directed and stretched out on the sofa. The pain in my head immediately lessened. My eyes closed of their own volition. I sighed as I settled deeper into the cushions.

Something cool and wet was draped over my forehead which made me sigh again. It felt fantastic.

"Better?" my dad asked his voice quiet and soothing.

"Yeah" I whispered.

"Where's your ibuprofen?"

"Top shelf of the cabinet in the bathroom. I have a container with all my medicine in it there."

"I'll be right back" he said.

I heard his shoes on the wood floor as he headed toward my bedroom. I was drifting when he returned.

He cupped my hand in his and placed the pills in my palm. "Here. Take three."

I sat up my movements slow and careful so I didn't jostle my aching head. I placed the pills in my mouth and took the glass of water my father held out. Once I swallowed them Dad stuck a pillow where I'd been laying moments before and helped me ease back down.

Then he covered my forehead and my eyes with the cool wet cloth. It felt heavenly.

"So what brought this on?" he asked.

I didn't answer at first because I wasn't sure what Brody may have told my parents. And I didn't want my dad to be mad at Brody. Yes Brody had made a mistake but he and I had worked it out and I didn't want my parents to hold a grudge. Not that they tended to do that but my dad was especially protective of me and I wasn't sure how he might handle it.

"Cam" he prompted.

"Brody and I had a little bit of a..." I trailed off searching for the right word to describe what had happened.

"Break up?" my father asked his voice bland.

"Sort of." I hesitated. "He did something that hurt me badly. He had reasons I can understand but he didn't talk to me about any of it first. He apologized but he's in a bit of situation right now and we can't really spend any time together."

"You mean the mess with his ex?"

"Yeah. She threatened to ruin me financially and she was winding up to throw the first punch when he gave in to what she wanted."

"And what did she want?"

"Me out of his life. And Jacks' life."

"So he acquiesced?"

I couldn't read any emotion in my dad's voice but his choice of words seemed too stilted. I didn't want to take the cloth off my eyes and have to see the disappointment on his face.

"Yes. Which I understand and I might have agreed to a short break from each other if he'd talked to me about it. It was the fact that he didn't that upset me so badly."

My father was silent. I was afraid to look at him but I lifted the corner of the folded washcloth and peeked out from beneath it. "We worked it out Dad."

He was staring down at his hands but looked up when I spoke. His eyes were filled with sadness and worry. "Are you sure you want to take this on Cameron? I love Brody and Jacks but if you continue that relationship you will always have to deal with Monica. I doubt this will be the last time she tries to worm her way between the two of you."

My father was right. I wouldn't be able to escape Brody's ex-wife or her scheming. But I couldn't control what she chose to do. I could only choose how I reacted to it.

I wasn't going to give up the man I loved just because of her. She could only remove me from his life if I allowed it. And I never would.

"All that matters is that I won't allow her behavior to control mine. She can be sneaky vicious and nasty all she wants. In the end the only people she will hurt will be her and Jacks. And it pisses me off that she won't hesitate to involve her daughter but I can't change Monica. I can only provide her daughter with love and

support when her mother tries to drag her into it."

I was surprised to see the approval in my father's face. "It won't be easy" he said.

"I believe it was you who told me that nothing worth having is easy to attain."

He smiled then. "Sounds like wise words."

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I dropped the washcloth back over my face and took a deep breath. The more I relaxed the better I felt. The pain was still there just behind my eyes but it wasn't as sharp.

"But your mother would want me to tell you not to let him get away with that sort of thing again."

I laughed a little then winced. Ouch. "I've already warned him of that."

"Brody has a well-developed sense of responsibility" he replied. "He feels like he should be taking care of you and Jacks not the

other way around. I think he's gotten so used to being neglected that he doesn't stop to think about the fact that you would want to help him and take care of him in the same way he does you."

"I never thought of it like that."

"So even though your mother would disagree with me I'm going to tell you to cut him a little slack. He's not used to someone caring for him like that and it's going to take time for him to grow accustomed to leaning on you without feeling like a burden."

"Hmmmm. I'll take it under advisement."

My dad chuckled. "How's the pain now?" he asked.

"On a scale of one to ten it's at a five. As long as I don't move or turn on the lights."

"Then this doctor prescribes rest low lighting and no stress. You work yourself too hard."

One corner of my mouth quirked up. "Don't worry. I intend to start taking a little more time off now that Sierra will be staying in town and I have an assistant manager to help out with the shop."

"Sierra's staying here? Permanently?"

"I think so. She's been talking about finding a place to rent but I think Ben wants her to move in with him."

"Your mother will be pleased."

That was code for both of them being please but I let it go.

"All right I'll head out and let you get some rest. I have appointments the rest of this afternoon but if the pain gets worse call me and I'll come by as soon as I can."

"Thanks Dad" I said.

He leaned over and kissed my hair. "Anytime. Love you Cam."

"Love you too" I murmured.

I stayed still on the couch as he gathered his medical bag and left. Somehow talking to him made me feel better as though a weight I'd been carrying around all week had been lifted from my shoulders.

I had no idea how much time had passed but I was just about to take that nap he'd suggested when my doorbell rang. I groaned and rolled onto my side getting slowly to my feet. If I opened that door and found someone trying to sell me something I couldn't be held responsible for my actions.

My head didn't like the fact that I was now upright and started pounding again. I pressed one hand to my forehead and opened the door with the other without checking who might be standing on the other side.

The sight of Brody holding a big brown paper bag surprised me so much that I merely stood in the doorway and stared at him squinting against the brightness of the afternoon sun.

Finally I realized I wasn't hallucinating and asked "What are you doing here?"

"I'm done" he answered. "It's over."

The pounding in my head made it difficult to think straight. Done? Over? I thought we'd settled all this and that we were good.

"What?" I asked.

Brody took a moment to study me then and he came into the house shutting the door behind him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Migraine" I mumbled.

He set the paper bag on the console table in my foyer and took my arm. He saw the washcloth

I'd set on the coffee table and picked it up.

"What's this for?"

"My head. A cool damp cloth helps sometimes."
I eased myself down on the sofa then lowered my head to the pillow.

"I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the kitchen and I closed my eyes focusing on my breathing. Now that I'd gotten up and the pain in my head had exploded I was nauseous with the pain.

The chilled cloth was laid across my forehead. I sighed. "Thanks that feels great."

"When I called Sierra and told her I wanted to surprise you she told me she'd sent you home but I didn't realize you were sick."

"Yeah" I whispered. "It hit me this morning."

"Then you need soup."

I shouldn't have been surprised that he remembered but I was. When I got migraines as a teenager the only things I could keep down were soup toast and tea.

I put my hand over his which was resting on my forearm. "What did you mean by its over?"

He hesitated so long that I didn't think he was going to answer. Finally he asked "Are you sure you want to talk about this now?"

"Yes. Tell me already before my blood pressure shoots up from pure frustration and it gets worse."

"Monica signed the paperwork today. Supervised visitation only."

"You didn't have to take her to court?" I asked. That was shocking.

"No I only had to point out some things my investigator discovered over the last few weeks. Like the fact that she was drinking heavily using

illegal drugs and hadn't paid taxes since we split up."

"How did he find out about the taxes? It's not like the IRS announces that stuff."

I could hear the suppressed humor in Brody's voice when he answered "Apparently my investigator knows people who can find him information like that." He cleared his throat and the mirth was gone when he said "The PI is also pretty sure that she was doing that shit when Jacks was with her. I asked my daughter if Mommy seemed a little loopy sometimes and I was not happy about what I heard."

Oh my God.

"She was high or drunk or both when she was supposed to be taking care of my baby girl. She drove her around while she was out of her mind. Monica could have killed her."

I hated that. And I wanted to hate Monica but I couldn't. Well not completely anyway.

“She’s sick Brody.”

“I know but Jacks’ safety comes first. Especially when I confronted her about it and she said she was fine. That she just liked to have a good time once in a while.”

Yikes.

“And what about us?” I asked. It should have felt strange having this entire conversation with my eyes closed and covered by a damp cloth but it didn’t.

“It’s finished. If Monica cleans up her act Jacks will see her more often. If not then she’ll have supervised visitation until Jacks is old enough to drive herself to and from her mother’s.”

“I still don’t understand how you got her to agree” I said.

“I threatened to take her to court to have her spousal support reduced. I was so desperate to

be free of her during the divorce I agreed to a lot more than she would get if we fought it out in court. I just wanted it to be over.”

“So what now?” I asked. “You have full custody of your daughter. It’s unlikely Monica will come after you again. I’m in the clear from whatever plans she had. Where do we go from here?”

Brody lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. “Well first I make you some soup and toast. Then I tuck you into bed so you can rest.”

He was so exasperating. “As lovely as that all sounds you know what I really meant.”

“We pick up where we left off” he replied. “And we work our way up to sleepovers. When we’re all ready we’ll make it more permanent.”

I swallowed hard at the last sentence. I knew without asking that he meant marriage. He wanted to marry me even after the nightmare with his ex.

“You know that we’re going to have a prenup right?” I asked.

“What?” He sounded almost insulted.

“I’m on my way to becoming a franchise. I need to protect my assets.”

Brody choked then laughed. “Worried I only want you for your money?”

“Yeah. It’s been a real problem for me. Knowing when men really care for me or when they just want my cash.”

“All right then right?” I asked.

“What?” He sounded almost insulted.

“I’m on my way to becoming a franchise. I need to protect my assets.”

Brody choked then laughed. “Worried I only want you for your money?”

“Yeah. It’s been a real problem for me. Knowing when men really care for me or when they just want my cash.”

“All right then boss lady. We’ll have a prenup but I expect to be well-compensated for my agreement.”

I knew he understood why I’d said it and that he was just playing along. I never wanted Brody to think I was with him for what he could buy me or the amount of money I could walk away with. And after the horror show that was his divorce I expected him to be gun shy. Hell I could understand completely how he might be.

So I said it first. Got it out in the open so he wouldn’t have to tiptoe around the topic when the time came.

I decided to change the subject because discussing marriage was freaking me out.

“This is not how I was planning our first night together after the dust settled” I complained.

“How did you picture it?” he asked.

“You. Me. A bottle of wine and my bed. There was other stuff involved too but those were the highlights” I answered.

“We can do all of that when you feel better.”

Yes but it would be more difficult with a sassy six-year-old around. Speaking of her...

“Where’s Jacks?” I asked.

“With your parents. According to your mother I needed to decompress after everything that’s happened recently.”

I bit back a laugh because I knew it would make my head hurt and the pain had finally faded to a manageable level. “She’s going to come back with a bunch of toys and clothes. And probably some sparkly make-up and nail polish” I promised him. “Mom’s dying for grandkids and she’s chosen Jacks to be her first.”

“That’s fine” Brody said. “Jacks needs that. My mother and Monica’s are both very indulgent but in a distant way. She needs attention and affection something I know from experience your mother can provide in spades.”

Brody kissed the top of my head. “Rest. We have plenty of time to talk later.”

“Okay.” I was in no shape to argue with him now. “But you’re staying the night right?”

This migraine would probably fade by morning. And then I could celebrate with Brody the way I really wanted to—by jumping his bones.

“Yeah. I’m here as long as you want me to be.”

If that was true I would have him forever.

I woke up to find someone in my bed. Not just someone. A man.

I lay perfectly still for a few moments until my muzzy head cleared. Brody was in my bed. For the first time in weeks.

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand and saw that it was still early just after six. I'd slept for nearly twelve hours.

And Brody slept beside me.

I'd gone to sleep in his arms but he wasn't holding me now. He was turned away from me mostly on his stomach and I could see the expanse of his bare back above the blanket that pooled at his waist.

I reached out and ran the palm of my hand over his shoulder and down his spine. He stirred beneath my touch and excitement pulsed within me.

When he turned over I was presented with a perfect view of his chest which seemed more defined than usual.

“Been working out?” I asked when his sleepy green eyes met mine.

“Stress relief” he answered. “How do you feel?”

“Back to normal.” I let my fingertips trail over his pectoral.

He made a low humming sound in the back of his throat. “Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“Touching you? Absolutely.”

He smiled. “No what happens after you touch me.”

“I think I’ll be fine as long as you don’t want to start working your way through the Kama Sutra.”

Brody chuckled and pulled me closer. “As good as that sounds I don’t think I’m up for that this morning.”

I let my fingers rove lower and lower on his body until my hand cupped his erection. "I'd say you're up for something."

His answer was to kiss me.

I sank into that kiss the soft deliciousness of it. I'd been starved for this—his taste his touch. The weeks between us suddenly felt like years.

I drank it all in. The scent of his skin the heat that emanated from his body the sound of his voice when he whispered my name. I needed this every day of my life.

Brody reached between us and used one hand to unbutton the pajama top I wore. He spread the shirt apart baring my torso. His mouth released mine and he looked down at me. The early morning light was pink and ethereal. It painted his skin bringing each contour of his shoulders and chest into sharp relief.

"You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" he murmured.

His fingertips trailed over my chest to the tip of my breast. My nipple hardened as he drew circles around it. Then he lowered his head and sucked my nipple into his mouth.

I arched into him my nails digging into his shoulders as my fingers curled and flexed.

"Brody." His name was a sigh that escaped my lips.

His mouth came back to mine as he tugged my panties down my legs. I lifted my legs to wrap them around his hips. Hot flesh pressed against me. He was already naked and ready.

I reached between us and stroked the thick length of his cock running my thumb over the head.

"I need you" I murmured when his mouth lifted from mine. I pressed my lips to his throat. "Don't make me wait."

"Condom" he muttered.

I tightened my grip on him. "I'm on the pill now."

He didn't say anything but his hand joined mine our fingers touching. He tilted his hips and lined up with my entrance before slowly pressing inside. I lifted my head and watched as he slid inside. The sensation coupled with the sight of his body made my body catch fire.

Brody and I both took a shaky breath when he shifted his hips back and thrust back inside his movements controlled and not nearly fast enough.

Then he was completely inside me and I moaned letting my head fall back. My muscles clenched when he withdrew and thrust again. Each movement was unhurried but enough to take my breath away.

"Don't ever leave me again" I said.

Brody's lips touched mine as he spoke each word making our mouths brush together. "I won't."

I tangled my fingers in his hair drawing him closer. "Even if you think it's for my own good." I gasped when his next thrust was deeper and a little harder.

"Never again" he responded.

Then we were both beyond words as our bodies came together moving in unison. I touched him relishing in the texture of his skin and the muscle beneath.

"I love you" I said as my body drew tighter.

Brody kissed me his hips driving harder against me. "I love you too."

The tension within me wound tighter and tighter until it snapped. I wrapped both legs around his waist and my arms around his neck holding him

to me as wave after wave of pleasure drowned me.

His mouth moved to my throat and he groaned into my neck as he came with me.

Our bodies shuddered together damp with sweat.

I put my lips to the indentation between his collarbones and sighed as the last of my climax faded.

"I missed you so much" I admitted. "I felt like a piece of me was missing."

Brody propped his weight on his elbows and looked down at me his eyes soft and his hair tousled from my hands. "I never want to feel that way again."

"Whatever happens from here we'll work it out" I told him. "Promise me."

"I promise" he vowed. "Jacks has been asking about you constantly. I didn't want to make things awkward when the situation was resolved so I told her you had a lot of work to do and you couldn't visit us for a couple of weeks but that I'd take her to see you as soon as you weren't overwhelmed."

"I hate that she was hurt by all this" I murmured.

"I think I kept all pain to a minimum. Especially since you sent her treats because you couldn't see her."

I narrowed my eyes at him and he grinned as he shifted and reached for the washcloth I'd used on my head last night which was on the nightstand. He must have put it there after I went to sleep.

He pulled out of me and pressed the cloth between my legs. "I'll be right back."

I turned over on my side and watched as he disappeared into the bathroom naked. I waited

until he returned before I asked "What treats did I send your daughter exactly?"

He smirked and stopped at the end of the bed to grab his underwear. "Remember when you insisted we needed to start Christmas shopping early?"

"You didn't" I said trying not to let the sight of him putting on his underwear distract me.

"Not everything. Just a couple of things you picked yourself."

"I guess I can't be mad. I was worried that her feelings would be hurt because I vanished from her life without a word."

Brody came over and sat on the mattress next to my bare thighs. "That's why I did it. And part of the reason Jacks hasn't been a sad sack like her father the past few weeks."

It hit me then. Our lives were starting now. He'd made it clear that he wanted a serious

relationship. That he wanted to marry me one day.

And I couldn't wait.

"Do I really get to have you forever?" I asked.

He leaned over me. "Only if I can have you too."

We were both smiling when he kissed me.

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Epilogue

Several months later...

I parked my car in the garage next to Brody's and dragged myself out of the driver's seat. I tried not to touch my clothes at all. Because they were covered with a sticky green substance that had once been pistachio ice cream.

Originally I'd planned to just come home for dinner with Brody and Jacks but the incident-

that-would-not-be-named had occurred and now I needed a shower. A really long shower where I would have to wash my hair multiple times to get rid of the remnants of the hot fudge sundae that had somehow ended up on top of my head.

I'd had to call in Sierra because there was no way I could clean myself up at the shop and I wasn't going to walk around the rest of the night with bits of hot fudge and dried flaking whipped cream on my face and neck.

Then when my former best friend showed up and saw me she immediately laughed and took several pictures with her cell phone. I knew that no matter what I threatened her with those images would end up on the shop's Instagram account. At least Lee would edit them first so I would look my best in my ice cream-covered glory.

Too bad I hadn't thought of that the night she'd had her ice cream mishap with Ben.

I closed my car door and trudged into the house.

A month or so after Brody and I had gotten back together we'd talked to Jacks and she didn't seem upset by the idea so I'd started sleeping over once a week.

That had slowly morphed into several days per week until I was now basically living with them. I still went home at least once or twice a week to spend time with Sierra but I rarely spent the night. She'd threatened to move into my room just so I'd stop pretending like I lived there and just move in with Brody. Not that she was any better because she spent most of her nights at Ben's place.

The problem was I was waiting for an invitation. Brody knew Jacks better than I did and he would have to be the one to make that decision. I told him that when I'd started spending every night with them.

Now several months later I was still waiting.

But I would wait years if I had to. He and his daughter had become my entire world. And he made it clear that I was just as important to him as his daughter.

He also made sure I understood that I was allowed to be involved in parenting Jacks too. Especially when the supervised visits with her mom faltered and finally stopped because Monica was too consumed with her partying and jet-setting lifestyle to spend time with the little girl who loved her.

I didn't want to take Monica's place. I wanted Jacks to have her mother. But I couldn't control Monica either. She had to make the choice to be involved.

So I did the best I could to be there for Jacks. I spent time with her. I showed her that I cared about her. I helped her with her homework and tucked her into bed.

And I loved every second of it.

She was also the first thing I saw when I walked out of the mudroom and into the kitchen.

"Hey Cam!" She had a huge grin on her face and her eyes sparkled. For some reason she was extra happy to see me.

The sight of her smile was enough to make what had been a trying evening a little bit better.

"Daddy and I made you a special dinner" she said.

Brody appeared in the kitchen behind her and stopped short when he took in my appearance. The corners of his mouth turned up for a split second before he controlled it. "What happened to you?" he asked. I could hear the need to laugh vibrating in his voice.

"Pee Wee football league night. Apparently the teams decided to play the last quarter all over again with ice cream this time."

Brody snorted but quickly suppressed it.
"Please tell me you have video."

I did but there was no way I was going to tell him because he would want to watch it. I wasn't ready for that right now because I was still too angry. Maybe after I'd cooled down.

On the way home I'd called the Pee Wee commissioner and let him know on no uncertain terms that I expected the parents from those two teams to reimburse me for the professional cleaning I was going to have to arrange. Considering I sponsored a team and paid for their uniforms he was more than happy to comply. Though neither of the teams that messed up the shop were sponsored by me. Otherwise things would have ended a whole lot quicker.

Jacks tapped Brody on the arm. "Daddy can we ask her?"

Brody crouched down. "I think she might want to clean up first sweetie."

When Jacks' face fell I pushed the thought of a hot shower to the back of my mind. This was more important. Congealed fudge could wait.

"It's okay Brody." I came closer and knelt on the floor in front of Jacks. "What did you need to ask me baby?"

Her grin returned with a vengeance and she looked to her father. Brody nodded and dropped down on his knees next to her.

Jacks turned back to me. "Actually it's Daddy that has something to ask you."

When I looked at Brody the little black box in his hand caught my attention and I froze.

"You know how much I love you Cameron McClane. Would you do me the honor of being my wife?"

I stared at him then at the diamond ring that appeared when he opened the box.

"Daddy I thought you were going to ask her to marry us!" Jacks chimed in.

My heart started beating again and tears filled my eyes.

Jacks' happy expression faded. "Why are you crying Cam?"

I completely forgot about the goo on my clothes and grabbed her into a tight hug. "I'm crying because I'm so happy that I can't keep it inside."

Jacks' arms wrapped around my neck and she squeezed me back. "So you're not sad?"

"No baby" I answered

Sponsored

releasing her and sitting back so I could see them both. "I'm very very happy."

"So you'll marry us?" she repeated.

"Absolutely" I answered my voice breaking. "I would love to marry you." I looked at Brody as I accepted his proposal.

"Give her the ring Daddy" Jacks demanded.

I laughed even as tears still slipped down my face. I swiped them away with my right hand as I held my left out to Brody. Then my mouth fell open when I got my first good look at the ring.

It was perfect. A cushion cut diamond gleamed in the center surrounded by smaller diamonds that also crusted the entire band making the whole ring sparkle.

Brody held my left hand steady as he slid the ring on my fourth finger. It fit as though it had been made for me.

I looked from the ring to Brody and Jacks. "I love you both so much" I said.

Jacks threw herself into my arms again then grimaced when she pulled back. "You're sticky!"

Brody chuckled. "Why don't you go change clothes and wash up before dinner Jacks?"

She scampered out of the room yelling "Don't eat without me!"

As soon as I heard her feet on the stairs I threw myself into Brody's arms and kissed him.

When we came up for air I said "I can't believe you proposed to me while I was covered in pistachio ice cream and hot fudge sundae."

"I don't care what you're covered with as long as you said yes."

God that was the most perfect thing he could have said.

"Did you honestly think I'd say no?" I asked.

"I didn't think so but there was always the chance. You're not upset that Jacks wanted to help are you? When I asked her how she felt

about us getting married she got so excited and she wanted to plan 'our' proposal right away."

That was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard.
"You asked her tonight?"

He nodded.

"I love that she wanted to be involved. I want her to be happy" I answered.

Brody pulled me closer again and kissed me once more light and short. Then he pulled back a bit and looked down at the smear of green across his shirtfront. "I think we both need to clean up before dinner."

He got to his feet and helped me up.

"What are we having?" I asked.

"Carbonara and salad with garlic breadsticks. Jacks insisted that it was your favorite."

I laughed. "It is one of my favorites." I stopped in the middle of our bedroom and stared at Brody. "Please tell me this isn't a dream. Because I don't think I could handle waking up."

"It's not a dream Cam" he said wrapping his arms around my waist. "It kills me every time you go home. The longer we're together the more I need you. I crave you. Every day. I would marry you tomorrow if we could arrange it and not get murdered by our families."

My heart swelled at his words. "And don't forget Jacks. She'll probably want to help plan the wedding."

"Oh that reminds me. She's already requested that you not dress her in pink."

I laughed. "I'm fine with that." I rose up on my toes and kissed him again. "I would marry you tomorrow and tell our respective families to get over it if you wanted."

He rested his forehead against mine. "I know you Cam. You want a wedding. Maybe not something huge but I know you have something in the back of your mind that you've been dreaming about."

"I do" I answered honestly. "Every time I've daydreamed about my wedding I was marrying you. That's all that matters."

Brody kissed me until Jacks pounded on the bedroom door and hollered "I'm hungry! Are y'all done cleaning up yet?"

We broke apart laughing.

"We'll celebrate after bedtime" I promised him.

His arms tightened around me. "We have the rest of our lives."

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