

rebel  
at  
heart

THE KINCAIDS OF PINE HARBOUR

ZOE YORK

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# **REBEL AT HEART**

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A KINCAIDS OF PINE HARBOUR NOVEL

ZOE YORK

# CONTENTS

About This Book

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Epilogue

The Next Pine Harbour Novel

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Also by Zoe York](#)

[About the Author](#)

*for everyone who has a sister from another mister, especially those who get  
to be sisters by marriage*

Monica Fischer needs to make things right with the man who was her husband for two short, beautiful weeks. Before she lied and told him it was a mistake. But making things right means crossing the continent to find him and tell him that actually, no, her father's high-priced attorneys didn't successfully get them an annulment, and now they need a divorce.

Josh Kincaid left his heart and his patience in California, three years ago. Now he's trying to make a living as a small town mechanic. The last person he expects to show up on his doorstep is his wife. Ex-wife. Whatever. But demanding she leaves—immediately, without speaking to anyone in his hometown—doesn't work. A spring snowstorm traps them together, and forces them to confront their lingering resentment, inconvenient longing, and some painful truths.

# WELCOME TO PINE HARBOUR

Tucked into a hollow half-way up the Bruce Peninsula, on the eastern shores of Lake Huron, **Pine Harbour** is a small town full of big families.



**The Kincaids of Pine Harbour series**

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**ZOE YORK**

# 1

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JOSH KINCAID HADN'T PARTICULARLY ENJOYED his brief period of pseudo-fame as a minor social media celebrity. So when it all came crashing down around him, he wasn't bothered by the loss.

What did bother him was a single, confusing comment he saw, right before he deleted his account. *He's married to the Fischer Racing heiress, you know.* That bothered him a lot.

Because he wasn't married. He had been, for two short weeks, three years ago. Before her father demanded an annulment and she agreed that their brief, fiery love affair wasn't as real as Josh had thought.

It ended as quickly as it began.

And then he set about constructing a new life for himself. One that was all about cars, and hard work, and definitely no women. He moved back to his hometown of Pine Harbour. He bought a garage and spent time with his family. Watched his brothers fall in love and get married.

He filled all the empty bits of his day by creating content. He shoved the busy work of recording video into any free moments around his work in the garage and his hard early morning runs and his far-too-aggressive training schedule for his beer-league soccer teams.

Making content about car restoration was how he avoided having to think about just how one-note and lonely his life post-Monica had become. He was

busy, he told himself.

*You had a wife for two weeks and you ran away from her.*

Well, he hadn't run. He'd accepted her regret as palpable and real, and then put as much distance between them as he needed to take his next breath.

So of course, it was another woman who had been the linchpin of his most recent humiliation. *No, not the woman.* His visible interest in Wynona Wheels, aka Sexy Car Grrl. *That* had been the linchpin.

Joke was on her jealous boyfriend, because Josh hadn't been that interested. It just appeared that way to people on the internet, who latched onto the supposed chemistry and "shipped" them. It didn't take long before a ReboundJosh hashtag was trending. Utter disaster.

And it was absurd. He wasn't going to be anyone's rebound anything. He hadn't even rebounded himself, and it had been three years. He was hardly qualified to be a bouncy landing pad for a stranger's broken heart. Also, she lived on the other side of the continent, and if there was one place Josh Kincaid would never go again in his life, it was sunny California.

It had started innocently enough. They made similar content, had common fans. People tagged them in each other's videos. So when she broke up with her boyfriend, he played along with the joke that he could be her rebound guy—at first. Which was a mistake.

Now that it had all blown up, he could see the missteps. The truth was probably that he'd gotten distracted. She had the type of gig he wanted. The big garage, the team of people working on restorations. The real business to go along with the social media fame, which paid almost nothing.

Josh wanted all of that so badly he could taste it.

And he wasn't even close, no matter how good he made things look online. His garage? It mostly did oil changes and brake pad replacements for locals. The restorations he did? Half of them were for his brothers. And his slick-looking merchandise store online barely paid for new running shoes every month.

Or it did until the internet decided he wasn't just a fun rebound option, but actually the reason Wynona had left her boyfriend. And then the tide of online opinion turned against him.

He had never met the woman.

He wouldn't be blamed for the downfall of yet another California racing world princess, especially when the piranhas in the comments figured out his connection to Monica Fischer.

*He's married to the Fischer Racing heiress, you know.*

Except, according to some papers he signed, that marriage had been erased from the record. And he wasn't about to argue with the trolls.

So he deleted his TikTok account.

Then he checked the backlog of messages left by local customers, because oil changes and brake pad changes might not be sexy, but they paid the bills.

And he replied to the group chat with his brothers, confirming that yes, he knew about the party on Saturday at the marina across the street.

Yes, he would be there. He'd close the garage for a few hours and celebrate the remarkable happiness of yet another Kincaid brother getting hitched.

All of them but him.

His own nuptials had been short-lived and disastrous. Not to be repeated. But he was genuinely happy for Seth and January, who had found their way back to each other after twenty years apart.

*Maybe seventeen years from now, Monica will reappear...*

He barked a cold, hard laugh at his empty garage.

That would still be too fucking soon.

But that comment about his marriage bothered him. It lingered on his mind in the hours after he deleted the app. His brain kept chewing on it, and he woke up early the next morning, which deeply irritated him because he preferred to sleep in until the last possible second now, until he had

something to do or somewhere to be.

How had that person known about the marriage, if it was scrubbed from the record?

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IT WAS TOO EARLY in the morning for Monica Fischer's phone to vibrate once, let alone basically non-stop for five minutes. And because she was asleep when it started going off, she accidentally shoved it between her mattress and her headboard. Now it was wedged out of reach, resting against the base of the headboard on the floor. Right in the middle.

She was going to have to move the whole bed. Or find a tool. Where did her housekeeper put the broom?

"Stop. Calling. Me," she snapped at the phone.

Then her iPad starting ringing from across the room.

Great. Whoever it was—probably her mother—had decided to switch to FaceTime, and that went to every device she owned. Well, rescuing the phone could wait now. She rolled out of bed, snatched the iPad, and carried it with her into her dressing room.

"Mom, it's too early for whatever your latest—"

"Not your mother, darling," an elegant, lightly accented voice interrupted her. "Oh, you look terrible."

"I look asleep, Amira." Monica set the tablet on a shelf and propped her hands on her hips, giving her best friend from boarding school an exasperated look. The woman was the closest thing she had to a sister. "And fuck you."

"Damn it, did I get the time difference wrong again?" Amira Saleh managed a smile that was both bright and sympathetic at the same time.

"Have you checked your Google alerts yet?"

"I was *asleep*. It is *five thirty* in the *morning*."

"Yikes." Amira grimaced. "Okay, well...This could have waited a few

hours.”

“What could have...?” Monica abandoned her plan to get dressed. She swiped over to her inbox, where she got a routine digest email of Google alerts on her name every morning. It was a rare day she clicked in to read the summary of mentions of her name around the internet, because she wasn’t super high profile. Not like Sylvie or Cathryn, their other friends from school.

Even Amira had more of an online presence than Monica did.

She preferred to nurture other people to their best brand potential. That was fun.

Her name being in the press? Never fun.

And because Fischer Racing had the best lawyers and PR people in the world, her name was never in the press.

“I’m not seeing anything,” she murmured as she skimmed the links. She snapped her gaze back to where Amira was sipping what looked like lemonade at a cafe. “Where are you? It looks warm.”

“Beirut, visiting my grandmother before leaving for Italy.”

“Nice.”

“Mmm. The countdown is on, but...you may have to fix your little... problem?”

“Just tell me. Did my mother join TikTok? I told her she shouldn’t, but she’s in a fifty-is-the-new-twenty phase. Oh God, is my father getting married again?”

“It’s not your parents. But TikTok...” Amira sighed and leaned in, tapping on the screen. “None of those people got the media training we did, babe. And it shows. I’m sending you a link to a not-so-blind item on a gossip website. Your name is all over the comments, so if you don’t get the alert today, you will tomorrow.”

A violently queasy feeling took up residence in Monica’s belly as she read the brief item.

*A reality TV star in the car world, who amassed millions of followers on*

*TikTok and recently broken up with her fiancé, is now linked to a certain racing heiress's secret husband. Talk about a love quadrangle guaranteed to finish last.*

She knew exactly what this was about.

Josh's brief flirtation with Wynona Wheels hadn't bothered Monica. They lived in different countries, for goodness' sake. And anyone with eyes could tell that he wasn't an instigator. She would bet money he hadn't slid into Wynona's DMs. He was simply responding to fan chatter. Which was a rookie mistake anyone with experience could have seen coming, but Josh didn't have that social media experience.

It drove Monica crazy that her ex had managed to get a huge following online but hadn't built a professional team around that platform, to protect it and him from nonsense like this.

And it was nonsense.

Total...nonsense.

*Keep telling yourself that, babe.*

Well, she would. She'd built quite the emotional firewall around herself to not care about an insignificant online drama. It was a free world...and he was a free man. But for her own name to be dragged into it? That stung.

And as Amira warned her, the comments had it figured out. Her name. Josh's name. Mention of a hashtag over on TikTok, but she didn't have that app on her iPad. Only her phone, which was currently stuck under the bed.

"Amira, I have to go."

"Of course." Her friend's gorgeous face slid into a delicate frown. "Wait, does this mean it's true? You have a secret husband?"

"No," Monica promised. "I do not."

"But you aren't surprised at the rumour."

She bit her lip. "Look, it's a long story."

"Babe, did you get married and not invite me to the wedding? Because you are my maid of honour. *Maid*. That means, not married. If you're really



my *matron* of honour, I need to have the programs reprinted.”

“I’m not a matron.” Her pulse jackhammered nervously in her neck.

But she couldn’t tell Amira about the wedding, because it technically never happened. Well, it had legally been undone.

And for legal reasons, she was pretty sure she needed to keep pretending that it had never happened.

Which felt bad. Very bad. Lonely, terrible, what the fuck kind of bad.

And that terrible feeling made her question just how good the Fischer Racing lawyers actually were.

Monica took a deep breath. “I need to look into this. It’s a weird mix up, that’s all. Let’s assume it takes a day or two to handle...I’ll be in Italy by Monday or Tuesday at the latest.”

“Sylvie and Cathryn arrive on Wednesday.”

That gave her a week to figure out how some random person on the internet knew about Josh. “I won’t be any later than that. Promise. Pinky swear.”

“UNCLE JOSH, WE’RE HERE!”

He poked his head around the hood of Betsy, an old pickup truck he’d slowly been restoring for himself, just in time to see his niece Becca catch her son Charlie’s hand.

The little devil had tried to snag a wrench.

Josh kept plastic ones in a tool kit just for Charlie, so he wiped his hands on a rag, then dug the toys out for his grandnephew.

At thirty-four, Josh felt too young to have a grandnephew, but his older brother Owen had only been nineteen when Becca was born, and then life repeated itself when Becca had Charlie at eighteen.

Normally, he loved having them visit—especially because they didn’t live in Pine Harbour any longer. Charlie’s dad (and Becca’s fiancé) had beaten all the odds after his young hockey career had almost derailed over becoming a teen father. Two years ago, Hayden had been offered a try out contract by an NHL team’s player development program. So it was a rare treat to have Becca and Charlie here.

But Josh was in no mood for company, and in a few hours, he would have to put on a happy face for a family barbecue he couldn’t get out of. His brother Seth was flying home from his honeymoon today. There would be a get together at the marina across the street, where his new sister-in-law was

one of the two Howe sisters who managed the Pine Harbour fixture.

And Josh would have to be pretend he wasn't seething inside.

He yanked Charlie's special toolbox out of its permanent home on his shelf and handed it to the tyke.

It wasn't the toddler's fault that Josh had fucked up, royally, and not noticed for three whole years.

Becca gave him a look that said she could tell something was seriously wrong.

"Don't start," he warned.

She raised her hands. "Okay, but whatever it is, fix your face before this afternoon."

"Yeah. I will."

"Does this grumpy Saturday morning vibe mean you don't want to come to the pancake breakfast with us?"

Josh rolled his eyes, and almost swore a blue streak about the relentless marketing events his newest neighbours were doing, before remembering little ears always heard everything.

And he didn't need Charlie's fifth and sixth words to be *motherfucking keeners*.

For the three years that he'd been back in Pine Harbour, the dilapidated harbour where his garage was located had matched his general vibe. A little rundown, very hardworking. Honest and real.

Now everything was changing, really quickly, and he wanted that. He did. He wanted his town to have growth, and he wanted the harbour to have new life breathed into it.

But did it have to happen so...aggressively?

Fuck, he didn't even have a good reason for hating Pine Harbour Brewery, the latest brainchild of Campbell Mills, Hunter Jackson, and Trent Aitken—three former soldiers who bought the land behind Josh's garage.

In a few short months at the end of the previous summer, a modern

building popped up. Over the winter, they installed a craft brewery inside, and now, six weeks before the start of cottage season, they were ready to soft launch their business.

He was officially impressed.

And unofficially exhausted just by observing them when he shot hoops behind the garage. Didn't they ever feel the unrelenting need to go take a nap? Was that just him?

And his need for a nap would only increase if he had a stack of pancakes for breakfast. "I've got work to do," he said, gesturing at Olivia Minelli's minivan. "Brake job."

He also had some homework to do, a bunch of questions to answer for the lawyer he'd hired, but he'd been dragging his feet on even looking at that today. *Fuck.*

"Oh, bummer." Becca perched herself against a workbench, keeping one eye on Charlie and making no move to head off to breakfast. "So, what's up?"

He was tempted to tell her. It might come out eventually, anyway. *I'm still married. I found out from a TikTok troll, and it's been seventy-two hours of confusing what the fuck inertia. I've hired a lawyer I can't afford, in another country, to unfuck a mess I didn't want and didn't make.*

But he wasn't ready for the questions. He would never be ready. He hated talking about Monica. Had barely confided even small slices of what happened to his brothers.

Instead, he changed the subject to Becca's fiancé's hockey team and their success in hunting down a spot in the playoffs. "Hayden's playing well."

Her whole face brightened. "I know, I'm so happy for him. That's why we're here, actually. Giving him a bit of space to do nothing but eat, breathe, sleep hockey in the last few weeks before the end of the season."

They chatted about hockey for a few minutes, until Charlie asked for pancakes, really clearly—in toddler speak. "Cancakes, Mama?"

“Absolutely, my little mister.” She picked him up. “Say bye bye, Uncle Josh.”

“Buh-bye,” Charlie said, handing over the plastic wrench he’d hung on to until the very last second.

Josh gave him a high five. “I’ll see you at the marina,” he promised Becca. “With a smile on.”

He followed them outside. The biting fresh spring morning couldn’t decide what it wanted to do, weather wise. The sun was trying to come out, but the wind whipped in that erratic way that threatened to bring back a bit of winter, if only for a few hours.

Hopefully, that held off for the afternoon.

Traffic was steady now, a line of trucks and cars coming down the hill from the main part of town. Stopping at the stop sign in front of his garage, waiting to turn left to go to the brewery.

Everyone loved pancakes, it seemed. Well, that was good for his town.

Once upon a time, the harbour area had been vibrant, with a busy marina and a popular motel. Then other towns up and down the peninsula between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay that the town sat on had exploded in popularity. There was more to the decline of the harbour area than that, of course, but by the time Josh had returned after a decade on the racing circuit down south, it was dead.

Only the marina had survived, and just barely.

Which meant he’d scored the garage at a bargain basement price. The only price he could afford, given that he’d cashed out his 401k at a not-great-time for the market, and he’d angrily sold his Gran Torino in a fit of *never want to accidentally remember Monica spread out naked on these leather seats, flushed from a shuddering orgasm, ever again.*

He’d poured himself into establishing the garage as a significant, permanent part of the new Pine Harbour. Worked with the Howe sisters across the road at the marina to bring town celebrations back to the water’s

edge.

So it should be right up his alley to celebrate another business putting down roots next door.

But even if he could shove the recent, terrifying realization he had a legal mess on his hands—a mess he shared with a woman who never wanted to see him again, to boot—he couldn't deny that he was tired on other levels as well. Frustrated with work—too much ordinary work, not enough of what he really wanted to do in the more interesting restoration space.

Which was, always, connected to Monica on some level. Those were the dreams he'd confessed to her, late at night as she lay tangled up in his sheets, her fingers tracing lazy figure eights on his chest.

He'd always wanted to prove himself professionally. He was the only Kincaid brother who hadn't joined the military—who hadn't served his country and then his community in some meaningful way. Instead, he'd run off to play with loud, powerful cars. That choice had to lead to something with impact, or he'd feel like a selfish child.

And he'd had a plan, a good one. Until he went and fell in love with the wrong girl.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” he growled out loud. He couldn't be left alone with thoughts like that.

Olivia Minelli's brake job would have to wait until tomorrow.

“Becca! Charlie!” They were almost at the corner, but they turned around and looked at him, bright expectations on their faces. He sighed, although he could feel a reluctant smile threatening on his own face. “Wait for me. I could use some cancakes after all.”

---

THE PILOT'S voice crackled to life. “We've begun our final descent, Ms. Fischer.”

Then he gave her a weather update—they'd be landing amidst "wet flurries", which didn't sound like something to be cheerful about, at least to this California girl.

Monica checked her messages one last time as the private plane circled the small airport she'd found an hour south of Pine Harbour.

Oh, it was ironic that it took leaving her father's company and striking out on her own to realize that some of the things she hated to hear from him—like, CEOs never really get to take vacation—actually were true.

She shoved that thought away and called her mother as soon as they were wheels down. "I'm on my way."

"Good luck, darling," her mother said, not trying to keep the worry out of her voice. Bianca Fischer had never met her son-in-law-for-a-hot-second, but Monica was very aware her mother didn't like the idea of Josh.

And her parents were unexpectedly united against Monica handling this herself.

She didn't care. She needed to see Josh, as soon as possible, and try to get ahead of this. And staying focused on that goal—make this right, and organize a civil divorce—helped her avoid drowning her feelings in a vat of what ifs.

Self-pity didn't look good on anyone, but it really didn't look good on wealthy heiresses, and Monica knew that. It was a lesson she was supposed to have learned three years ago, when she played with the feelings of a flesh-and-blood man and broke both their hearts.

In the three days since Amira had called her, Monica had done a deep dive in the rumours swirling about Josh and Wynona. She found the hashtags (#ReboundJosh was trending), and then, to her horror, stumbling across an account dedicated to analyzing public records.

With clear screen shots flashing behind her head, a perky blonde woman detailed how Monica had married Josh in Vegas—and the two had never been seen together in public, but according to public records, they were still

married.

That was confusing, stressful news on many levels.

Because she was supposed to get on a plane and fly to Italy. She didn't have time to deal with her father, but she was incandescent with rage.

On the other hand, she couldn't risk her father taking matters into his own hands while she was in Italy. So she had to be proactive. She called Amira and profusely apologized, buying herself a few days' grace before the pre-wedding events really kicked into high gear.

Then she found the best family law attorney in California and made it clear *she* was hiring their firm. Not her father.

And then she reluctantly called her father.

The fallout over the next twenty-four hours was massive. He fired the law firm who had handled the annulment. Monica used the biggest weapon at her disposal—her knowledge of how much her father hated publicity—and promised to make this very ugly if he got involved.

Her attorney strongly encouraged her to quickly and quietly file a formal divorce petition in the courts and let a process server deliver the application to Josh.

She knew her father would lose his mind if she zoomed ahead with a quickie divorce—which would be fine. A reason to do it, in fact.

Except that Josh would also lose *his* mind, for other reasons, and she wasn't that cowardly.

It was her fault they were in this position, so no. She had to explain the situation to him herself.

She really didn't want to. It wouldn't go well.

*I'm so sorry.* The apology she'd tried to give him as he stormed out of her life. That she would try to give him again today, whenever she finally made her way to Pine Harbour...and he wouldn't accept.

She was going into the lion's den and she knew it.

And she was doing it alone.



She'd reluctantly agreed to keep her mother posted, but considering the fact that it was Monica's life that had been turned inside out, she didn't understand why her mother was being so clingy about this situation. On the other hand, unnecessarily injured feelings was a Bianca Fischer classic.

So there didn't need to be a logical explanation why her mother wanted hourly updates on this side trip.

"How is the weather there?"

She could picture her mother staring out the window of her Upper East Side apartment, out across Central Park, in the general direction of Middle of Nowhere, Ontario, Canada. "Fine," she lied. No need to mention the wet flurries.

"I looked up Toronto weather. It's snowing there."

"I'm not in Toronto. And I learned how to drive in Switzerland, Mom. I'll be fine."

"You spun out and crashed a Ferrari. Your father shouldn't have—"

And that was enough of that conversation. "Gotta go, Mom. I'll drive safely."

She quashed the little flutter of inherited fear when the rental car agent repeated the pilot's cheery warning of intermittent wet snow flurries, instead focusing on the promise the weather would clear shortly.

Good. While—one collision notwithstanding—she *had* learned to drive in Europe, so it wasn't the first time she'd encountered gross wet white stuff on the road, she wasn't looking forward to a white-knuckle drive through a foreign country.

Even if it did look a lot like the one she'd just departed in many ways.

But there were lots of small signals that she'd left behind the comfort of Southern California for a journey into the unknown—in more ways than one. The road signs were in different measurements. Where she'd expect the speed limit to be fifty miles an hour, it was eighty kilometres. And her phone coolly informed her she only had seventy-three of those kilometres to go before she

would be face to face with the last person on earth who wanted to see her.

The bumper stickers and billboards all had a slightly different tone to them. She imagined them all saying, *Josh doesn't want to see you* and *You should have a lawyer handle this*.

When she stopped at a coffee shop, she did a double take when the woman at the counter asked her if she wanted a divorce cookie.

“Excuse me?”

“Do you want a frosted cookie?”

“No.” She cast a longing look at the treat. She didn’t deserve such goodness. Not yet. Maybe after she did the hard thing. “Thank you.”

The woman gave her a sympathetic smile. “Long drive today?”

“Something like that.”

“You aren’t from around here, are you?”

“How can you tell?”

That got her a shrug. “You’ve got that not-from-around-here vibe. First visit?”

“Yes.” And it would be her last. Once this was done, she wouldn’t have any reason to ever return.

And to further underline that she wasn’t at home, that she was entering unknown territory, at least one of the random radio stations she flipped past was in French. From her time at boarding school, she knew just enough of the language to be dangerous. But she was pretty sure *Va voir ailleurs si j’y suis* was a uniquely Swiss derogatory flip off, so she was imagining things there, too.

Every part of her subconscious was warning her that danger lay ahead.

Josh wouldn’t want to see her.

And when she stopped just south of Pine Harbour, pulling off the road into a scenic lookout spot to check her messages—really? There wasn’t anything that she needed to handle urgently?—she had to confront the gross feeling that the guilt she was feeling had nothing to do with skipping out on

work, and everything to do with coming face to face with the man she hurt.

Josh Kincaid was still her husband, and no matter how hard it would be to see him again, she owed it to him to fix this properly, once and for all.

If she hadn't used him for her own purposes in the very beginning, none of this would have ever happened.

*THREE YEARS earlier*

MONICA CHECKED HER LIPSTICK, her tits, and her winsome smile. All were on point. Good. The hot mechanic who had just returned from vacation was probably the only guy in the building who didn't know who she was, and she needed a crash course in car racing.

She'd spent the last two weeks dodging subtle barbs and not-so-subtle shade about her suitability for the sweet marketing gig she'd been handed by virtue of being the boss's daughter. She'd expected all of that. She hadn't been prepared for the sharpest cuts to come from her father himself.

"You don't need to know anything about racing, sweetheart. You just need to remember how often people want you to post on Instagram."

That was her whole job, it seemed. Posting blink and you'd miss it slice-of-life video from the Fischer Racing campus to the team's Instagram Stories. And if someone had Instagram and didn't know how to use it, she could "consult with them."

Nobody wanted her consultation.

She pushed through the interior door between the executive suites and the back garage bay and leaned against the wall. She'd watched this guy earlier,

during the team workout in the morning.

That had been some good Insta content. Hot Mechanic peeling his sweat-slicked t-shirt up his rangy torso, revealing a six-pack dusted in golden brown fuzz. He'd wiped his face with the hem, then dropped it down, letting the damp fabric cling to his belly, not fixing the way it rode up a bit, still teasing a slice of his lower abdomen above the waistband of his shorts.

She hadn't posted it online. She'd saved it to her phone instead. Maybe he had an account himself. It would be better content for him than it would be for the team.

That's what she told herself—that she saved it *for him*, this guy whose name she didn't even know, but who she'd decided was her final chance to reboot her short-lived career in this building.

That decision had happened immediately after the workout. He'd taken charge of the pit crew, even though she didn't think that was his job, and reminded everyone of the day's agenda.

Which is how she knew to come back here, now, at the end of the day.

He was running a few of them through pit crew practice because they have a new tire guy on the team. This was the last thing he'd barked to everyone else—and she'd put it on her own schedule, too.

The garage bay had a raised viewing platform at the back, where she was standing now, with stairs at either end. Underneath the platform was where a lot of the...stuff...was stored. *You need to know what the gear is called.*

There was a lot she needed to know. So far, she'd memorized the race schedule—they were two weeks into a six-week break, then a ten-week circuit would start. She wanted to be Knowledgeable with a capital K by the time they were back on the track.

She forced herself to listen to the words Hot Mechanic was saying to the new team member.

“Don't rush. Fast but smooth, that's the rule. We want to finish before the fuel guy, but going faster than that just invites trouble.”

“Fast but smooth,” the new kid said, parroting what he’d just been told. But it didn’t look like he understood.

And maybe Hot Mechanic saw the not-listening panic in his eyes, too, because he gestured for the kid to come closer. The new guy glanced up at Monica, nervous and quick, but Hot Mechanic didn’t glance back. Like he didn’t care, or maybe he didn’t realize she was standing on the catwalk just behind him.

He dropped his voice. “Like when you’re fucking, you know?”

Heat swarmed through Monica’s lower belly.

The kid stared at him.

She was sure she was staring, too. Hot Mechanic was deeply captivating.

When the kid didn’t seem to understand the analogy, Hot Mechanic got specific. “If she asks you to go faster, what she’s really saying is, do exactly what you’re doing right now, just...”

“Faster?” The kid was confused. Maybe he wasn’t as good at sex as Hot Mechanic was.

Because Monica didn’t have a ton of experience, but what she did have affirmed the hypothesis that jack-rabbing was the most common response to an urge for more, and often that urge was communicated as a breathless “faster” that didn’t really mean exactly that.

Hot Mechanic knew exactly what it meant. “Speed up. Gradually. So she can’t feel the shift in gears.”

“But it needs to be under seven seconds.” The kid’s cheeks turn pink. “Not sex. I mean, the tire change.”

“Don’t worry about how long it takes. Worry about being smooth. Focus on the car not even being aware that you’re sliding on a new tire. Pretend the car is a girl—or guy, whatever—that you’re trying to impress. Don’t worry about me. I’m not here. It’s the car you want to be smooth with.”

Monica let out a low moan, and the kid looked up at her.

This time, Hot Mechanic didn’t miss the fact that someone was standing

right behind him. He turned slowly, every inch of his tall, muscular body on alert. When he finally looked up at her, he didn't look embarrassed about the conversation she'd just overheard.

He looked annoyed that she'd been eavesdropping.

Which she hadn't been.

This was a workplace, and she was there to do her job. Sort of.

*You thought you could seduce him.*

Well, that was before she knew that he apparently knew everything about sex. And back when she thought she might have the upper hand, because she was a pretty twenty-one-year-old and he had a dick.

From the suspicious look on his face, clearly it wouldn't be that easy. "Can I help you?"

There was something utterly irresistible about the command in his voice. She blushed and gave him her brightest smile. "I certainly hope so."

His brows rose, and he waited.

"I'm..." she trailed off. Re-assessed. Figured out that the first thing she needed to do was prove to him she *was* allowed to be here. Time to play it straight. She flashed him her keycard. "I'm new here. From marketing. I have some questions, but please, finish up what you're doing first."

He frowned, but accepted her answer and turned around again. "Let's do this three more times. Then we'll call it a night."

The driver in the car backed up, then rolled forward again. The team surged forward, each doing one task. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than before. The second time was a little slower, but the third time looked exactly like on a race day, and Monica clapped.

Hot Mechanic shot her a look that said, *we don't applaud people for just doing their jobs.*

She pressed her lips together, holding back all her other impulsive responses—questions, quips, and attempts to be cute that she just knew would land badly. This guy wasn't that easy to impress. She knew that

instinctively. And yet that only made her want to impress him more. To win him over and show him she was worthy of his time.

It didn't take long for everything to be returned to its rightful place. For the team to disperse, leaving them alone. Just long enough for her to take another good look at him and assess him again. Not as Instagram material this time, or a potential racing-business coach, but as a...

*As a what, Monica?*

He locked up a tool cabinet. Everyone else in the garage had been wearing race team overalls. Not him, though. He was wearing black jeans, snug to his thighs. The knees were worn, but not yet ripped, and a metal chain looped from his belt to his back pocket, where the faint outline of a wallet did nothing to obscure the distinct curve of solid thighs to an even tighter, more solid ass.

*How did a mechanic get a lower body like that? Non-stop squats?* He was built like an athlete, like a baseball catcher, not like the graceful leanness of most people in racing. But he wasn't just built differently. He was taller than most everyone else in the building, too.

“What on earth does someone from marketing want with a grease monkey like me?” he finally asked, breaking the silence in the garage.

She jerked her gaze up from his ass. He wasn't looking at her. He was still puttering around with tools, but somehow she knew she was busted for checking him out. She scrambled down the stairs, and as she crossed to him, he turned and leaned back against a workbench.

Stopping just in front of him, she squared her shoulders. “Thank you for letting me watch the tire-changing practice.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don't remember giving you permission, exactly.”

“Thank you for not kicking me out, then.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “Have you been kicked out of a lot of spaces?”



Not exactly. Shamed out, maybe. “I have a lot to learn about racing still. Not everyone has your patience with new hires.”

“My patience?” He laughed. “You may have gotten the wrong impression about me, Ms...”

She doesn’t want to give him her name.

He shrugged. “You’ll learn plenty about racing soon enough. You pick it up by osmosis just being here.”

“I spent fifteen years of my life trying to do that, and it never worked.”

He raised his eyebrows. “You don’t look old enough for that sentence to make any sense.”

Damn it. She held out her hand. “Monica Fischer.”

Understanding dawned, and he screwed up his face in a *fuck no, you’re the owner’s daughter* expression. “Josh Kincaid. Let me just put my foot in my mouth...”

He checked his hand as if worried it might have a smear of grease on it, then wrapped his fingers around hers. She ignored the rush of heat that crawled up her arm—*don’t think about the sex analogy he made earlier*—and focused on the fact that his handshake was firm, strong, and lasted the perfect length of time.

“Nice to meet you, Josh.”

“Same to you, Ms. Fischer.”

“Monica.”

“Mmm. So, you’re returning to the family business after...?”

“I just graduated from college.”

“Ah.” He dropped her hand like a hot potato.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I think it was something. Is it my age? You think I’m not old enough to hack it here? We have drivers who are younger than me!”

“It’s not—” He growled with an exasperated sigh. “You’re what, twenty?”

Twenty-one?”

“I just turned twenty-one.”

“Happy birthday, Miss Fischer.” She didn’t miss the pivot from Ms. to Miss. However old this guy was, it was old enough that twenty-one was too young to be taken seriously. “Here’s your first lesson about racing. The pit crew does not fraternize with the boss’s daughter.”

She blew a raspberry. “That’s a stupid rule. And I’m not looking for fraternization. Just a little help with getting up to speed.”

“I’m not the guy for that.”

“I think you are.”

“You’re wrong.”

“What are the other rules, then? Tell me that much.”

He shook his head. “Oh, no. I’m not going to be your racing tutor.”

“Why not?”

“Because everything I tell you will only trigger more questions.”

“That makes me an eager student.”

“That makes you…” He stopped, turned around, and dragged his gaze down her body. And in all the ways his handshake had made her feel like an equal, if only for a brief moment, this heated glance made her feel like an object. “A very dangerous liability.”

She’d bet money that was intentional. “A sexy liability?”

He laughed. “Oh yeah, Miss Fischer. You are absolutely sexy. And you know it, too. Now run along.”

“I’m not a little girl you can boss around.”

He leaned in close. “I promise you, the only people I want to boss around are pit crew trainees and mature, willing women. Do we understand each other?”

She had never felt more mature or willing than at this moment. Damn shame that was one-sided. “We certainly do. You don’t want to fuck me.” She liked the way his eyes blazed in surprise. She grew up on race tracks.

Sure, she may have left them behind six years ago for a Swiss boarding school, but the salty language was baked into her soul. She leaned in. She wasn't going to be scared off. "But you're willing to make me think you want to scare me off, because you're afraid of getting in trouble for helping me. Except I need you to help me, because I'm quite certain that you are the only person on this entire campus who sees me as a fully formed human being with the potential to learn this business from the ground up."

He blinked.

Blinked *hard*. "I'm not afraid of getting in trouble."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

He dropped his gaze to her mouth. His eyes turned steely. "Nothing."

"Good." She pressed her lips into a flat line. "Then what's my next lesson?"

"I don't have time for this. I have to—" He glanced at his watch and sighed. "Jesus, it's late. I need to clock out."

"Can we resume this tomorrow?"

"No, I'm not working tomorrow."

"So, Monday?"

"Not Monday, either. I'm working then."

"But this *is* work."

"*This* would be extracurricular self-guided study. Nobody on this campus is paid to give you lessons about racing."

"Would you prefer I pay you directly, then? Let's call it a lucrative side hustle for you."

"I don't want to have this conversation."

"Because of what people will think."

"Sure. That."

She nodded. "All the more reason to do it off-campus. What are you doing tonight after you clock out?"

"I'm—" He took a long, slow breath. It filled his chest, making him look

forbidding, older and bigger and sterner than before.

She shouldn't find that as attractive as she did, but if there was something Monica Fischer excelled at, it was getting attention from older men who wanted nothing to do with her.

He gave her a pained look. "You want to learn about racing from the ground up?"

"I do."

"What's your most prized possession in this world?"

Her autonomy was probably the wrong answer. "I have a vintage couture —"

He rolled his eyes. "Never mind. Just swear on your right kidney that you'll never tell your father about what I show you tonight."

“IS SPRINGSTEEN ALL RIGHT?”

“Sure.”

And that was the extent of their conversation for the first half of the drive into L.A.

Having a twenty-one-year-old socialite as his passenger was an unforced error. Why had he opened his big mouth?

Josh blamed the fact that other people who worked at Fischer Racing were dicks to her. He couldn't abide by that. Just because she was the owner's daughter didn't mean that she couldn't pull her own weight... eventually.

And the way she stood toe-to-toe with him as he tried to brush her off? Maybe not even eventually. Maybe she might surprise people. But they would either need to give her a chance, or she would have to break them down and take the chance she deserved.

After working for the company for six years, he was pretty sure the latter was more likely. Fischer Racing was not a warm and fuzzy work environment.

As traffic slowed down, he shot a glance sideways at her. She looked rich, for lack of a better description. Slim and yet well-fed, with very good skin and even better hair. *Pretty*, he had to admit, if one liked them young

and saucy, which he didn't.

He had nine years on her, and she probably had ten million dollars on *him* just because of how trust funds worked. They had nothing in common. Not even if she really liked the growl of his engine and hadn't blinked at his custom five-point harness seat belts.

Earlier, she'd surprised him by calling him on his weak attempt to intimidate her. He'd leered at her tight jeans and silky top, letting her think he was picturing her naked. Now he had to scrub that from his memories, because he'd saddled himself with a student for the night.

He couldn't actually guess what she looked like naked, anyway. She was so far out of his league, it wasn't funny. Did rich girls look like porn stars, waxed and sculpted to perfection?

Josh usually went for down-to-earth bed partners, who didn't mind a bit of grease (although he always scrubbed his hands, because he very much *did* like to get his fingers wet), and who knew his heart and soul were in the engine of a car. He wasn't one for splitting his attention for more than a few hours.

Besides, he didn't know where he'd land next. He had a plan, and maybe on the other side of that plan, he'd think about finding a woman to settle down with.

He liked the idea in abstract. Pulling the same warm body on top of his every night. The familiarity, the secrets. The babies they would have one day. But it was always *in the future*, not the now.

His brother Owen had an eighteen-year-old daughter—and Owen had been eighteen himself when he found out he would be a dad. That had been enough “racing to be a grown-up” for all the Kincaid brothers. In the nineteen years since, none of them had settled down.

The rest of them had joined the military back in Canada, as if that might ward off babies. Owen was a paramedic now. Will was a school principal. Seth was a float plane pilot. Adam had just gotten out of the military himself,

and was working as a mover but thinking about firefighting school.

Josh was the lone outlier. The one who'd run south of the border and found his way into the racing circuit because he was just that good with cars.

It twinged, sometimes, that he hadn't done the public service thing the way his brothers had. But it wasn't like their military service wasn't selfish in some ways. It paid the bills and gave them adventure, and that had been how racing had started for him.

Now, though...

He glanced down at Monica's hand, resting on the black vinyl bench seat between them. She was *petting* his '69 Gran Torino.

His gaze caught on the flex of her hand, on the way her knuckles were pinker than the rest of her skin, and her nails were short, the thumbnail a little ragged.

At least her hands were that of a normal human being. And she appreciated a good-looking car. Or maybe Springsteen just had that effect on people.

She shifted again, then lifted her gaze to look at his profile more intently. "So we're going to a..."

He hadn't told her anything yet. "You'll see."

"Maybe you're kidnapping me."

He laughed. "You begged me to kidnap you. You *demand*ed to know what I was doing tonight and knew—without even hearing what my plans were—that your need to learn about car racing trumped all."

She chewed on her bottom lip for a second. "Did I say thank you for including me in your mystery, non-kidnapping plans?"

"I don't think so." He shrugged. "It's fine. It's good to have friends in high places."

"Oh, I assure you, I'm not in any high places." She sucked in a sharp breath.

But she would be one day.

He'd looked her up when she disappeared to collect a tiny purse barely big enough to hold her phone, and a pair of mirrored sunglasses that glinted in a way that made him think they were worth almost as much as his car. She was the only child of the billionaire owner of the racing team, Michael Fischer. Her father was in his late sixties. At some point in the next twenty years, she would inherit his entire fortune. Become a minority shareholder in a few major tech companies and a Major League Baseball team, and the sole owner of a sprawling racing empire.

One day, she would be a billionaire herself.

So she needed to know about racing, and somehow, she'd ended up in the passenger seat of *his* car, revealing her vulnerabilities far too readily.

Didn't a girl like her have handlers? Why didn't she have an assistant whose sole job it was to feed her whatever information she needed whenever she needed it?

Confused heat crawled up the back of his neck. "We're going to the Irwindale Speedway," he said. Giving a little, since they were almost there now. The yeasty beer smell from the Molson brewery was the familiar welcome. "Classic car drag race night."

Even out of the corner of his eye, he could see her surprised reaction. She rubbed the bench seat between them again. "Like this car?"

He grinned. "Yeah, like this car."

"Oh." It was the single most pleased syllable he'd ever heard. "I guess that explains the fancy seatbelts."

He swallowed hard. "Yeah."

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THE PARKING LOT already seemed full, to Monica's eyes. Gleaming cars in all directions. Josh drove slowly but confidently to the midst of it, pointing out cars as he rolled down an aisle. "That's a '67 Cuda. That's a nice Chevelle.



Ooh, hello beauty.”

There were hot rods, muscle cars, compact sports cars, and some weird custom racers, like a cab-over-engine truck that made Josh whistle. And mixed in among them were a lot of ordinary looking vehicles, too.

“Spectators or sleepers?” she asked.

Josh shot her an impressed look, then grinned. “So you know more than you let on.”

She shrugged.

He eased his car into a parking spot, then turned off the engine. “So, not all the cars here tonight—even the muscle cars—are here to race. Some are here just to be seen. Come on, I’ll show you around a bit before I register with the Race Marshall.”

“You don’t have to get ready for the race...or...”

“It’s not like what you know. It’s fifteen seconds of joy. And we’ve got all night before I need to do that. Lots of time for a few racing lessons.”

Right. Her reason for getting in his car. The favour he was doing for her. “If you race cars,” she asked as she pushed open the heavy passenger door. “Then why are you working as a mechanic?”

Any credibility she’d gained by knowing what a sleeper car was evaporated in the second her question landed.

He frowned. “I’m going to *pay* money to race tonight. This is a hobby.”

“But people do...” She frowned, too. “Isn’t it a profession?”

“Yeah, princess. It is. For some. On some circuits. Not in the spaces I want to play in. And I like my job. I like my health insurance, my 401k, and the nest egg I’m saving towards for when I go my own way. It’s what us ordinary people do.”

“I know that.” She didn’t like the look on his face. “I’m sorry.”

He waved her off. “It’s fine. Count it as another lesson. And you can buy me dinner when we leave here.”

That made her brighten right up. “It’s a deal.”

Resolved to not put her foot in her mouth again, Monica scrambled out of the car and carefully closed the door behind her. When she met Josh at the trunk, though, he immediately tested her ability to listen politely and learn.

“This is the heart of racing.” He gestured at the sea of hot rods behind him. “Cars.”

Her mouth dropped open. Then snapped shut. She frowned.

He looked amused. “You don’t look impressed.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?”

He leaned his hip against his car and crossed his arms. “Do *you* think I think that?”

Her frown deepened. *No.*

“Miss Fischer—”

“Monica.”

“*Miss Fischer,*” he repeated, seemingly unperturbed that she didn’t like the way he said it. It should be infantilizing. It was...not. It was engaging. Arousing. Distracting. “Is it possible that part of your problem is a rush to get to the finish line, in every sense of the word? You want me to deliver racing to you in a neatly tied up package, but it’s not neat. It’s long days and long nights of nothing but the love of grease and exhaust and growling engines. Of tires and repairs and the very specific kind of envy that sparks deep in your gut when you realize that someone else had a better idea than you.”

She blinked, and maybe her frown softened. She wasn’t sure, because he was closer to her now. He’d stopped leaning on his car and prowled towards her as he talked, and now he set his hands on her shoulders and turned her around.

“See that green car over there?” He pointed past her with one arm outstretched.

She nodded, ignoring the wild heat that blazed across her chest as his other hand—still on her shoulder—squeezed a little.

“That’s a vintage Mustang. I used to own one of them. Sold it so I could

buy this car. I'd like to own another some day. That car makes me curious, and curiosity is at the core of racing."

She glanced at his black Gran Torino. "Do you wish you'd painted your car to look like the inside of a children's arcade?"

He laughed, then gently pressed his fingertips to the small of her back, pushing her forward. "What I envy is not on the outside. Let's take a look at the engine. See if I might beat him in a race."

Next to the Mustang was a little hatchback, a Gremlin, and Josh pored over both engines. He sweet-talked their drivers in the same confident way he'd coached the pit crew earlier—the same way he was managing her demands to learn more about racing.

When a car backfired nearby, and she jumped, he caught her hand and pulled her close.

The early quivers of a crush were forming like the smooth, inevitable cresting of a wave. It swelled inside her. Dangerous, yes. Her father wouldn't approve. *An understatement.* Her father would be livid if he found out she was messing with one of his mechanics.

But her father wasn't here tonight, and this was *fun*.

"I'll catch you in the pit lines," Josh said, having firmed up a race buddy. Then he caught her hand again and gave her his full attention. "Come on. It's time to get our tickets."

He was only holding her hand to tug her along, to keep her safe around souped-up cars rocking on their modified suspension and boisterous fans.

For a girl who had grown up around racing, this was nothing like anything she'd ever experienced.

And it apparently showed on her face.

Josh laughed at her as they stood in line to get wristbands. "You've never been to a drag race track?"

She shook her head. "Only..."

He nodded. Only the fancy racing circuits, with celebrities in the

paddock.

“I think my father must have done racing like this when he was younger?” She shrugged. “A long time before I was born.”

Her mother was his third wife, and the first one who had convinced him to have a child. His final wife, he said, although he was only in his sixties and he didn't like to be single, so Monica was braced for him to announce he'd decided to re-marry.

Although he might not re-marry, since all of his ex-wives have seats on the board of Fischer Racing, and lately, he'd started chaffing at their input, since he no longer could control it.

“Monica...”

She blinked at Josh.

“Your wrist?”

She presented her hand to the ticket seller. “Sorry. There's just so much to take in.”

“It's her first time,” Josh said conspiratorially.

“And I'm very excited,” she added, not wanting to be left out of the fun.

Once they got through the gates, he steered her to the race officials' tent, where he registered. They knew him, which made the process go faster, apparently. She caught snippets of their conversation, about his safety still being valid, no modifications since his last race, and why they never see him on Wednesday nights.

“That's the cheaper night to race,” he murmured to her as they headed into the stands. Below them, an aggressive-looking Charger was doing tire burnouts just before the start line.

“Why don't you race on Wednesdays?”

“Because it takes an hour to get here after work, so I'm always at the end of the race list, and then it's an hour to get home. And then I have to wake up for work the next day. Tomorrow, I can sleep in. I'm not a morning person at the best of times, but after a late night?”

She was deeply amused. “So far, you’ve been nothing but charming. I find this hard to believe.”

“Oh, I have a cross side, Miss Fischer.”

She didn’t believe it for a second. She twisted away from the track so she was looking at him full on. “What do I have to do to get you to call me Monica?”

“Not be the boss’s daughter.”

She snapped her fingers. “Then for tonight, I am *not*.”

He caught her hand and used it to spin her around, pointing her to an empty row at the back of the stands. “That’s not how life works,” he murmured in her ear. “Now let’s sit down and learn more about racing.”

“YOU’RE BOSSY,” Monica said under her breath as they climbed the bleachers.

“You literally asked me to teach you things.” He paused a beat as they took their seats. “Have you always had simpering tutors?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Not when I was in boarding school in Switzerland, but at college...yes?”

“Did your father put his name on a building, maybe?”

She winced. “Yeah.”

“Mmm. Well, your father’s never going to know that I’m doing this, and if he did, he wouldn’t like it, so don’t expect me to treat you the same way the Dean of Princess Studies at Yale—”

“Business at NYU—”

“Honestly sounds the same to me.” Then he grinned.

And she had to admit, it sounded the same to her, too. She changed the subject back to the topic at hand. “I know what a burnout is. Warming up the tires.”

He nodded. “And how do they do that?”

“No clue.”

He told her about line locks and the different tire types as they waited for the next two cars to crawl out of the pits. When it got loud, he leaned in.

“All right. Here we go. Now this is where we start to train our gut call instincts.” Josh’s hand brushed up her spine lightly as he shifted, sitting up straighter. “Is that little shitbox going to take the GTR?”

She twisted her head to the side. “Is it?”

“I’m asking you.”

She licked her lips. “It looks light. Does that make it fast?”

“You’re moving less mass. Think of how fast motorcycles can go. So it could be faster, yeah.”

But the machine wasn’t a bigger factor than the driver, or the care that the driver put into the vehicle. As the track lights beeped, flashing down to green, she burst out, “I pick the GTR.”

It was a lucky guess.

But Josh was pleased, and that made her happy. She’d guessed correctly, and that was worth something. They spent the next hour watching race after race. Sometimes she guessed correctly, sometimes not, and when she was wrong, Josh asked her to guess what she thought the issue was. Sometimes it was a slow start off the line, sometimes it was pulling up too soon. Almost always, her guess was some form of driver error.

Which Josh picked up on. “Some things are driver error, sure, but other times, the driver is making the right call to protect the car. That’s not a mistake.”

“The most toxic Fischer trait of all is assuming that anything less than a win is some kind of catastrophic misjudgement,” she said, maybe a little too sharply.

He nodded. “I am familiar with that energy, yes.”

“Do you like working for my father?” She regretted asking it as soon as the words were out of her mouth. “Never mind. Don’t answer that.”

He didn’t. He spread his legs a little wider and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. Hunkering down as if to get closer to the track. And for the next three races, he didn’t quiz her on what she thought. He just got

lost in what was clearly pure enjoyment.

“Hooked up and *gone*. Take that. What a beauty.”

“Fuck yeah. Nice.”

“Come on. You can do it... Yeah, baby! Go, go, go!”

“No way you’re gonna catch him, bud.”

“Awww, shit. That’s a tough start. Can she haul ass and get there? Can she? Yesss she can. Whew!”

And she learned a little something from each of those races. From his reaction, from the tension in his body, then the thrilling release. Maybe not the lessons he meant to give her tonight, but ones she found wildly helpful, anyway.

She’d tapped out a few of the things he said, for example, for Instagram quotes next week. She probably couldn’t say *haul ass and get there*, but maybe she could substitute dollar signs for the letter s.

From a business perspective, understanding fan engagement was just as important as understanding the technical chances of a win on the track. And that was where she had a chance in hell of impressing her father—by demonstratively improving their social media numbers.

If she did that, she might earn a seat at the table for things like advertising discussions and brand design.

“What are you working on?” Josh glanced at her phone long enough to demonstrate curiosity, his favourite thing, but not long enough to be nosy.

“Making some notes for the social media team. Things heard at the track. This is probably universal, right?” She showed him the lines she’d copied down from him.

He laughed so hard his whole body shook. “Yeah, those are pretty standard for any race fan.”

“Good.” She beamed. “Thank you.”

His phone went off, an alarm, and he glanced at the time. “That’s my cue. I gotta go get in line. You gonna be okay here by yourself?”



He'd explained they weren't allowed passengers on the track. She nodded. "I'll continue my market research until I see your car."

He smiled, amused. "Or you could just enjoy a few races, you know."

"That, too."

"I'll try to race twice. When I'm finished, do you want me to come find you here, or do you want to come to the parking lot?"

"I'll come find you. I owe you that dinner."

After he left, she got up and wandered down to the railing, where she could better see into the pit lanes, where cars lined up two-by-two to enter the burnout boxes. She smiled to herself, pleased that she'd picked up that much specificity. Maybe she could convince Josh to come back on Wednesday. Or maybe he knew about other races she might find interesting.

Spending more time with Hot Mechanic would definitely be educational.

By the time she caught sight of his car, she was nervous. She didn't know why. It was a recreational race. Nothing was really at stake here. But she'd seen how involved he'd gotten just watching other people.

Something told her he didn't need external stakes. Simply showing up and doing the thing, entertaining everyone and driving his car well, was what really mattered to him.

She was torn between wanting to record him, and wanting to watch. She settled for filming him on her phone, but not watching the screen. He might want to watch it afterwards, if it went well.

As he drove into the burnout area, she held her breath. He rolled forward, stopped, then his whole car rocked as the back tires started to spin—and the front tires did nothing. Smoke and steam swirled around the back end, then engulfed his car for a few seconds before he shot forward, emerging from the cloud like an avenging dark knight.

She didn't know the type of car he was racing. She couldn't bet against him, though, even if the other car was good, so her only thought was *Go Josh Go, haul ass, you beautiful man!*

The lights blinked, beep beep beep, and then it was green and he was gone, a rocket off the line. His whole car leapt forward like a panther on the chase, and she squealed and bounced and shouted things that probably made the video she was recording sound terrible, but she didn't care.

For ten glorious seconds, his roaring car was all she could see, until the track lights and maybe some tears in her eyes obscured the view of him fishtailing into the curve, and then he was gone.

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JOSH GOT in line to race again. He didn't see the Mustang he'd been eyeing up earlier, but his second race was a good head-to-head against a gorgeous Barracuda. The guy couldn't beat him off the line, but it was still neck and neck all the way to the end of the track, just the way Josh liked it.

By the time he made it back to the now slightly less full parking lot, Monica was there, waving him down.

He pulled into a spot and parked.

She did a double-take at his helmet and racing jacket when he stepped out.

"Safety first," he said after pulling the helmet off.

"That was incredible," she breathed. "Both races. Well done."

He grinned. "You liked that?"

"So much." She twirled in an excited circle. "And now I owe you dinner."

"You really don't need to—"

She caught his forearm, stopping him from waving her off. "I want to. I want to know everything about what got you into this."

He raised his brow. "Is that genuine curiosity I hear?"

"You know it."

"All right." He stalked to the back of his car and popped the trunk. He

stashed his helmet and jacket, then peeled off his damp t-shirt. It was only after he pulled out a clean shirt from his duffle bag that he felt her gaze on his body.

Slowly, he straightened up and tugged the new shirt over his head. Did he flex a little? Sure. He wanted her to enjoy the hard planes of his back and shoulders. He wanted to enjoy the fleeting attention of a woman who would otherwise never give him a second glance.

He'd impressed her tonight.

That felt amazing.

"Can't take me anywhere too fancy," he said teasingly as he turned around.

Except she was looking at him like she thought he was wrong about that. Like she could take him anywhere she wanted.

He'd told her she couldn't tell her father about what they did tonight.

She'd insisted he forget she was related to his boss.

The night only had a few hours left in it. How much trouble could they get up to in that time?

"Lucky for you, I'm in the mode for something simple."

But her breath hitched on the last word. He saw it. She knew it. Wherever they went next, it wouldn't be simple.

He took a deep breath and opened the passenger door for her. "Then let's find an all-night diner or something like that."

Something like that turned out to be a sushi place just north of the 210 because Monica's phone told her it had the highest Yelp rating of all the local joints.

"Do you eat fish?"

He grinned. "Eat it, catch it, skin it. Yep."

She laughed. "I only eat it."

"Let's put that on your list of things the expensive tutors overlooked."

Drag racing, fishing, how to keep secrets from her father...there were a

lot of things Josh wanted to teach her. *Fuck.*

In the last four hours, he'd gone from thinking of her as Miss Fischer, a dangerous annoyance, to lovely young Monica, who posed a challenge he was more than up for.

At the restaurant, they pored over the menu together, each suggesting their favourites, which had some convenient overlap. He ordered a beer, and she asked for green tea.

While they waited for the first plates to arrive, he figured he should deal with some unfinished business. "I dodged your question earlier. About your father."

She frowned, her brow pulling tight. "No, I shouldn't have put you in that position."

"Your dad's an asshole." He said it straight up.

She burst out laughing. "Okay, so you don't feel awkward about the question, then...?"

"Not at all. But I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Ah. That's nice." Her lips curved softly. "And now you're not worried about that?"

"Now I'm quite confident you can compartmentalize how I feel about him from how you feel about it. You're a smart girl."

"Woman," she corrected.

"Barely."

Her eyebrow quirked. "Is that easier for you? To think of me as Michael Fischer's daughter? A kid?"

"I didn't say kid."

"You said girl."

"I—" He was glad their drinks arrived. He took a long, slow sip of the refreshingly cold beer. "You just turned twenty-one."

"And you're, what, thirty-nine?" She said it like she was joking, like she wanted to get a rise out of him.

“Thirty.”

“Oooh, another milestone birthday.” She lifted her still steaming mug of tea. “Happy birthday, old man.”

“I guess I deserve that.”

“Call my dad an asshole and me a kid? You’re getting off easy.”

“Smart *and* relentless. You’re going to go far.”

“That’s the plan.” She blew on her tea and carefully took a sip. Then she set it down, narrowed her eyes, and cocked her head to the side. “Are you trying to push me away?”

“I just called you smart, and we’re sharing a meal. If that’s my goal, I’m not doing a great job of it.”

“That’s because you don’t really want to push me away.”

He leaned forward, beer glass firmly in hand. If the backs of his knuckles brushed hers, that was accidental. “Why wouldn’t I want to push you away? You’re nothing but trouble for me.”

“Not true. I’m also a lot of fun.” She nudged her index finger against his. Nothing accidental about that. “Or do you take smart girls to the track every Friday night?”

He never did.

Luckily, he was saved from answering by the arrival of their sushi boat.

As they dug in, he wondered how they had never met before.

The answer, of course, was rich people drama. “My parents had a bitter divorce six years ago.”

Roughly the same time that Josh was hired.

“And when I was a minor, my mother kept me away from here. California. Home of all of his infidelities and vices, I guess. She allowed him custody, but something something...” She waved her hand. “I don’t know. Long story short, I went to boarding school in Switzerland, because that was close to the European racing circuits my father likes to visit.”

“Your mother didn’t object to that?”

“I don’t think she put two and two together. She really just wanted to keep me away from L.A.”

“And now you’re back.”

“Yep. It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always?”

She nodded ruefully. “How about you? Parents? Siblings?”

He took a careful swallow of beer. “Four brothers. We’re all close. Our parents died when I was a teenager.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Her brow furrowed. “Are they here in L.A.?”

He shook his head. “Actually, nowhere near here. I’m from Canada. A little town on one of the Great Lakes.”

“Wow. You’re a long way from home. Do your brothers still live there?”

“Three of them. We all left home for a while—some longer than others.”

He gestured at himself. “I’ve been gone for twelve years. Pulled pin as soon as I graduated high school. Went to Detroit for the summer, got into working on racing teams. Went back across the border to Canada and trained as a mechanic, knowing I’d probably be able to get a work visa if I narrowed in on a specific skill set. Went to Texas next, and landed here six years ago.”

“Right when I left.” She would have been a colt-legged teenager.

Another reminder of their age difference.

She carefully picked up a piece of sashimi and ate it delicately as she looked at him.

Why had he encouraged curiosity? “What?”

“Just trying to figure you out. You like your job, and you’re not a fan of late nights—”

He barked a laugh. “It’s more the early mornings I struggle with. If you’re wondering if I’m boring, then yeah, probably, but not because I don’t have dangerous tendencies. I’ve just learned to curb them.”

“Like racing.”

He nodded.

She changed subjects. “So you’re not a morning person.”

A hard shake of his head. “All of my brothers are—but I don’t know if that’s nature or nurture. They all went into the military.”

“Speaking of dangerous tendencies.”

That made him laugh again. “One of my brothers is a pilot, so yeah.”

“Is it a family tradition, or...”

“The military service?” He shook his head. “My older brother Owen joined first. He’s a paramedic, and he was a teen dad, too. So the army reserve was extra income at first, and then when my mom died—she died a year and a half after my dad—his unit really stepped up and helped with us.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen.” His throat got tight, as it always did. He washed that feeling away with a sip of beer. “As far as brother guardians go, Owen was the best.”

She nodded. “Not a replacement for your parents, of course.”

“No. But he never tried. And my other brother Will was at university, studying to be a teacher. He joined the army too, so he’d have that extra income when he came home, because he wasn’t sure what kind of teaching job he could get in a small town right away. He helped a lot as I went through my roughest years. So after Owen and Will found the structure and support they needed in the military, it just made sense for Seth to go to the recruiting office, too. He went all-in, signing up with the Air Force. He just got out two years ago, and now he has a float plane charter service to the north.”

“Wow.” She leaned forward, chin on hands, the final few pieces of sushi forgotten. “That’s four of you. Who’s the youngest?”

“Adam. He’s a bit of an army bum. He talks about being a firefighter—our dad was a firefighter—but Will and Owen don’t want that for him.”

“Is he a lot younger than you?”

Josh laughed and shook his head. “Nah. He’s just the baby in our hearts. He’s twenty-eight.”

“I bet he loves the overprotective brothers routine.”

“Loves it.” He sighed. “You don’t have any siblings, right?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Although never say never.”

“How would you feel about your father having another child? Or...your mother?”

“Just my father. My mom was young when she had me, but not that young. And I don’t know. It’s his life. But he says he’ll never marry again. Time will tell.”

Josh wondered if there was more to the story there, but he didn’t want to dig into Michael Fischer’s personal life. His job was to fix transmissions and tweak suspensions. That was it.

“So you didn’t want to join the army?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. No. Maybe? I can’t remember what teenage me wanted. But as soon as I found cars, that was it.”

Her eyes crinkled. “Well, I can’t be sorry about that, since if you hadn’t, we would never have met.”

He lifted his beer glass. “I’ll cheers to that.”

She clinked her tea cup against the glass.

“Ready to get going home?”

She nodded and raised her hand for the bill.

Everything inside him itched to tell her it was on him, but that would make this a date, and he wasn’t allowed to want to impress this woman. Couldn’t treat her, not a sushi dinner would be a treat for someone from her background. But it still pinched as she pulled out a credit card that just *looked* like it had no limit. Subtle logo, monochromatic design, gilt details that matched her expensive sunglasses now perched on her head.

Not that he cared if she was rich.

He only cared that it made her off-limits.

He wanted another nudge of her finger against his. He wanted to tug her into his lap, other restaurant diners be damned, and find out if her mouth was as soft and sweet as it looked.



Yeah, it was definitely time to take the princess home. And then he could knuckle-drag his blue-collar ass back to his one-bedroom apartment just off the 215, between the Dunkin' Donuts and a run-down auto parts shop.

They took just a few steps out of the restaurant when a loud rumble caught their attention from the street.

“Hey, that’s the Mustang from the track, right?” Monica asked.

Josh waved, to be friendly, and the driver took a sharp turn into the parking lot. He pulled up behind their car and rolled down his window. “I looked for you at the track. Thought you wanted to race me.” His grin flashed bright, even in the shadows of the dark car interior. “This must be fate.”

Josh shook his head and brushed his hand up Monica’s back. “Go on, get in the car.” Then he raised his voice to tell the guy, *not tonight*.

But Monica stood her ground. “You could take him.”

And she said it loud enough to carry.

Of course he could. That wasn’t the point. *He* kept his voice low. “Street racing is illegal and I’m here on a work visa. Don’t try to get me deported.”

“Oh.” She winced, and he opened the passenger door for her. “Sorry,” she whispered before she quickly buckled herself in.

The other driver gave him a raised eyebrow look. Like, *you wanna impress your girl or not?*

Josh swore under his breath. “Not here.”

“Rolling start on the freeway?”

He nodded.

Then he popped his trunk and grabbed his helmet.

## 6

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“PUT THIS ON,” Josh said after wrenching open his door. “And buckle up with the whole five-point harness.”

Monica stared at his helmet. “But you’re—”

“You’re the more valuable person in this vehicle. Put that on if you want to do this.”

“What are we doing?” But she knew. Her pulse sped up. “Are we racing? Josh, we don’t need to—”

“In the name of your racing education, we’re going to do something only slightly less dangerous than a street race.” He started the car, gunning the engine.

She twisted her head quickly, trying to figure out where the other car was.

“Monica. Helmet.”

“I didn’t mean to pressure you to...”

“I’m not sorry, so don’t worry about it. This is going to be fun.” He gave her a wicked grin and turned up the volume as a Nickelback song, “Animals”, started playing on the car stereo.

She took her sunglasses off her head and tucked them under the passenger seat, then jammed the helmet on as he tore out of the parking lot.

It wasn’t racing per se, not yet, but it was fast. There was a new energy in the car. In Josh. His arms flexed as he shifted gears, his gaze locked on the

car ahead of them.

They followed the Mustang to the on-ramp to the 210, then merged into eastbound traffic. The Mustang moved over a lane, and Josh pulled up abreast of the other car.

They both slowed down, just a little, creating a bit of space in front of them. And that space grew as they flowed down the highway, past the next exit.

Suddenly Josh rolled down his window. So did the other guy.

“At the next exit,” he hollered. “If it’s clear.”

She gulped at the implications. The seconds ticked by. Traffic thinned out, as if the universe knew Hot Mechanic had picked the lesser of two evils, for her, and wanted to make this a good one.

Then they swarmed past the next exit, not a cop in sight, and Josh glanced sideways at her. “Count down from three, honey. As loud as you can.”

“Are you—”

“Any second now.”

“Three,” she yelled. “Two...one. Go!”

He dropped down a gear and floored it. The other car jerked forward too, accelerating like mad, but he wasn’t as fast as Josh’s Gran Torino.

She screamed as the roar of the car mixed with the road noise from tearing down the freeway with the window open.

Josh shifted gears again, flying now, and she tried to look around but she couldn’t with the helmet.

The dark world on either side of them whizzed by in a blur, and up ahead were cars. They’d reach them soon, and—

Suddenly, he took his foot off the gas.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He grinned at her. “Was that fun?”

“Oh my god, yes.” She was breathless from the thrill of it. “Is that it?”

He laughed. “That’s not enough for you?”

“No, it’s good! I just don’t know what— how—”

“He dropped in behind me. A sign to slow down. And in a minute, he’ll pull out and curve around in front of me. Then we’ll switch lanes and probably do it again.”

That’s exactly what happened. It was less aggressive than Monica expected, more playful. Like lion cubs eager to tussle.

This time the other car was on her side, and it was her window rolled down so she could count them down. The warm wind whipped her in the face as she screamed the numbers into the night.

The second race was much tighter, with both cars jockeying for the lead until they reached an exit and had to slow down, just in case there might be a cop on the on-ramp.

When the Mustang peeled off, Josh kept going down the freeway, like they were making a break for the desert. He was grinning, his expression cocky and sexy as hell. His already irresistible charm took on a wild edge.

And her soft, needy little crush bloomed into a wicked impulse to do something very bad.

“You can take off the helmet,” he said, nudging her knee with the back of his hand.

The touch was as good as a lick against her bare skin. Wanton desire took firm hold. She pulled it off and shook out her hair.

His gaze caught on her face, holding long enough that she knew he felt the sizzling chemistry, too.

“Want to find the best route back to work?” His voice was husky. Thick with unspoken alternate questions.

And no, she didn’t want him to drop her back at her car. Yes, she wanted him to take her somewhere, anywhere else.

She didn’t trust that this energy would last all the way back to Riverside. His responsibility would win out, and he would reluctantly make her say a chaste goodnight.

That wouldn't work for her.

She wanted more. "Can we keep driving?"

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No. It was the only answer, but Josh couldn't make himself say the word out loud. "Where do you want to go?"

She tugged her phone out of her little purse and tapped on a map app.

He stared at the road ahead, at the broken white lines separating the lanes of traffic. Red taillights.

*Don't look at her.*

He glanced sideways.

She had her lower lip caught between her teeth as she scrolled around on the screen. "We could drive up to a lookout point in the hills," she finally said.

"Got any favourites?"

"One exit back the way we just came."

He immediately got over to the right.

They didn't say thing as he got off the freeway and looped around.

"This one?" he asked five minutes later.

Even out of the corner of his eye, he could see her magnificent smile spreading ear to ear. "Yep."

The noise of the highway faded behind them. The hills were dark, but he'd driven them at night before. Lots of twists and turns.

Dangerous and exciting, which seemed like what she wanted from him tonight.

There was a red light at the final cross street before leaving the residential neighbourhood behind, and Josh felt the weight of that stop. Like he knew it was an opportunity to apologize and make an excuse. To turn around and head for the freeway. Get her home, get himself to his own apartment—alone

—and forget whatever terrible thing he wanted to do with her in the dark, overlooking a reservoir lake or some romantic shit.

There would be no romance with this woman.

She was off-fucking-limits.

The light turned green, and he stepped on the gas.

It felt like they were the only people in the world awake as his car growled its way up the hill, then twisted around a switchback type of turn. The road snaked along the edge of a canyon, then climbed again.

He didn't know how long he'd planned to drive for—probably forever—but Monica's hand sliding onto his thigh put an end to any question about what *her* plans for this cover of darkness entailed.

“There's a lookout up ahead,” she breathed. “Want to stop for a bit?”

His cock did. So fucking much. He'd gone half-hard when she said he could take the other guy, and stayed in that aroused state ever since. Now that thickness filled all the way out, testing the limits of his jeans, and her hand felt too good and not enough at the same time.

“You sure?” He had to ask.

She smiled, barely illuminated by the dashboard lights. “Very.”

*Very.*

Around the next bend was a gravel carve out at the side of the road, and he pulled off. Killed the engine. And then he turned off the music, too.

“Josh,” she breathed at the same time as he said, “Let's get out.”

She waited for him to come around to her side. He opened her door, then offered her his hand. She took it, her fingers warm and sure.

*Very sure.*

“This isn't how I saw the night going,” he told her as they walked to the edge of the lookout. It was too dark to see whatever was in the canyon below, but the sky above was beautiful. Not as beautiful as Monica turning in a slow circle in the night air, but close.

He glanced up, trying to figure out what constellations were visible

tonight, but his attention yanked right back to her. The moon was nearly full and there weren't many clouds. So now that his eyes had adjusted to the night, he could see her just fine.

More than fine.

"What are you thinking about?" She shot him a coy look over her shoulder.

"My thoughts are torn in a few different directions."

"Such as..."

"Wondering if I can impress you with astronomy knowledge."

She nodded. "You definitely could. What else?"

"How pretty you are." *Too honest, Kincaid.* In for a penny... "And how I shouldn't be thinking that."

"Mmm." She looked pleased at both pieces of that thought. "What *should* you be thinking about?"

"Strategic career moves. Impressing you as a colleague."

"Is that what we are? Co-workers?"

"Yeah."

"Have you ever fooled around with a *colleague*?"

"Nope."

"Mmm." She skimmed past him and stopped at the side of his car. "Can I lean against her?"

"Sure." He joined her, their hips just barely brushing as they rested against the passenger side.

She rolled her head back, looking at the sky. "Okay, impress me as a colleague. Is that the astronomy stuff?"

He laughed. "No."

"Oh." Her little breathy realization sounds did just as much for his arousal as the warm stroke of her palm on his thigh. "That would be because you think I'm pretty?"

He nudged her shoulder with his. "Look up."

“What am I looking at?”

“That’s Ursa Major. The Big Dipper. And over there...Ursa Minor.”

She craned her head to the side.

And now the weight of her body was leaning ever so slightly against his.

“And what would you say to impress me as a colleague?” She whispered the question, as if she didn’t want to startle him away from the warm press of her side against his. “What is your strategic career move?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you see yourself staying with Fischer Racing? You mentioned saving money for something.”

“I’ve got plans.” He slid his arm around her shoulders, because fuck it. Those plans didn’t include retiring as a mechanic working for Michael Fischer, and life was too short not to hold this woman for at least tonight. “Definitely not staying forever.”

“Can you tell me? I promise not to tell anyone.”

“It’s not really top-secret. It’s stuff like this car. I love restoring old vehicles. Not like the flashier resto-mod garages, but something a bit more elegant. More restoration, less modification. But some modifying for *purpose*. Like racing. I know what you need to pass a race Marshall’s inspection. And I know how to make it a comfortable ride. I love shit like that. It’s what I think about eighteen hours a day, when I’m retooling a transmission or whatever. So if I could make it a real career, that would be amazing. But I want to do it right. If I’m going to leave the comfort and security of working on racing teams, then I want to do it properly. That means investors. And I’ll get them.” On his own terms. That was key.

She lifted her face, studying him. “That nest egg you mentioned. You want to be one of the investors?”

He nodded, surprised she’d figured that out, but she did have a business degree, after all. “I want business partners. I don’t want to be beholden to the money folks.”



“I bet you’ll do it. You have something there. Your enthusiasm is special.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “How about you?”

“You know my future path.”

Take over the family business, on a scale most could never imagine. “You don’t sound excited about it.”

“I have to prove myself first. Then I get to be excited. Can’t be too entitled.”

“I recognize that voice, and it’s not yours.”

She laughed. “No, it’s not. But he lives rent-free in my head.”

“What if you were someone else? What would you want?”

“I don’t know. I try not to daydream about lives I’ll never live, when my life is as good as it ever gets.”

“Humour me.” He wanted to know her secrets. He’d hold them sacred for the rest of his life, when their paths had carried them as far apart as two people orbiting each other now could probably ever get. She’d spin into the highest echelons of business, and he’d stay a blue collar grunt forever, even if he started his own company. There was no comparing the scope of their futures.

“My college roommate loved dinner parties. I miss those.” She sounded wistful. “A crowded table full of laughter. Bottles of wine and plates of interesting food.”

He squeezed her close. “Love that. Do you cook?”

“Mm-hmm. You?”

“Hell yeah. Five brothers raising themselves? We all had to take a dinner night. I’m not adventurous or anything, but I know my way around chicken, steak, salad and veg.”

“I learned at school. The Swiss are comprehensive in their curriculum requirements.”

That made him chuckle. “What else did you learn?”

“Uh...sewing, knitting, woodwork. And skiing. I excelled at cooking and woodwork.”

“Not skiing?”

“I’m a SoCal girl through and through. Winter is not my favourite season.”

“How long were you in Switzerland?”

“Three years.”

“Three long winters?”

“They have very good indoor heating. I survived.” She laughed a little. “Do you ski?”

“Snowboard.”

“So much falling down!”

“I don’t fall down that much.”

“It seems hard. Skis at least point in the direction I want to go.”

“Nah, it’s just like surfing.”

“Something else I’ve never done.”

“I thought you were a SoCal girl through and through? I could teach you.” The offer was out there before he thought better of it.

He couldn’t. Shouldn’t even have agreed to teach her about racing, although...he hadn’t ever actually agreed. It had just happened, like an inevitability. And he’d made her swear she wouldn’t tell her father.

He couldn’t stack other secrets on top of that. *Don’t tell him about surfing lessons. Don’t tell him about a snowboarding trip. Don’t tell him I want to peel your clothes off and lick every erogenous zone in your body.*

“We don’t have a surfboard here tonight,” she said softly. “What else can you teach me?”

A clear invitation.

Her fingers brushed his abs, making his whole midsection tense. Making his cock throb.

And then her hand slipped under his shirt.

“Hey, easy there...” He grabbed her wrist.

“We have to do something with this extra adrenaline.” She grinned and hooked her fingers over his belt.

His dick leapt and his vision swam at the deep pulse of delight that the teasing, intimate gesture roused in him. This girl—*mature, willing woman*—shouldn’t have this effect on him. He had better control than this.

“What do you usually do after a night of racing?”

Go home and jerk off. “Nothing like this.”

“What should I do? For the full experience...”

He dropped his gaze to her soft, pink lips. Maybe he didn’t have better control than this. Because nobody had ever tested his control the way Monica did.

“Kiss me,” she breathed. And if it had sounded haughty or demanding, maybe he could have resisted. But it was a plea, like she really didn’t think he would, and if there was one thing he knew deep in his marrow that he could never do, it would be to let this woman think he didn’t want her.

She was stunning. Funny, gorgeous, smart, and resilient.

Kiss her?

It would be his God damned pleasure. He settled his hand at the side of her neck, savouring the way her breath hitched in anticipation and how her fingers curled into the front of his t-shirt. He leaned in, almost brushing his lips against hers, then waited.

Giving her a chance to push the grease monkey away.

She tugged at his clothes instead, wanting him to close the gap. He turned and curved over her, pinning her between him and the car.

*She wants this.*

It wouldn’t end well. It might be a guillotine coming down on his career. On that health insurance and 401k he liked so much, and the work visa that allowed him to stay in America. But he couldn’t stop himself from lowering his head to take a sip from her lips.

Except that first brush of their mouths sparked a wildfire, a rush of heat he didn't see coming, should have seen coming, and suddenly he was consumed with need. He pulled at her lips again, desperately, and she surged up against him.

Her hands clutched at his shoulders, her throat working beneath the grip of his hand, and he rocked her against the side of the car. Her legs wrapped around his thighs at the same moment her lips parted for him, and then he buried himself in her taste and in her soft curves. His tongue stroked deep and his hips thrust up, finding her core with precision.

If he wasn't swallowing all of her moans, she'd be crying out his name.

He felt like a king on top of the world. Behind them, far away, the city lights glittered. But right here, magically, they were all alone.

And their first kiss was rapidly devolving into a dry hump on the side of the road. Heat licked up his spine. He traced his thumb to the base of her neck, to the wild thump of her pulse, and he focused all of his attention there. On her reaction to his body wedged between her thighs, and the way she turned to liquid in his arms when he found exactly the right spot to pulse against.

He dragged his mouth to her ear, so he could growl in her ear. "There? Does that feel good?"

She breathed his name. *Yes*. He made her feel more than good, and *that* made *him* feel powerful beyond measure.

"Did it turn you on? When I downshifted and took off?"

"Yes."

"Next time you'll wear a skirt." There wouldn't be a next time, but a man could dream. And it was what they both wanted to hear in this overheated moment of lust.

She shuddered.

"Do you know why?" He squeezed her neck, using his thumb on her chin to tip her head to the side, baring the other side of her throat for his mouth.

“Because the best fucking reward for winning a race would be sinking my fingers into your panties and discovering just how soft and sexy you feel.”

She gasped. “You won tonight. Repeatedly.”

“Should I take my reward, then? Or do you want to ride my cock like this? Pressed between me and my car? Your choice, honey. I just want to see you come.”

“Like this?”

He liked the disbelief in her voice. As if she thought it impossible for him to give her the ultimate pleasure with just the weight of his body and his wicked, wicked mouth. He wanted to think it meant she hadn't done anything like this before. He wasn't above a certain possessive pride that he was giving her a new experience, one that he'd own forever. “I can fuck you a half-dozen different ways without taking off your clothes. Suck your tits through your shirt. Slide my hand into your panties. Keep giving you my cock just like this, so your clit gets all the attention. Turn you around and—”

“Can we get naked?” she breathed, interrupting him. “I want to feel you against me.”

He was already moving her to the side so he could open the passenger door. “Climb into the backseat. Let me see how pretty that pussy is.”

MONICA'S LEGS shook as Josh set her down. He opened the passenger door and levered the seat forward.

Heart racing, she scrambled into the backseat. There was a dim overhead bulb illuminating the space, but it cast shadows, too, so it somehow felt darker in the car, and then darker still when he crawled in after her, closing the door—killing that overhead light—and taking up all the space.

Both of them were breathing hard, audible in the cavernous space.

“This is a big back seat.”

He grinned at her inane comment. “Big enough.”

She peeled off her shirt, and he sent it sailing into the front seat.

His gaze dropped lustily to her black bra, which was doing the Lord's work in displaying her tits to their absolute best potential.

“I've never fooled around in a car.”

“We're breaking all the rules tonight.”

“Take off your shirt. Let me see you, too.”

“In a minute.” He leaned in and traced the curve of her breast, his fingers sliding into the cup of her bra enough to make her thighs ache and her nipples pull tight. “I thought about how fucking pretty your tits would be, and I was wrong. They're better than I imagined.”

“It's the bra.”

“It’s not. But let’s get rid of that to be sure.”

“Your shirt first.”

He sat back and rolled that up his torso. She surged forward, needing her hands on his flesh in the same way he’d just touched her. Reverently. He looked thicker through the middle with his shirt off, heavily muscled on the sides, and she had a flashback to that morning when she watched him do lat pulldowns with ease.

Screw putting this guy on Instagram, she wanted a private feed of photos of his body for her own personal pleasure.

“You’re gorgeous,” she whispered.

“That’s my line.” He picked her up and hauled her into his lap, so she was straddling him. He undid her bra with a single tug, then curved his hands around to her front and groaned as he filled his palms with her aching flesh. “You feel amazing.”

Her bra tumbled to the floor as he lifted her breasts to his mouth.

The first heavy suck at her nipple sent a pulse of pure need straight to her clit. She rocked her hips, needing to find his cock again, and earned another groan from him when she was successful.

Her other nipple wasn’t abandoned, either. He rolled his thumb back and forth over it as he pulled the first one into a swollen peak, then switched. That steady thrum of his fingers felt different on the wet nipple, felt more like a good kind of torture, and she writhed in reaction.

His free hand landed hard on her hip, guiding her into a slower grind.

Her whole torso shook as he licked and sucked back and forth, back and forth, making love to her tits like that was the main event, and the closer her body got to a tight, needy release, she realized it maybe *could be* the main event, he was going to make her come like this, and that was fucking wild.

“Josh, Josh, Josh...”

He nodded, her nipple pulled into his mouth. *Yes. Do it.*

She tangled her hands in his hair, holding his head to her chest as her hips

snapped forwards and back. *Fuck. Oh. God. No. Yes...*

She shattered in his arms, and his pulling mouth softened immediately, letting her nipple slide off his tongue as she leaned back.

Her torso glistened even in the dark, wet with his spit.

His mouth was wet, too, swollen from his ministrations. And his gaze was locked on her face. “Good one?”

She dove forward, kissing that gifted mouth, thrusting her tongue against his. Needing more of him, now, all of him.

Her hands fell to his waist, wanting to get at his cock, but he was sitting and his jeans were pulled tight by the heavy bulge she wanted her hands on.

“Up,” she panted.

He pushed her off, over to the other side, and she kneeled on the seat and braced herself against the window, panting. Then he covered her from behind, his hands going to the button on her jeans, and his fingertips on the bare slice of her belly above her soaking wet panties felt incredible.

“No,” she panted.

He paused, his mouth on her neck at the top of her spine. “No?”

“Your turn.”

He laughed and licked the slight bit of peach fuzz hair there. She felt him breathe in the scent of her flesh, which only made her feel even more wild.

She rolled her hips, sliding the curve of her ass against his erection. “Josh, you just made me come.”

“I know. I want to do it again.” He shoved her jeans and her panties down her thighs, baring more of her sensitized skin. She scrambled to help, and then her knees were free, and her thighs spread open.

His fingers found the seam of her swollen sex with ease. “This wetness all for me?” he growled against the back of her neck as he stroked her flesh. “Little Miss Never Been Fucked in the Backseat. You like this?”

“So much,” she panted.

“Then let me make you feel good, because I like it, too.”



She knew that. She could feel the hard press of his cock against her bare hip. But he was still clothed and she—

His finger slid inside her, and her mind blanked out.

Fuck it. He could be in charge. She was just along for the ride. She moaned, her breath fogging up the window, and he gave her another finger, fucking two of them into her with a precision that screamed of practice.

*Don't think about that, don't be jealous of all the other girls he's railed in this backseat, just be happy it's you right now.*

She rocked back, fucking herself faster on his fingers, seeking that delicious blankness again. All feelings, no thoughts. Pure vibes.

His other hand snaked around and two fingers pushed into her sex, parting her sticky lips and finding her clit.

Yes.

“Love how you feel,” he murmured against her shoulder. “Knew I would. Can't wait to taste all this honey.”

She sobbed now, desperate for that, and when she came again, her pussy fluttering against his fingers, he again eased out of her with a gentleness that surprised her. Then the heavy weight of him retreated, only to have him tap her on the side of the ass.

“Come here.”

She twisted to find him lounging like a sexy prince, his long legs braced against the back of the pushed forward front bench. She shoved her jeans all the way off her legs, then climbed on top of him. He eased her back, so she was lying on his thighs, then he scooped his hands under her hips and tugged her up so her bare sex was right in front of his mouth.

“Knew you'd be fucking pretty like this,” he mumbled before licking a slow swipe up the centre of her tender sex. “Knew you'd taste like something special.”

“Please tell me you have a condom,” she begged.

He ignored her. “Spread your legs for me. Let me look at you.”

“Josh!”

“What?”

“I want you inside me.”

“Come on my tongue, and I’ll give you my cock.”

It wouldn’t take much. She was on a hair trigger now.

She let him press her thighs wider, revealing every sensitive bit of skin to his inspection. Could she come just from him looking at her?

What was this wicked car sex magic he was weaving?

Then the tip of his tongue flicked against her clit, slow and teasing. Could she shove herself up against his face at this angle?

“Damn it,” she choked out. “Don’t tease me.”

“What do you want?”

“Your cock inside me.”

“Before that.”

“Suck my clit,” she whispered, too turned on to care about being demanding.

He latched on, and that same steady tug that worked so well on her nipples was perfection between her legs.

She gave herself over to the steady climb of another release and enjoyed the pulsing thrill of it. Josh knew exactly what to do with his tongue and lips, and then she was there, another shattering orgasm, another gush of arousal between her legs.

She might have blacked out for a moment there, because the next thing she knew, he was stroking her belly softly. Looking at her.

“We probably can’t fuck in this position,” he said dryly.

“Mmm.” She tried to move. Couldn’t.

“Take your time.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you proud of yourself?”

“Shouldn’t I be?” He grinned.

She smiled, and it stretched from ear to ear. “Yeah, you should be.”

“I’m never going to get the scent of your pussy out of this car.” He pressed his face to the inside of her thigh. “And I never want to. Makes it fucking special.”

“Oh, come on, you do this all the time.” She scrambled off him.

He caught her wrist, stilling her as she kneeled naked beside him. “Monica.”

“What?”

He shook his head. “I don’t. It’s important to me that you know that. I’m breaking a lot of my own personal rules tonight, and I’m doing it happily. But don’t think you’re just another Friday night fuck. You aren’t. This is pretty fucking special.”

She blushed, and she was glad it was dark, so he couldn’t see her innocent reaction.

Leaning in, she licked the taste of herself off the corner of his mouth. “Good to know that it’s special for both of us, then.”

Then she reached for his fly, tracing the curve of his bulge in the same way he’d played with her tits before.

“Jeez, you make me fucking horny,” he muttered, grinning as his hips rocked forward. He reached beneath his body and pulled out his wallet. “Hang on, I need to focus—it’s dark in here—there’s one.” A crinkle of foil followed his relieved announcement.

She unzipped him, and together they shoved his jeans down his thighs, just as they had hers.

His boxer briefs tented as soon as the jeans were gone, and when she peeled the waistband down, a heavy cock bobbed into view, slapping up towards his belly.

Both of them sucked in a breath as she wrapped her fingers around his rigid shaft.

Josh rolled the condom down to her fingers, then she took over, sheathing him completely.

He lifted her onto his lap, and she fit them together. The broad head of his cock found her entrance like they were meant to be, and she let the delicious sensation wash over her as his thick girth demanded space.

Where her first orgasms came on fast and furious, she wanted this one to take a while. She didn't want to rush through having Josh inside her body.

When he was fully seated in her, she paused to let her body adjust to the size of him. He watched her silently, his lips swollen and parted, and she shivered at the naked lust in his gaze.

Then she braced her hands on his shoulders and rode him with everything she had.

The thick drag of his retreat from her body was sweet torture. The sink back down, the return to that delicious fullness, was heaven.

She'd told him she didn't know how to surf, and that was true, but she'd watched enough people do it to know that this might be what it felt like to catch the perfect wave. Every part of this felt right. Solid, hot, tangible, and exciting. Good. Right. *He thinks it's wrong, forbidden...* Except it didn't feel that way to her.

She knew it would be complicated for Josh, if anyone found out he banged the owner's daughter. So nobody had to find out.

But this was deeply, perfectly right. Nothing had ever felt this good.

And it wasn't just the tight squeeze of his cock in her pussy. It was the way he looked at her. It was the loose but possessive hold on her hips, like any second he might take over, but he was letting her have her fun first. It was the tiny shudder in his breath when she bottomed out, like it was deeply, perfectly right for him, too.

All of it made her feel victorious. It made her throw her head back, curving her body as she bounced on his lap.

"Jesus, you're beautiful," he growled, the first words he'd said since she started fucking him.

She blinked down at him.

His gaze was now locked on her jiggling breasts.

He hadn't been lying about liking them out of her bra. She could feel the hard, throbbing proof of how much he liked them.

She stroked her hands up her torso, cupping them together.

His eyelids drooped, hooding his arousal.

And on her hips, his hands squeezed tighter. Like he was losing his control.

“This ride’s for you,” she breathed. “What do you want?”

“I want you. All night long.”

“I’m yours.”

“Fucking right.”

“I want to touch you.” He smoothed one hand over her belly, his thumb brushing the top of her slit.

She leaned back, bracing her hands on his knees, and her clit arched into view. Into touchable range.

His touch felt like fire licking between her pussy lips, and she rocked her hips, protesting at the same time. “No...”

“Why not?” He stroked her relentlessly. “If you come, you’ll make me come, and we’ll both be happy.”

“I want this to last.” She threw herself forward again, curving on top of him. Clinging to his shoulders, trying to take back some control.

But it was lost now, the wave breaking, and Josh grabbed her. His hips surged into her from below, both of them panting hard. She could feel the edge of the climax rippling. “Josh...”

“I’ve got you.” He thrust into her and held it, turning his head and finding her mouth with his. “I’ve got you,” he repeated before kissing her.

She closed her eyes and let him take over. He swallowed her fears and her desire, her need and her desperate want for *more*. And once her body stopped shaking, he moved them together again. Slowly.

Like he’d found them a fresh wave to surf.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face there. Her breasts rubbed against his chest. Her ass slapped down against his thighs.

And between her legs, he stoked the kind of fire that could burn all night. He gave her the slow, careful fuck she was looking for.

No rush.

And when the fire finally caught, when they'd kissed and groped and ground against each other enough, when she finally breathed, "Faster," he knew exactly what that meant.

He kept doing what he was doing, just *more of it*, like he downshifted inside her, giving everything he had a little extra juice, and then they were flying together. His hands held her hard against him, their bodies slapping noisily with each button-pushing thrust.

"I want to feel you come," she whispered in his ear. "Can you fuck me so hard you lose it?"

He laughed, and cursed, then slapped her ass. "Yeah, baby."

His other hand snaked between them and found her clit, then he pushed back into her, all the way, and pinned her hips in place as he jerked against her.

That he'd been that fucking close this whole time made her lose her shit. Her pulse slammed in her ears, a storm roaring inside her now, and she threw her head back. He latched on to one of her nipples and pinched her clit between two fingers, sending her spiralling, too. His name tore out of her mouth as her whole being clamped down, then fractured. Bliss, it turned out, was found on the other side of complete destruction.

The seismic aftereffects of her climax seemed to match the shaking in his body, too. His chest heaved beneath hers, his thighs helplessly twitching.

There was no better sound in the world than the satisfied exhale he let out as he trailed his fingers up her damp spine. "Well, that was fucking hot."

"We steamed up the windows," she said, giggling.

He glanced up. "Sure did."

“Should I...” She moved to get off.

“In a minute.” He tightened his grip on her, and she relaxed again.

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IT TOOK MORE than a few minutes, but eventually the humidity in the car got to them both. Laughing, he reached past her and opened the door a crack. The light came on, and he handed her his shirt first, then her own. “We can look at the stars again while the car cools down.”

“While we cool down, too,” she murmured.

He caught her face in his hands and kissed her softly. “I like you all steamed up.”

She pulled on her panties, then her jeans and her shoes, and finally her top, forgoing her bra. Then she climbed out, giving him space to right his own clothes.

When he joined her at the front of the car, she was staring up at the sky.

“The Big Dipper moved.” She twisted her head. “A lot.”

“We’ve been here a while.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

He tugged her close. “Then we won’t. We’ll stay as long as you want.”

“Tell me more about the garage you want.”

He described his vision. A large shop with multiple garages and a warehouse space. An online presence, a YouTube channel, and a business focus on growth over time.

It all sounded remarkably well thought out. And expensive. “What is your initial investment plan?”

“If I can raise half a million dollars, I think I could get a business loan for the rest.” He told her about his own savings, which would put up twenty per cent of what he needed, and the comparable businesses he’d been watching doing similar but different things. “I want to stand out in the market. Meet the

needs of customers looking for something other than what's on offer currently."

"Where are you thinking of doing it?"

"This is the tricky thing. I can't just start a business here. I'd need a green card." Which led to a long conversation about immigration stuff.

He was open to moving the business to Canada, especially right across the border from Detroit, where he'd lived for a while.

"So that part remains up in the air." He kissed her forehead. "And now I've talked your ear off about a total hypothetical."

"I like it, though."

"Tell me something about you. Balance this sharing shit out."

That made her laugh. "What do you want to know?"

"What was boarding school in *Switzerland* like?"

"Kind of bossy. A lot of fun. Probably weird, out of context."

"How often did you see your parents?"

"Holidays. The Swiss have a lot of two-week breaks, and my parents basically alternated who would be in Europe for that. My dad liked to take me to Monaco, my mom to France or Italy. It was three years of nonstop travel."

"Did you learn other languages?"

"Technically, yes. I took French and German classes. I can use them in context, and it comes back when I'm surrounded by native speakers, but I'm not really multilingual. I didn't use them at all once I moved to New York."

"Is that where your mom is?"

"Yeah."

"Are you close?"

She thought about that. "Yes and no. I'm their only child, so both of my parents are very me-focused, but they aren't confidants. I have some friends who are best friends with their parents, and I cannot imagine that kind of closeness. Our relationship is very formal." She rubbed her hand over his



hard belly. “You said you’re close to your brothers?”

“Yeah. We’re the opposite of formal. A lot of teasing. I haven’t been home in a few years because it’s expensive and I’m saving all my money, but we have a group text that is constantly popping, and we have regular video calls, too.”

The conversation spiralled from there, and the next thing she knew, the sky started to lighten.

“What time is it?”

Josh glanced at his watch. “It’s just after five.”

“We’ve stayed up here all night.” She peered up at the sky. “Hey, what’s that constellation? We didn’t see that before.”

Josh followed her pointing finger and thought about it for a second. “That’s...Lyra. The brightest star is Vega.”

“Nice.”

“You’re nice.”

She laughed. “You’re just saying that because of the wild monkey sex.”

“And the fascinating conversation and the excellent race company.” He nudged her to her feet. “Can I buy you breakfast? There’s a pop-up breakfast taco place I heard about last week. Want to go see how long the line is?”

Anything to keep this night going, she thought. Even as it spilled into the next day. Because at some point very soon, they would have to part ways. There was no way she’d get more than one night with this man. She knew it.

She didn’t like it, but she accepted it.

Josh Kincaid was too good for her. Too down-to-earth, too kind, too real. All things her father would twist and ruin if he ever found out about what they’d done tonight.

“One more stop on our epic night of racing lessons?”

Josh nodded and opened the passenger door for her. “One more stop, princess. Then this mechanic turns into a pumpkin.”

She hoped the breakfast taco line was three hours long.

*One week later*

JOSH KNEW he was too old to have an all-consuming, impossible crush. But awareness that he *should* be more controlled around a secret affair didn't make a difference to how his whole body reacted when Monica slid onto his stool at the back of the garage.

Her dark hair curled over her shoulders, glossy and thick. He'd never before been so intimately familiar with hair that looked that good. It had looked even better spread out on his pillow earlier that morning as dawn began to lighten the sky. It would look best of all with his hands tangled in it in three minutes, after the other mechanic who worked with him left for the day and they were finally alone.

The hours in between were agony.

He'd only known her for a week. It didn't matter. She'd become his entire world. His hot little secret.

Off-limits.

He knew she was having a little adventure, screwing around with someone her father wouldn't approve of. Since that was the only way he'd ever get any small slice of Monica, he'd take it and hold it tight for as long as

he could.

That their affair had already lasted a week felt like some kind of miracle. He'd latched on to the excuse of teaching her about racing, when really he'd just wanted more of her bright smile and challenging gaze.

She had layers, and he wanted to discover every single one of them.

"Did you need anything, Ms. Fischer?" The other mechanic strolled over to Monica.

She beamed at him, and Josh's belly tightened up, the spike of jealousy electric and dangerous. He couldn't help the possessive instinct. She was his. Not forever, but for right now, and that was wild enough.

"No, I won't keep you any longer," she said smoothly. "I need to help Josh with his Instagram captions, though."

That made his co-worker laugh. "Good luck with that."

Monica didn't flick her gaze over his shoulder to Josh, but he felt it all the same, and knew they were both remembering the night before.

How he'd pinned her down and promised, between her giggling laughs, that he really did think that she had just as much to teach him as he did her. She was shockingly smart, clever, and funny, and even if others thought she was just at Fischer Racing because of her dad, he knew how much she wanted to prove herself worthy of being the heir apparent.

She'd embraced the first thankless challenge her father had tossed at her feet. She was going to level up their brand, and Josh was going to make sure she got full credit for her hard work.

If he learned about hashtags and audience funnelling in the process, that wasn't the worst thing. One day soon, he wanted to have his own garage, and he knew an online presence was how to get ahead.

So before and after giving each other orgasms, he found himself telling Monica every detail of his dream. He'd do the same tonight. They were kindred spirits experiencing a fever dream together, a magical moment in time that needed to be savoured on every level before the bubble burst.

Now he watched, his hunger barely veiled, as she leaned her hip against the work bench and waited. Her lush little mouth retained that secret smile until they were alone, and then she sauntered over to him, his cock thickening a bit more with each step.

“Hello, you,” she murmured as he yanked her hard against his body.

“Missed you.” He grunted the two words in the half second it took to tangle his hand in her hair and tip her head back, and then they were kissing.

She tasted like secrets. Like she’d popped a TicTac before she left her office and smiled the entire walk across the racing team’s campus, knowing he’d pounce on her at the first opportunity. Her lips promised that she wanted this just as much as he did, and her tongue, her clever, questing tongue, told him that she was eager to head back to his apartment for—

“Forgot my...”

They broke apart, but it wasn’t fast enough.

Fuck.

Monica pressed her lips together, her eyes wide as Josh winced. Behind her, the other mechanic gave him a *what the fuck* look.

The ground beneath Josh’s feet shifted hard, an earthquake custom-made for one.

He squeezed Monica’s arm. “Head back to your office, okay?”

“But—”

“Let me handle this,” he said quietly. Not so quiet the other guy couldn’t hear him. Just low enough Monica would hopefully pick up that he had this handled, at least for tonight. “And then I’ll find you after.”

---

“HE’S NOT GOING to tell anyone,” Monica heard herself repeat for the third time that night.

Josh nodded, but didn’t say anything.

He was grilling dinner in the courtyard behind his apartment building, and she was writing Instagram copy for the drivers.

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

Josh barked a humourless laugh. “I’ll be fired.”

She winced, hating that she kept forgetting how important his job was. For his immigration status, and his career progression. “What if you didn’t need to worry about the work visa?”

That got her a raised, *you got a trick up your sleeve I don’t know about?* eyebrow. Faintly amused, though. Josh always gave her room to explore ideas, even far fetched ones.

Maybe she did have a trick they could use, though. She took a deep breath. “What if we got married?”

The amusement fell off his face. “No.”

“Josh—”

“Let’s eat.” He turned the grill off and pulled the steaks onto a platter.

She flipped her iPad cover shut and stood up. “We could have a pre-nup.”

He gestured for her to open the door to the stairwell. “I imagine anyone who got to marry you would have their own team of lawyers to negotiate all of those details, but that’s not reality for me, princess.”

“Hey!” She huffed a frustrated breath at him as she yanked open the door. “I’m being serious!”

He stopped right beside her and looked down, his expression not quite amused, but at least...soft. Affectionate. “You know what? I bet you are. It’s what I love the most about you. How earnest you are.”

Her cheeks flamed with the accidental compliment. “I don’t need lawyers to get married,” she whispered, her gaze never wavering as she glared up at him in determination. “What if I want to just do this for you? To free you from needing to work for my father?”

“I wouldn’t...” He jerked his head, not finishing the response. *Go inside*, his body language said.

So she let it be, and they shared dinner in his simple, one bedroom apartment. Then he tugged her to his bed.

“I don’t want you to think I don’t appreciate the offer,” he said as he stripped her down. His touch was rougher than usual, not that she was complaining. She liked the urgency. She liked the urgency.

And she really liked how he pinned her to his mattress once they were both naked.

She liked the bossy look he gave her, too. It made her feel wild and rebellious. “Maybe it wouldn’t just be for you,” she whispered as he wedged himself between her thighs. “Maybe it would be for the girl inside me who never wants to leave this bed. Who wants everyone to know just how much I love kissing you in the garage.”

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek and gave her a look so soft and so mature it made her feel the weight of their age difference in a whole new way. “That girl deserves to get married for the right reasons.”

Monica resisted the urge to snort. There weren’t any right reasons to get married. Her parents had loved each other desperately—until they didn’t. Her father had loved other women, desperately, madly. Until he didn’t.

Marriage was a legal mechanism to be used like any other—for one’s own best interests. But knowing that in her head didn’t mean her heart didn’t appreciate Josh’s sentiment.

“You’re a romantic,” she breathed.

He gave her a half-grin and hitched her bare thigh over his corded forearm. “Sometimes.”

“Mmm.” She shuddered as he pressed into her. “Okay, you win. I’ll wait for the right guy to come along and—”

He cut her off with a hungry, possessive kiss that matched the way his body was laying claim to her body.

Inside, she crowed. He might not want her to save him with an ill-considered proposal, but he didn’t like the idea of someone else putting a ring

on her finger, either.

She shouldn't like that as much as she did. But she liked it very, very much.

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THAT NIGHT, Josh dreamed of another life, where everything was different, and Monica was his wife. He woke up with her sprawled on top of him, one of his hands spread wide across her back and the other curved around the back of her thigh.

He'd pulled her against him in his sleep.

He never wanted to let her go.

It was probably a warning sign that the affair had already gone on too long. It would only get harder, he told himself. Very reasonable. *End it.*

He didn't do that. He did the opposite. He filled every moment he could with her scent, her taste, her clever ideas. He started a TikTok account at her urging and followed other car content creators. *Others.* As if one day soon, he might also be a content creator.

The thought made him laugh, but she had faith for the both of them.

Another week went by, and their secret stayed a secret.

And then they went to Vegas.

IT WAS the first out-of-state race for Monica, and when they saw a nice lift for social media follows and engagement for all the accounts she helped with—the team, as well as for the individual drivers—she wanted to celebrate.

Also, it felt like she hadn't seen Josh for days. Just a few stolen kisses. She missed him in a confusing, heavy hurt in the middle of her chest kind of way, even though he was close by. She found herself gazing at his profile and losing herself in thoughts of what else he could do with those straining biceps, and then tearing herself away from watching him do his job in the pit, lest anyone else find out their secret.

So now that the race was over, and half the team had left to go back to California, she could finally cut loose—with her boyfriend.

That's how she'd started thinking about him in her head. It was girlish and simplistic. Idealistic, he would say, if she confessed. But then he would kiss her and whisper that she was his secret girlfriend, and it would feel so good it couldn't possibly be bad.

She rented a room at a nice hotel on the strip, something more expensive than anyone who worked with Josh might stay at, and she texted him the room number.

JOSH

Do I need a room card to get up there?



MONICA

Left your name with the concierge. They'll give you a key.

Her heart was in her throat as she waited for the sound of the lock whirring open. Then she ran to the door just in time for it to swing open, for him to brace his hand at the top of the doorframe and hold himself there. He absorbed the impact of her body as he used his free hand to catch the back of her head and make her be still.

So he could kiss her.

And kiss her.

He only let up when she was vibrating against him, and only long enough to get inside the door,. Then he picked her up and his mouth was on her again.

Endless kisses.

“Fucking missed you,” he growled as he laid her out on the bed. He’d showered, really well. Not a trace of grease left anywhere on his body, not that she’d mind. She had a lot of fantasies where his arms were streaked with a bit of something from the garage.

But tonight he smelled like soap and skin, all warm and fresh and very lickable.

“I have a bottle of champagne,” she panted between kisses.

That would be a theme of the next twelve hours. So much champagne. Kisses and bubbly in the room. Bubbly kisses in the shower, after the first, private celebration. Then a late night dinner, more bubbles free flowing, as Josh’s eyes got bright and his grin slid into a new gear. Cocky and shiny, from the kisses and the champagne and—okay, they might be drunk—the sexy as fuck way he kept licking his lower lip that made Monica want to drag him into a dark corner.

They celebrated her getting a gruff acknowledgment from her father that she’d made a difference on the social media team. They celebrated Josh getting a nice bonus, and two weeks of paid time off.

They celebrated her three-in-the-morning confession that she'd called him her boyfriend in her head all weekend. Josh told her he loved her, like it was the easiest thing in the world for him to say, and time stood still.

And then the celebration sped up in a dizzying kind of way.

At some point they celebrated it all—their love, their success, the best night ever—by getting a marriage license, trying desperately to keep straight faces.

And then they got married, the most epic celebration of all, giggling the whole time. As if they were now seventy percent effervescent bubbles of joy.

She chartered a private jet as a wedding gift. “Only the best for my husband,” she said as she twirled in front of the plane. “Let me take you to paradise for our honeymoon.”

When they were offered champagne on the plane, they declined.

“I want to be sober for every second of this part,” Josh said, tugging her into his lap.

His whole body was tense. Like maybe he was second guessing this plan as he sobered up.

She burrowed into his warmth, pressing her face into his neck. Breathed in that fresh, clean scent of his and absorbed the feeling of his pulse against her lips. “I’m going to be a very good wife,” she promised.

He laughed. “I’m not worried about that, princess. It’s only explaining this to your father that I’m worried about. And that’s on me, and being a good enough husband to you.”

Her husband.

It gave her a thrill beyond anything she'd ever imagined. “We’ll worry about that when we get back,” she said confidently, licking at a tender spot at the base of his neck.

“I love you,” he growled. “I shouldn’t. You know that, right?”

She laughed. “No. You should.” She wanted it more than anything else in the world. His love. His kindness. The way she felt when she caught him

looking at her, like she was the best thing that had ever happened to him. It filled her with more of that bright effervescence.

But all bubbles eventually pop.

---

JOSH HAD NEVER HAD such a perfect tan as he did when he returned to work two weeks later. It was indecent. So were his thoughts, consumed with his lovely little wife. Which he needed to lock down, because he knew he would see her father this morning.

He was going to seek Michael Fischer out. Explain that he didn't want anything from Monica, other than her love, and—

But he didn't get that far, because the owner of the racing team was waiting for him in the garage. And nobody else was there.

“Did you have a good vacation?”

“Sir—”

“Come on, Josh. You think we're family now, don't you? What's this *sir* nonsense?”

“I wanted to come and see you today. To talk to you.”

“Great minds think alike. We can talk now.” He kept going, ignoring that Josh had opened his mouth again. “The thing is, Josh, my daughter is a foolish child.”

She wasn't. She was young, yes, but she was a twenty-one-year-old woman who knew her own mind.

And she was Josh's wife.

This time he didn't say *sir*. He didn't try to be polite. He didn't say anything at all, simply set his jaw as cold fear slicked down his spine. So, it would be like this. The most important thing Josh could do now was shut up.

Michael Fischer nodded, the veil of niceties dropping away. They saw each other. “Monica is my only heir. She has a long way to go before she can

assume that mantle, however. She stands to come into a trust of a hundred million dollars in a few years, and will eventually inherit the entire business if she proves herself. If she were to marry someone...properly...there would need to be careful negotiation of a pre-nup. You understand, right? This mistake in Vegas needs to be annulled. You will make a sworn affidavit attesting to that, and I will pay you—”

“No.” Josh said it firmly. Quickly. Without hesitation.

He couldn't be bought.

And he would never say that any part of his relationship with Monica had been a mistake.

“No,” he repeated. “I won't do it. I won't accept any offer to *go away*. I love Monica. That's what I was going to tell you when I came to see you. I love your daughter, for who she is. Not what she has. Not what you have.”

“Come on, Josh. You're an ambitious young man. Anyone with eyes can see how you'd have thought it would be beneficial to marry my daughter. But I can't let this stand. You can't trick her like this.”

“I didn't trick her into anything. I don't want her money. I don't want your money.”

“Her money is my money, you fucking shit.” Fischer's temper flared, but as quickly as he lit up, he reined it back in.

But Josh had seen the depth of his misplaced rage. How little this man understood what it was like to live in fear of having one's job yanked out from under one's feet. So he held his own violent response in check and said nothing, even as he saw all his dreams crumbling to dust and blowing away. This wasn't going to end well.

Every single dream he had for himself required that he not fuck up this life he'd built, and here he was, doing just that.

But there was no point in engaging in a debate when the man's mind was made up. All Josh could do was focus on the fact he got to go home to his bride. Which was all the advantage he needed—it just wouldn't be one

Michael Fischer would ever understand.

Fischer waited.

Josh still said nothing.

Finally, the other man snapped his shoulders up, then squared them away. “You’re fired,” he said casually. “In case that wasn’t clear.”

“I assumed as much,” Josh said evenly. It wasn’t how he wanted today to go, but now, as he saw this scene play out as if from a distance, it had been inevitable.

Fuck this guy. “But I’ll warn you...don’t underestimate your daughter. She deserves so much more than that.”

“You don’t know my daughter.” Fischer shrugged. “She doesn’t know herself yet, either. And when she understands that you have put her inheritance at risk, she will choose the money. And you will be left with nothing.”

---

LATER, Josh would regret not calling her before he got home. Because by the time he walked into his apartment, she was on a plane to Arizona.

“I’ll be home tomorrow night,” she promised, her voice so full of joy at this new responsibility she’d been given by her father, he couldn’t bring himself to tell her how badly the conversation had gone. “Did you see my dad?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t happy.” *Do not burst her bubble. Not yet.* “Maybe he’ll change his mind with some time.”

She groaned. “Sorry. But I love you.”

“I love you, too. So fucking much.” He fisted his hand against his mouth. Rage wanted to spill out, and she didn’t need that from him. “Hey, princess... You know I don’t want anything from you, right? Other than your sweet smile?”

She laughed in his ear. “And my sweet kisses.”

“Your sweet everything.”

“It’s yours,” she promised. “Gotta go.”



TWO DAYS LATER, she appeared on his doorstep, her face streaked with tears. And he knew before she opened her mouth that she was going to tell him it had all been a terrible misunderstanding.

It wasn’t his, after all.

Maybe it never had been.

## *PRESENT DAY*

MONICA HAD IMAGINED what it would be like to visit Pine Harbour many times.

Josh's home town sat halfway up the Bruce Peninsula, a large jut of land between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay.

Inland seas, he'd called them, his eyes bright as he described the glittering waters he'd grown up on.

In their brief relationship, she'd pictured herself visiting it and meeting his brothers. In the years since, she'd looked it up in moments of weakness. And then yesterday, once she decided to come here, she looked them all up again. His brothers were married. His sisters-in-law all owned businesses in town.

Kerry, the midwife. Isla, the baker. Catie, the hairdresser-slash-real estate agent. Those were all on Main Street. And then down the hill, at the harbour, across from Josh's garage, was Howe's Marina, where January worked sometimes, although she was also a teacher at the school where Josh's brother Will was the principal. Will, who was married to Catie—

*You shouldn't know all of this. It's creepy.*

She wasn't going to stay in town long enough to meet any of them, though, so it didn't matter if she'd done a deep dive on his whole family. Memorized everything she could about them as if that would help her figure out a plan of attack to make everything right with Josh.

Well, not everything.

Some things would never be repaired.

But she'd do what she could.

A sign on the highway warned her she was five minutes away. She passed a cluster of buildings, including an art gallery, and then on the left, at a crossroads, she saw the Pine Harbour Emergency Services building.

*This is it.*

She turned left, and headed through a forest that separated the town from the highway. On the other side of the woods was a diner with a large gravel parking lot, and then the road she was on turned into more of a street.

Oh. This was Main Street. She recognized the buildings from Instagram. The midwifery clinic, the bakery, the hair salon-slash-real estate office. Then, at the end of the main drag, she saw the lake in the distance. The street dropped away, down a hill that separated the town from the harbour, and there on the left, at the intersection of Main Street and Old Whiskey Harbour Road, stood a whitewashed building.

Red letters painted on the wall told her she'd definitely arrived at her destination. *Kincaid's Garage.*

Monica parked her rental car in front of it and got out, taking her bearings. Across the road was a chilly looking lake that stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions. The tired-looking marina had a parking lot full of cars. Just south of that, she could see the edge of what looked like an abandoned motel, and then the road curved away from the lake and into the forest again.

Heart pounding in her chest, she finally turned her attention back to the garage.



She knew, of course, that this was Josh's pride and joy. She'd followed him on Instagram and TikTok under burner accounts. Watched him amass quite the following. Start flirting with another popular car restorer—that had been hard to see—and then, abruptly last week, walk away from his newfound celebrity. To focus on what really mattered, he'd said in a final, simple post.

This wasn't the career he'd told her about that first night together. This wasn't his dream. This was his reality, though, and she was about to blow it up again, right after he'd had a public mess to wade through.

From her probably inappropriate stalking of him online, she also knew that the easy-going, helpful man she'd fallen head-over-heels in lust with in a single night was long gone.

He wasn't going to be happy to see her.

That was her fault. She deserved the icy-cold reception she would certainly meet. And it was already cold enough in Pine Harbour to freeze her SoCal tits off. She zipped her brand-new down jacket up the rest of the way.

The lights weren't on in the shop, but she was pretty sure from his videos that he lived upstairs. She didn't even have to go that far, though. There was a note stuck to the glass door of the office.

***CLOSED for the afternoon for a Kincaid wedding celebration. Come find us at the marina.***

SHE HEARD the party before she saw it. Loud laughter, clapping, and the clink of beer bottles.

When she turned the corner, she saw Josh right away. He was sitting in a chair, tilted back against a railing. Unlike her, he wasn't dressed for winter weather. Of course, it wasn't really winter here, not for them. It was spring,

technically. Just.

She was freezing her butt off.

He was in dark jeans and a black zippered hoodie. Beneath it she saw a flash of a white t-shirt, and memories of their first night together spiralled through her mind.

But that was where the similarities ended between this stranger and the man she'd fallen in love with. When his gaze landed on her, he didn't break into a curious grin. Instead, he stood up so fast his chair clattered to the deck, his face tightening into a fierce mask.

Another man, closer to where she stood at the edge of the deck, turned and smiled. "You look like you need a drink." Everyone else on the deck fell silent, noticing Josh's hostile approach now. The smiling man seemed oblivious. "I don't think we've met. My name's Trent. And you are?"

"Get away from her," Josh snarled at the same time as she said, "I'm here to see Josh."

Someone she recognized as one of the Kincaid brothers jumped between them, stopping Josh from shoving the other guy—Trent—way from Monica.

Josh sidestepped his brother, who was trying to diffuse the situation, but clearly the other men didn't understand just how badly she'd fucked everything up.

Nothing would stop Josh from telling her to get out. She knew that. She was prepared.

And then he was in front of her, and everyone else faded away.

She'd once dreamed of this man being hers. Of a normal life with a mechanic husband, and babies who teethed on rubber wrenches. But she hadn't been strong enough to fight for that dream, and it shattered before it could really take shape.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?" Josh asked, his voice low. Her traitorous heart leapt at having his attention again after so long, even if he was vibrating with rage.

Trent grabbed his arm. “Hey, you can’t talk to her—”

Josh shook him off, but his gaze stayed glued on her. “Don’t fucking tell me how to talk to my wife,” he growled.

And the whole deck erupted in noise.

---

NOT ONCE IN the last week had Josh considered that he might actually see his wife during this new drama of needing to undo his marriage. A three-year-old marriage he hadn’t even experienced.

He was not prepared on any level for her to show up in Pine Harbour. And when Trent turned on her, like she was just another pretty face in the crowd?

Josh’s brain had flatlined.

Now, he managed to move her off the deck and onto the path around the marina to the road without directly touching her.

His heart pounded in his chest.

She glanced both ways, her dark hair swinging in long, slightly messy waves. A more grown up, sophisticated hair cut than she used to wear. She hurried across the road.

A high-end rental car sat in front of his garage.

She stopped just short of the garage office and shot a nervous look back at him. Like she wasn’t sure if he would bite.

Tempting.

He stalked past her, shoving the door open. His skin prickled as she silently joined him in the space he’d forged for himself after their brief marriage imploded.

Would he ever be able to excise the memory of her scent wafting past him as he held the door? The cool, assessing gaze she slid over the space slammed him back three years in time. Could she see her own influence on

how he'd organized the space, knowing how it would look in videos online?

Did she know that he still heard her voice in his head every day, even as he tried to drum it out?

"What are you doing here?" He hoped he sounded cold as ice.

"I...I need to talk to you." That waver in her voice as she started...fuck.

He needed this conversation to be as short as humanly possible. But he also wasn't willing to show his cards. He crossed his arms over his chest.

"About what? We have nothing to talk about."

"No, Josh, we do. You don't understand. Something... A mistake was made, and I'm not sure how exactly, but I'm going to rectify—"

Jesus. Christ. "As if I'm going to trust your father's legal team," he snapped. "They didn't take care of this *mistake* properly the first time, did they?"

Her eyes went wide. "You know."

"It was quite a shock," he snarled, "To find out a few days ago that we're still married."

"I swear I didn't know. As soon as I found out, I hired my own lawyers. Not my father's. It will take a week or so, but I will—"

"No." A muscle in his cheek spasmed. "Stop. Just...stop."

He couldn't let her dive into a conversation he wasn't prepared to have.

Not when her voice wavered and his brain hadn't finished processing that she was *here*. In his *garage*. In his *hometown*.

He had imagined variations on a confrontation scenario dozens of times.

He'd pictured himself at a racing gala dinner, a beautiful woman on his arm. Not that he could picture a face or a body or hear a voice or imagine a scent that felt right, but in his most vengeful fantasies there was a woman there, if only to be hurtful. Showing Monica that he had moved on.

Imagined the TikTok videos turning into some kind of reality show that took him back to California, with enough fame they might run into each other.

He'd run through scripts where she was gracious. Maybe a lingering gaze after they exchanged pleasantries, but generally adult about it.

He had fantasies where she was sad. And he didn't like those, but his discomfort at the thought of her being hurt didn't stop the darker parts of his mind from going there and taking a savage kind of pleasure.

He had *never* pictured this kind of reunion.

Maybe he hadn't for a reason. Maybe he should have known that it would be this hard to look at her, here, in the space he'd built out of the remnants of their relationship.

But now that she was in front of him, none of what he had considered, none of his vengeful fantasies were at all what he wanted.

What he wanted, though, was impossible. And that impossible desire lodged in his chest like a physical weight.

There was probably a vengeful way he could press her against the wall and take her mouth. Show her he was fine, that he didn't need her to race here and fix anything.

He could kiss her so hard it hurt, a little voice inside him said. Except he wouldn't. He'd kiss her gently, so fucking gently, and she'd melt in his arms. He could almost feel the little exhale she'd let out, the way her body would tremble before she surged into him and kissed him back.

He needed her to leave before he did something stupid. Three years ago, he'd ignored this same self-preservation internal alarm, and look where it landed him—broke, struggling for new direction, and bitterly alone.

Monica Fischer was dangerous.

And she was staring at him, still, waiting for him to say something.

He didn't know what to say.

*Get the fuck out* was probably too harsh, even with their history.

He scrubbed a hand over his face.

She flicked her gaze to the ceiling. To his apartment. "Would you rather have this conversation somewhere else?"

“No.” He was shaking. God damn it.

She reached out, as if she was thinking of setting her long, slim fingers flat on his chest.

The fucking nerve.

But she thought better of it, clenching her hand into a fist in the air between them, then dropping it to her side.

He took a jerky step backwards, and she visibly inhaled a big breath. Held it.

“Okay,” he finally said. Good, his voice sounded cold. That was good. “So we’re still married.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I think we’re beyond apologies.” He hunched his shoulders up. “Why the fuck are we still married?”

“I can’t explain it. But I want to make it right.”

“You came all this way and you can’t explain it?”

“You probably have grounds to sue—”

“I don’t want to fucking sue anyone. I can’t fucking afford—” He snapped his gaze out the window, so he didn’t have to look at her for a second longer. It was so fucking hard to look at her. “And I’m not signing anything else with your father’s fingerprints on it. I can begin my own divorce petition here.”

“I was thinking—”

“No.” He didn’t want her to be in charge of this. He wasn’t taking directions from Fischers ever again. “Whatever your idea is, I’m not interested. You asked me to lie to the court, and I did. But it didn’t feel right then and I won’t do it now.”

“It was...an annulment was...”

“It was a fucking lie,” he snapped. “If you came all this way to have a conversation with me, let’s start there. With the fucking lie that we didn’t consummate our marriage. Because we consummated the fuck out of it. For

fourteen days and fourteen nights. Consummated it in every way possible, didn't we?"

She blanched, and he was pretty sure he should feel bad for using the passion they once shared as a weapon now. He didn't. It might have the impact of a bludgeon, but it felt like a shield.

"We did," she whispered. "I won't ask you to lie again."

"Good." He exhaled. "I don't want anything from you. If that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not..." Her body tightened up. She lifted her face to the ceiling, taking a beat before looking directly at him. "This isn't a cold transaction for me. Maybe I wanted to see you, too. Make sure you were all right."

He spread his arms wide. "Take a good, long look. Look your absolute fill. I'm here, just doing my thing. It's a free country. You can even catch up on what I've been doing, because I spent most of the last two years documenting it with videos—"

"I know."

The suggestion she had been following his rise and fall as a social media star didn't help his mood. "Then you might know that right now I'm particularly salty about wealth and fame, and all that fucking nonsense."

She swallowed hard, looking visibly nervous now. "I know. That's why —"

Great. Maybe she was finally hearing him. "It's time for you to go now."

"Josh—"

"Leave." He pointed outside, and then, more specifically, to the highway. "Get out of my town. Go back to California."

"I can't do that. We need to—I would *like*—to work this out between us before anyone else gets involved." There was a tight urgency to the way she said it. Whatever drove her to come find him now was important and time sensitive. Did she need to be single herself? Was she getting re-married?

Over his dead body would he rush to free her for another fool.

Or could there be another reason why she might need to be rid of him again? Another ultimatum from her father? Or another man, eager for his lover to not be married. “Tell whomever is waiting for my answer that I’ll deal with this at my own speed.”

She frowned. “All I care about is righting a wrong. This is just between you and me.”

“It’s never been just between you and me, has it? Because when it came down to me or a hundred million dollars, you made your choice clear.”

He wasn’t an idiot. Of course she chose the money. Anyone would have.

She looked like he’d slapped her in the face. Good. Now they both felt like shit. “It was more complicated than that. And I’m here, now.”

“Three years later.” He threw his hands in the air. “What do you want, some kind of wife medal? I’m all out. None of that matters to me, Monica. It never has. I never wanted your father’s money, or his company, but you didn’t believe me then, so I don’t expect you to understand me now when I say *I need some fucking time with this new fucking information*. Got it?”



MONICA DIDN'T KNOW what she thought would happen. *This whole thing could be handled with a phone call*, her mother had said. *Let the lawyers fix it*, her father had growled. *Ew, that sounds messy*, Sylvie and Cathryn had agreed when Monica finally looped her friends in on the whole situation. Then Amira pouted a little that Monica would be delayed in arriving for her pre-wedding celebrations.

The better part of a month in Italy to celebrate a wedding.

It had felt excessive before she showed up here. She'd instinctively known that Amira could spare her for a few days.

But now? After Josh had pinned her with that fierce gaze and basically told her—although he hadn't wanted to admit it—that he couldn't afford to go toe-to-toe with her lawyers?

That made her feel very, very small about swanning off to Italy next.

Well, it was done. She got half way up Main Street before she had to pull over and have a good cry.

Josh had tersely told her he'd call her tomorrow. Had taken her phone number with ginger reluctance, like she was handing him a ticking bomb.

And then he'd kicked her out of his garage.

But it felt wrong to hit the highway and head back to civilization.

So she stopped in an empty parking spot and let the tears fall—for a

minute.

Swiping angrily at her wet cheeks, she gave herself a pep talk. “You’ve done the hardest part,” she said out loud. Her voice sounded shaky and uncertain. So she repeated it, this time with more confidence. She *had* done the hardest part. Now Josh would go through the reaction cycles, and then he’d sign divorce papers. It wouldn’t be long before she could give him half of everything she had, under the guise of *rules are rules, the law is the law*.

It wouldn’t make her feel better, exactly, but it would be the right thing.

And now she had a button she could push if he dragged his feet. He wanted her gone, and divorce helped that along.

Her watch lit up with a text message from her mother.

BIANCA

I’m watching a big storm develop.

Monica rolled her eyes and took a picture of Main Street.

MONICA

It’s not snowing here. Just a bit cloudy. I’m fine. I’ve talked to him. Getting back on the highway now.

BIANCA

Maybe find a hotel room for tonight. Do they have hotels there?

Was it too soon to roll her eyes again? Of course there were hotels... somewhere. Maybe not right here in Pine Harbour.

And the idea of staying nearby for another day was tempting. Just in case he called her. She wouldn’t be able to tell him, *no, I can’t come back for another chat, I’m halfway across the Atlantic, off to a villa, you see...*

God. That sounded insufferable even inside her own head.

She opened a vacation rentals app on her phone. There were a few cottages listed nearby, but none that were available for today or tomorrow. And the nearest hotel was forty miles away, almost back at the airport.

She didn’t feel right being that far away from Josh. *Not Josh*. From...the

conversation. From the process.

Maybe she could pay one of the locals to let her have their house for the night.

Huffing, she glanced out her window. She'd parked in front of *Bake Sale!* and there was an open sign in the window.

She could use a cookie right now. Cookies made everything better. She'd earned one, after all.

Inside, there was a short South Asian woman with a long, dark ponytail. "Welcome to Bake Sale," she said. "What can I get you?"

*A five star hotel would be amazing.* Monica flicked her gaze over the coffee listings on an overhead blackboard. "Double macchiato with oat milk and maple syrup. And a chocolate chip cookie. Actually, make that two cookies, please."

"That'll be five-seventy-five," the other woman said, ringing it up before starting the espresso.

Monica tapped her credit card as the door to the bakery swung open, and a tall white woman with a blonde bob rushed in—and skidded to a stop. "Hi," she said breathlessly, looking straight at Monica. Then she jerked her attention at the woman behind the counter. "Bailey."

"Isla," Bailey replied carefully.

Then they exchanged a wordless back and forth that ended with them turning as one to smile at Monica.

"I'm Isla," the blonde said. Monica had already guessed that she was one of Josh's sisters-in-law, and had probably been in the blurry sea of people at the marina. "And this is Bailey."

"Got that much," Monica said. "I'm Monica."

Isla circled around the counter and grabbed a stack of glossy pamphlets Monica hadn't noticed before—but one of them fluttered across the counter and to the ground in front of the glass display cabinet, as Isla shoved the rest behind the counter.

Bailey stepped back from the counter and took off her apron. “Nice to meet you, Monica. I have to dash. You’re good for the last hour, Isla?”

“Yep, you’re good to go!” Isla clapped her hands together. “Good luck with the meeting.”

Bailey came around the counter and quickly leaned over to pick up the flyer on the floor. Monica saw Josh’s familiar face in a featured photo before Bailey shoved the paper in a tote bag.

Once Bailey was out the door, Isla slid Monica’s coffee across the counter. And she didn’t let go of the cup when Monica reached for it.

“So…” The baker had a funny expression on her face.

Monica’s stomach sank.

Isla knew who was standing across the counter from her.

Monica glanced down at the coffee, and on the way, her gaze caught on another of those glossy flyers behind the till.

There was no point pretending she wasn’t Josh’s never-seen-before ex-wife, if Isla had either been at the marina or had heard what happened. So she reached past the takeaway coffee cup and snagged the piece of paper instead.

“Oh,” Isla said.

Monica’s eyes went wide as she took in the headline above Josh’s face. *Pine Harbour Charity Bachelor Auction*. “Oh,” she breathed.

“It’s not what it looks like.” Isla shoved the coffee the final few inches across the counter. “And this is on the house.”

Monica didn’t bother to explain that she’d already paid for the coffee. She couldn’t drag her gaze away from the flyer. *Featured Bachelor*. Well, he hadn’t known until twenty minutes ago that he wasn’t actually a bachelor.

“The charity auction is mostly an intergenerational friendship fund.”

“Excuse me?”

“The ladies who bid on the bachelors,” Isla said with more sympathy than Monica deserved. “They’re all…older. And it’s for a bunch of good causes. They tend to get the bachelors to do manual labour for them.”

Monica knew intimately how nice it was to watch Josh use his muscles. But it didn't matter if the people bidding on him were octogenarians—she needed to have those divorce papers signed and preferably be on the other side of the continent by the time this bachelor auction took place. “It sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It's fun for everyone who isn't a Kincaid brother. Josh didn't volunteer.”

“We don't need to talk about—”

“Are you sure?” Isla threw her hands in the air. “I know something about getting tangled up with this family. So...hi, again. I'm Isla. I married Adam, and moved here from Toronto. And I take it you're Josh's wife?”

“You were at the marina?”

“Yep.”

I'm his ex-wife, she wanted to say. But it wouldn't be an accurate correction. So she nodded. “I'm only here for one day.”

Isla's gaze lingered, full of questions, but she didn't push. “It was nice to meet you briefly, then. If you end up staying longer, I'm always happy to make you a coffee. Be a friendly face in the storm.”

She wouldn't say that if she knew how Monica had abandoned Josh. He must not have told his family the details of how they broke up.

“Thank you. I truly do appreciate that.”

“We're sisters of a sort. Even if you're only here for a day.”

It was hard not to compare that reaction—from a stranger—to her closest friends' reactions. “I don't have any sisters,” Monica heard herself say. “Only an overprotective, meddling mother.”

Isla laughed gently. “Oh, dear.”

“I love her. So much. We're best friends right up until she forgets that I'm twenty-four and can make my own decisions.” Monica pressed her lips together. That was entirely enough sharing. Too much, in fact.

Isla nodded. “Well, I know it's not much, but I promise to never forget that. And also, I promise to always have cookies.”

Now Monica was the one laughing, and oh, that felt good. “If I come back tomorrow, I’ll be sure to get more cookies, then.”

Back in her car, she drank her coffee while she did another search for a hotel room, settling for a motel on the northern tip of the peninsula.

After she sorted out her accommodation, she texted the pilot to let him know she wouldn’t be returning today. Then she quickly checked her work messages before pointing her rental car to the highway again.

While she drove, she ate one of the cookies. With each careful bite, she gave herself a nibble of positive self-talk, too.

She’d done the hard part and found Josh.

She’d held her chin up in front of strangers who had to think the worst of her.

She’d let him be angry and, for the most part, hadn’t argued back. And she’d tried to apologize, even if it hadn’t worked.

Sometimes, trying was what mattered.

Her watch lit up.

BIANCA

I just have a bad feeling about this whole thing.

And then, as if her mother had conjured a shift in the weather, fat snowflakes started to pelt the car. Monica swore under her breath and turned on the wipers. Swirling snow danced across the highway surface. She slowed down.

The wind picked up, suddenly, and it went from snowing to a serious squall in a matter of seconds.

Hitting the brakes, Monica slowed down, but the car locked up—fucking rentals—and she skidded sideways. Headlights appeared out of nowhere, and she steered into where she wanted to go, her heart racing. The other car screeched past her, too close for comfort, but she was fine, she was still on the road...

And then she couldn’t feel the road.

It felt like she'd taken flight, and she had no control over the direction of the vehicle. No amount of "steer where you want to go" mattered if the wheels weren't gripping the road. She hit the shoulder, the tires finally bit into the gravel, and the car whipped around.

When it came to a stop, she was facing the wrong direction.

Her heart pounded.

It took her a long beat before she remembered to breathe again.

Another car appeared, headlights ghosting out of nowhere, then blew past her, rattling the windows.

"Oh my God," she whispered out loud to herself, her voice cracking.

Where the hell had this weather come from?

Her hands shook. She wasn't sure if she could safely get her car turned around and pointing in the right direction in this squall, so she decided to wait it out. Minutes ticked by, and then the wind slowed down, and the sleeting snow returned to lazily dancing fat flakes.

The road looked clear in both directions, so she pulled out to execute a quick three point turn.

From nowhere, a pickup truck loomed in front of her, horn blaring. She floored the gas, rocketing across the highway and into the ditch on the other side, coming to an ominous crunch against a thick tree trunk as her airbag exploded in her face.

JOSH HADN'T MOVED. He was still sitting on the floor where he slumped after Monica left, his back against the cold cement wall. His legs stretched out in front of him, his head in his hands.

In his pocket, his phone kept vibrating. He knew without looking that it was the Kincaid brother group chat going nuts.

Fuck.

He didn't know what to tell them. He didn't know what to tell himself.

Across the garage, his shop phone rang, interrupting his miserable silence. He still didn't move.

Ten seconds after it stopped, his cell phone rang. Not a vibration, but the loud jingle that meant the call had broken through his Do Not Disturb settings. Fuck. He yanked it out of his pocket, ready to answer it and tell his brothers to leave him alone—or maybe just throw it across the room.

But it wasn't his brothers. It was the central dispatcher for the company he used to funnel tow truck calls in his direction.

Jesus fuck, he didn't want to go out and respond to a call right now. But tows were a steady, reliable income stream for his garage. And he needed that money. Part of being his own boss meant kicking his own ass when he didn't want to work.

He replied affirmatively. Yes, he could respond to the scene of a single



vehicle accident north of town.

Then he flipped over to the group chat texts, since he was already in the messenger app. They'd started an hour ago, almost as soon as he'd dragged Monica out of the party.

OWEN

Look, no pressure, but we have questions

SETH

A lot of questions

Adam's name just kept popping up with three dots, showing he was typing, then disappearing again.

WILL

When you said you had a brief marriage that was annulled...it was with that woman?

SETH

And was she a woman when it happened?

OWEN

Seth!

SETH

What? She looks like she just graduated college. We're going to talk about it at some point, right?

OWEN

Not the most pressing question.

ADAM

I don't know. If Josh married someone who is a decade younger than me, I think that's of immediate interest.

Josh clicked out of the app, his knuckles turning white from the intensity with which he was gripping his phone.

Then, heart pounding, he stabbed his thumb on the screen to go back to the chat.

JOSH

Don't talk about her like that.

He didn't want his brothers to talk about Monica at all. He wanted her to leave, and for everyone to forget they ever got a glimpse of the young, beautiful, so-far-out-of-reach-it-hurts woman who once used him for a good time, and shoved him away when it all got a bit hard.

JOSH

She's gone again. It's over and done with. Now I need to go do a tow, so stop being dicks about this.

OWEN

Shit, I'm sorry. I just heard about the MVA on the radio. Stay safe out there.

There was nothing to be sorry about. Not now. The regret? That was three years in the past.

He shoved himself up and off the floor. Dusted off his jeans, yanked on his work parka, and grabbed the keys to the tow truck.

---

MONICA'S HEAD WAS SPINNING, but she hadn't lost consciousness. The guy in the pickup truck had stopped, and called 911. Then he climbed down the embankment to get to her and keep her company while they waited for an ambulance.

"I don't need to go to the hospital," she said repeatedly. To him, and then to the paramedics when they arrived pretty quickly. Considering how far away she was from any large town, it felt like a miracle.

"We'll get you checked out anyway," a friendly EMT said. "I'm Matt. This is Dani."

He got her door open, although it protested and creaked in a bad way that told her the frame was fucked.

She wouldn't hear the end of this from her mother. Or her father. *What*

*were you thinking, trying to turn around on a snowy highway?*

She had waited! She—

“What’s your name?”

“Monica Fischer.”

“And where are you, Monica?” He turned a pen light on as she answered his questions, then he looked at both eyes and checked her neck, her arms, her legs, before confirming for his partner that they didn’t need the backboard. “We’re going to wait until the fire department and the tow truck gets here before we try to get you out of here, okay? Are you cold?”

She was shivering, she realized. They covered her in a metallic blanket before she could answer the question. More sirens could be heard approaching, and then the female paramedic—Dani—opened the passenger side door and crawled in next to Monica.

“The tow truck driver is here, and so is the first fire truck. They’re going to make sure the car is stable before we get you out.”

“I think I can just...” But everything hurt and maybe she shouldn’t. What was she saying? Accept the things you cannot change? Right now, she couldn’t do much about the fact her car was at a forty-five degree angle down a ditch, resting against a tree.

Gripping the crinkly blanket tighter around her, she glanced in the rearview mirror, but it only showed her the ditch. Carefully, she slid her gaze to the left, to her sideview mirror—and thankfully, her neck didn’t hurt. Okay, she could move her head.

She exhaled in rough relief, and twisted more to see the gathering rescue effort.

Any momentary internal peace she might have found fled her body when she caught sight of the tow truck driver standing stock still on the shoulder of the highway—as if he had just realized who was driving the rental car he was staring stonily at.

She gripped the wheel. Nope. This wasn’t going to work.

In the mirror, Josh steeled himself in exactly the same way she was. He squared his shoulders and burrowed into his jacket. Straightened his gloves.

*Lesson learned, universe. I will get the hell out of Pine Harbour. I will leave him alone, and not meddle in whatever legal process needs to happen next.*

Then he was scrambling down the bank. He said something to the male paramedic, then he was at her door. He gripped the frame of the car and leaned in. “Hey,” he said really quietly. “You’re okay, eh?”

She nodded. “Just...weird angle.”

He looked past her to Dani. “I’ll let the fire supervisor confirm, but the car looks stable to me. You transporting her to hospital?”

“I don’t need to—” Monica started to say as Dani said, “She’s declining transport.”

He shook his head. “No. Let’s get her checked out. I’ll have to take the car to the autobody shop in Owen Sound anyway.”

Owen Sound. That was where her plane was. Maybe it hadn’t left yet.

Dani looked at her. “Monica? What do you want to do?”

She tried to shrug. If that’s where the hospital was, she could go there. She slid a glance sideways at Josh, who hadn’t moved from the open door of her car. He was blocking out the cold with his big parka, so she didn’t hate that he was so close, even if the proximity played weird tricks on her mind.

She suddenly felt very, very tired.

“You don’t have to enjoy the consequences of my choices quite so much,” she muttered at Josh when he started to smile.

His gaze flickered for a second, then he hardened his expression again. “I’m not enjoying any part of this. Just want to make sure you’re all right.”

There was a shout from the road, and he swore under his breath. “Hang tight. We’ll get you out of here fast.”

Then he was gone, and she was cold again.

By the time they got her in the ambulance and she was warm enough to

text anyone, it was too late to ask her plane to wait. It had already departed. Her assistant offered to book another charter plane, but with the way the weather was turning, it might not be until the next day.

She closed her eyes and didn't bother to answer that text, or any other that came in.

She'd clearly pissed off the universe, and the only thing to do now was hunker down and wait out the storm.

Figuratively and literally.

WHEN JOSH STALKED through the sliding doors of the Emergency Room, he immediately caught sight of Monica, sitting up on a gurney in the hallway.

*Sitting up.* Fuck, that was a relief. The tension in his chest eased a tiny bit.

And she was making Dani and Matt laugh, because of course she was.

She tried so fucking hard to make everyone like her, and even though they always did it never felt like enough for her.

Even after being in a car accident, she was trying to win people over.

If he could force her to lie down and just rest, he would. But he didn't have that right, not anymore. Had he ever had that kind of influence over her? He'd thought he had—he'd thought he'd known her inside and out—but that hadn't been true in the end.

"Hey," he said gruffly as he came to a stop just short of the little group. The paramedics gave him a familiar nod, but before they could ask why he was there or what he was to Monica—did they already know? Maybe they did—a nurse hustled over to take the input report.

Matt relayed what had happened, and Monica's symptoms. *Headache, possible neck strain, reported dizziness, no period of unconsciousness.* For anyone else, Josh would be relieved. It didn't sound that bad.

But his hands balled into frustrated fists and he had to shove them in his pockets to keep himself from reaching for her.

The nurse turned to Monica. “Can you walk?”

She wiggled her legs. “Yep.”

“All right, let’s go this way.” As Monica carefully slid off the stretcher, the nurse glanced at Josh. “Is he with you?”

He was going to feel real dumb in three, two, one—

“Yes,” Monica said, not quite looking at him. “He is.”

He was grateful that nobody asked why, or what his relationship was to her. It wasn't that he didn't think they should know or maybe already did know, in the case of Matt and Dani, and the Pine Harbour gossip network. It was that he wasn't sure he could hold himself together at the same time as he said out loud, *I'm her husband*, three words he didn't deserve to say after demanding she leave his garage.

He'd sent her out into bad weather.

It was his fault she ended up in the ditch.

Seeing Monica's car in the ditch was one of the hardest moments of his life. Realizing that it was her who had driven off the road had clarified some of his feelings.

Not in any kind of *real change* sort of way. Just in the profound, *how dare he be mad at her* kind of way.

She'd flown across the continent and rented a car to come and tell him some seriously fucked up news to his face.

That took guts.

And he'd responded by telling her to get the fuck out of his town.

Guilt twisted at him, because the direct connection between him yelling at her and then her subsequently getting into an accident couldn't be ignored.

The nurse got a quick summary of Monica's injuries—which Josh held his breath through, only exhaling properly when the summary was, “I really do feel okay.”

“We'll just get the doctor to confirm that. You might not in the morning, dear.”

And then he had to hold his breath again until the doctor showed up. After a thorough exam, the doc ordered some testing, and they were sent to the imaging department.

“I know where it is,” Josh said, offering to push Monica’s wheelchair because it seemed like the least he could do.

When they were alone in the CT and X-ray waiting room, she swept her gaze over the entire room before stopping just above his head. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Yeah, I do. What you said when I got to the car, about consequences and me enjoying it...that couldn’t be further from the truth.”

She winced and drifted her attention away, looking over at the unattended reception desk. “I was trying to make a joke, because of course the only tow truck driver who can be witness to my stupidity is my ex-husband.”

“Your husband.” The correction tore out of him in a tight, cold, two-word blast. He didn’t know why it mattered to correct that detail.

But it did matter. It mattered a fuck ton.

And then she was called in for the CT scan, and that was followed by an X-ray. Josh had a long stretch of silent, agonizing minutes to think about the fact he was married for three whole years and had no fucking clue.

There was no time to talk about that, though, because as soon as they were back in her numbered bed in Emerg, the doc came over with good—but complicated—news.

“You mostly have some soft tissue damage from the impact. We’ll give you some strong painkillers to get you through the night, and a prescription for the next few days. You’ll be more sore tomorrow, and then it will get better after that.”

“Any sign of concussion?” Josh asked.

The doctor shook their head. “The CT scan is clear, and she passes the assessment. Of course, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Let your body guide the recovery here and get as much rest and sleep as you can.”



Monica furrowed her brow. “Uh...what about air travel?”

“I’d strongly advise against any unnecessary travel, but especially long drives or flights.”

“All right.” She twisted her fingers around the hem of her hospital gown as she almost looked in Josh’s direction. “Can you pass me my phone? I need to find a rental house.”

“Uh...” The doctor glanced back and forth between them. “It would be better if you weren’t alone. At least for tonight. Further symptoms could develop at any time, and it’s better if someone else can monitor those.”

“She’ll stay with me,” Josh heard himself say. Monica’s eyes went wide. He was just as shocked as she was.

“Excellent. I’ll get you the information sheets for concussions and pain management.” The doctor left them alone.

For the first time since they’d arrived at the hospital, Monica looked straight at Josh, really looking at him, and her brow furrowed in confusion.

Of course she wouldn’t want to stay with him.

And now that he’d said it out loud, he really, really wished he could claw it back.

---

THE DRIVE back to Pine Harbour was unbearable. Monica pressed her body against the passenger side door of his tow truck. Josh was painfully aware of how dusty and creaky the truck was, and each click they got closer to Pine Harbour, the more he dreaded taking her up the stairs to his apartment.

He tried to imagine how it would look through her eyes. Dingy and dated and in desperate need of renovations.

*Like an updated apartment above the garage would impress her?*

Nothing would. They were from two different worlds. He needed to remember that. He wasn’t trying to impress her tonight, he was showing her

he could be a decent human being and put her health first.

But she picked up on his wariness, apparently, because she cleared her throat just as he turned off the highway. “I do have other options,” she said quietly. “I have...an assistant. I should have suggested this at the hospital. They could watch me over a video call. Or my mother—”

“It’s not necessary,” he ground out.

Silence stretched again as they drove down Main Street. Everything was closed now. It was well past dinner time, and dusk threatened any minute.

“Perhaps one of your neighbours might like a very fair market rate for the use of their guest room?” She said it lightly, as if it were a joke.

As if she couldn’t buy his entire town a few times over.

He didn’t laugh.

He eased his way down the hill, hoping against hope the weird weather hadn’t turned any of the earlier sleeting rain or snow to black ice on the road. And he decided to take the question at face value.

Maybe he could send her across the road to the marina. Call in a favour from August Howe and her teenagers. *Can you take my ex-wife in for the night? Put her up and not ask her a single question about our past, why she’s here now, or anything else? Whatever you do, don’t engage her in conversation, because she’s a captivating witch who will make you fall in love with her and then crush your heart when you least expect it. Oh, and you’ll have to check on her repeatedly throughout the night...*

Yeah, he couldn’t send Monica across the road.

And he couldn’t ask any of his brothers to have her in their homes. Not after the text chain from earlier.

God damn it.

Because the only other option in the immediate vicinity was Trent Fucking Aitken, who was staying in a trailer at the brewery behind the garage. Who’d already flashed a willing and eager smile Monica’s way once today. Who hit on every beautiful woman who crossed his path like it was his

job.

She was going to have to stay with him for the night. Josh honestly wasn't sure how he'd survive the next twelve hours.

WHILE JOSH REVERSED his tow truck into the garage—tension rolling off him in electric waves—Monica finally updated her mother in the vaguest, most positive of ways. No mention of the car accident, or the hospital.

MONICA

You were right about the weather. Staying in Pine Harbour overnight. I'm fine, though! Will update tomorrow.

BIANCA

Where are you staying?

MONICA

The marina.

Not exactly a lie. It was across the road. But childish parents didn't always deserve the truth.

BIANCA

Are you still coming to New York before meeting the girls in Italy?

Monica thought about her calendar and winced. But she had to, because she didn't bring anything with her. This was supposed to be a day trip, a brief stop over.

MONICA

Of course! Love you! Talk soon.

She was tired of indulging her mother's worry. She was tired of negotiating everyone else's feelings.

Nothing was going to plan. And that burned, because she had thought this through. She had angsted and considered and made choices, all to right a wrong. But as soon as she arrived, that plan went out the window.

Which meant she needed a new plan. Right after she caught her breath, and maybe had a nap.

Was it wrong to want to go to bed at seven o'clock at night? And preferably anywhere else but in her ex's garage?

She was tired. So fucking tired.

Josh turned the truck off, exhaled roughly, then turned to her. "Let me show you upstairs. It's not much. Lower your expectations."

"I don't have any expectations," she muttered.

He gave a weird half-laugh, then hopped out and quickly came around to her side. After opening her door, he stepped back, giving her a wide berth to get down. Once she was standing gingerly on the concrete floor, she waited for him to lead the way.

He didn't move.

"Well?"

He grimaced. "Sorry, I was waiting for you to move. Your duffle bag..."

She spun around, her head swimming a little, and the whole garage tilted dangerously.

"Hey there," he said softly, catching her by the elbow with one hand, his other hand steadying her in the middle of her back.

"My bag," she said breathlessly. She hadn't even thought about it.

She hadn't really packed for this trip—California to New York, where she kept a complete wardrobe, with a single day stop in Pine Harbour. But at least her small travel case had her makeup and toiletries, and a change of clothes.

“It was in the trunk of the rental. I grabbed it before I left the car at the autobody shop.”

“Thank you.” She meant it.

She reached for the bag, but he waved her off. “You just focus on getting up the stairs without falling over.”

He showed her through a small office, covered in stacks of paper, to a dark staircase that turned twice on tight landings before opening up to a larger landing upstairs. There were two doors, one with glass that looked out at an exterior staircase. If it weren’t pretty dark out there right now, she guessed it would look out over whatever was behind the garage. And the other door opened to—

*It’s not much.*

That was an understatement.

They were standing in a living room of sorts. A faded couch. A TV on the wall. A coffee table in between that had a laptop open on it, and a notepad next to that, covered in dark blue inky scrawl, and a few greasy fingerprints.

Behind that was a kitchenette with yellowing linoleum on the floor and, inexplicably, behind the counter as a makeshift backsplash. There was a basic white fridge, and an off-white electric stove. A bowl of red apples and a small black microwave sat on the counter, which was otherwise clear.

It was tidy, but very sad looking.

Josh hadn’t exactly decorated his apartment in California, either, but it hadn’t looked like something straight out of the 1970s.

He gestured away from the kitchenette, to two side by side doors. “Bedroom and bathroom are through there.”

“I can...the couch is fine...” She swallowed hard. “Josh, I know this is hard for you. It’s hard for me, too. And I appreciate it. Thank you.”

“Don’t.” He shook his head. “Don’t thank me for anything. Just go to sleep and don’t hurt your brain, okay?”

She unzipped her boots and set them neatly on the boot tray next to the

door.

“Let me take your vest,” Josh said, moving around her, shifting the quiet air in a way she found distracting and confusing.

She slid it off, into his hands. He was close enough she felt heat radiating off his tense body, and for a second, she thought he was going to touch her.

She could almost hear his voice, a low murmur in her ear, saying *God, I’ve missed you, Mon.*

But he didn’t say it.

Because he didn’t feel it.

Instead, he curved his hand around her upper arm just long enough to turn her towards the bedroom, then his touch dropped away.

As perfunctory as possible.

Fatigue draped around her like a heavy cloak as she moved in that direction.

One thing his weird little apartment had going for it—it was warm and cozy compared to the chilly spring night outside.

He dropped her bag on the bed, and she unzipped it, only to discover a new problem. She didn’t really have anything to sleep in. She’d packed a change of clothes, but it was another pair of skinny jeans and a silk blouse. A thong and an underwire bra.

Nothing comfortable.

She paused. “Would you happen to have—”

He yanked open a drawer and tossed a t-shirt and a pair of shorts onto the bed. “Are you hungry?”

Once upon a time, she’d have turned and given him a saucy look, dragging her gaze down his body before saying something like, *starving*, and then they’d tumble onto the bed.

Now, her stomach growled. The cookie she had earlier wasn’t enough to get her through the night, and she wasn’t stubborn enough to pretend it was.

She nodded mutely.

“Get changed,” he said softly. “I’ll find something. Do you still like eggs?”

Another quiet nod. It was all she could manage.

The bedroom door creaked shut, and she was alone. She peeled off her jeans, and her shirt. Her clothes smelled stale, like flop sweat and something medicinal from the hospital. Her underwear, too, so they had to go as well. Stiffly, she folded her panties into her bra, and tucked that inside her shirt, then wrapped her jeans around the whole thing and tucked the bundle onto a chair in the corner.

Like she was at the gynaecologist’s office instead of in her husband’s bedroom.

With a sigh, she pulled on Josh’s shorts and tugged the drawstring tight. Then she lifted the shirt, and before she pulled it over her head, she pressed her face into the soft cotton.

It smelled clean, but not like Josh. Not *her* Josh.

What was she doing?

She yanked the tee over her head and smoothed it down her torso. A bit big, but comfortable and it didn’t smell like she’d panic-sweated her way through a snowstorm in it.

It wasn’t some fantasy trigger that magically erased the last three years, unfortunately.

Or, maybe fortunately. Maybe it was for the best that she not get swept up in an impossible idea.

From the other side of the door, she heard the sizzle of butter in a pan.

Food.

Then sleep. Then... Then she would get out of Pine Harbour and leave Josh alone forever.

---



JOSH HEARD her step out of his bedroom, but he didn't look over. Wanted to. The temptation to have that image seared on his retinas was nearly overwhelming.

But the last time he'd gotten over her sudden absence from his life, he had to sell his car to start sleeping through the night.

He couldn't sell his garage.

When he saw the slight sway of her body just at the periphery of his vision, he reached out with his foot and nudged one of his two chairs out from the small table. "Sit."

Monica sat.

He finished her omelette and slid it onto a plate. Put it in front of her, then turned back to the stove to make one for himself. "You can start eating," he tossed over his shoulder when he didn't hear her pick up her cutlery.

"I'll wait. I should take another painkiller."

Her chair scraped against the linoleum.

He glanced around just in time to see her lean over and pick up the hospital pharmacy bag from where he'd set it on the low shelf by the front door.

Her legs stretched up to his shorts, and the round curve of her ass, in soft, smooth delicate curves.

Three years and the worst kind of betrayal hadn't done shit to dull his reaction to the way she looked in his clothes.

*Which you knew when you pulled shorts and not sweatpants out of that drawer, making this a self-inflicted wound.*

No denying that.

In less than half a day, he'd gone from violently not wanting her anywhere near any part of his space to hoping she'd imprint her scent on at least a few of his things before she left again.

The frying pan spit an angry bit of butter at him, demanding his attention. Well, his omelette would be a little darker than hers. So be it.

“Where would I find glasses?”

He pointed to the cupboard.

She turned on the tap, and for a second, he had a flash back to the nights where she stayed over at his place and they cooked together. The cozy secret, the joy of moving through the kitchen in symbiotic effort.

His place in California had been spartan, but at least it was modern. And his dishes had matched. He’d been surprised she liked spending time there, but it had been nice.

Nothing about *this* was nice. Now his skin crawled with discomfort of having the most delicate creature in the world stretching up on her bare toes to dig around in his haphazard collection of things that can hold liquid.

When he turned off the element and plated his own omelette, Monica was sitting again.

At their respective place settings were his best water glasses—a mason jar, and a Leafs memorial mug. That’s the one she had chosen for herself, and her fingers gripped it now so tightly her knuckles were white.

Fuck.

“The doctor said rest was the most important thing,” Josh started, suddenly desperate to fill the silence. “And I don’t need to wake you every four hours. That’s outdated.”

She nodded.

“So I won’t. Bother you. You can sleep as long as you—”

“I can leave tomorrow.” Her voice was quiet. Final.

Of course she didn’t want to spend a second longer than necessary here.

“You don’t need to.”

“But I should.” She shrugged. “It’s a short flight to New York. But I really appreciate this. The food. And the bed.”

“Yeah.” He stabbed his plate.

She took two bites, then put her fork down. “I started my own business.”

He jerked his head up. “Oh. Good. Is it? Good?”

She nodded. “It’s hard.”

“Marketing?”

“Sort of. Yes, I mean. But not customer facing stuff.” She dropped her gaze to her plate. Took another bite.

He watched her chew. Liked the way she swallowed eagerly, then went back for more. He didn’t really want her gratitude for the bed—hated showing her this space, that it wasn’t nice enough yet—but he’d always liked feeding her.

“Neither of us ended up where we wanted to be,” she finally added, her gaze still locked on her plate.

He frowned.

She wasn’t wrong. He wasn’t where he’d imagined he would be as his thirty-fifth birthday approached.

But he didn’t want her to think about that.

Didn’t like that his dissatisfaction was obvious.

So he deflected. “It’s been good to be home. Closer to my brothers.”

“Right.”

“And you’re in New York now?”

“Sometimes. I was in California last week. I go back and forth.”

“Ah.” He wondered where the line was between making conversation and being nosy. “How does your mother—”

“She hates it.” Monica made a face. “Never mind that I’m a grown up. She still thinks she’s stuck in a fifty-fifty custody battle. It’s ridiculous. But I started my business on the west coast, and that’s where a lot of my network is. New York is...good.” A ghost of a smile drifted across her face, and Josh had a pang of jealousy for whatever triggered it.

Did something—or someone—in New York spur her to come here and get a quick resolution to the fact she’s married?

“Good,” he managed to get out, his voice rough from being forced around the word.

“I need to...I have a friend’s wedding coming up,” she offered. “So the sooner I get going the better.”

He nodded, not trusting himself to say anything else after that. Fair enough. She had a whole life separate from him.

She finished her dinner as quickly as possible, then stood up and looked for the non-existent dishwasher.

“Just put the plate in the sink.” His words sounded sharp to his own ears, so he forced his voice softer. “I’ll wash up. You can go get some rest.”

She nodded.

He couldn’t finish his own dinner. He set it aside. He had some paperwork to fax to the car rental company’s insurance department about the tow, so he headed downstairs to take care of that.

When he returned, his bedroom door was firmly shut.

QUIETLY, Josh turned on the TV and put the volume all the way down. He wasn't actually going to watch the hockey game, his attention span wasn't capable of that tonight, but the distracting bright white flicker of the screen was better than the looming shadows of the rest of his apartment.

Tonight was the first of back-to-back games for the Hamilton Highlanders, the NHL's latest expansion team, and he was trying to be a good uncle-in-law, following Hayden's season as closely as possible.

Maybe on the other side of Monica leaving again, he could become a hockey content creator. Anonymously this time. That could fill his days and nights, because he wasn't going back to restoration CarTok.

His phone lit up. The brothers group chat. He wasn't the only one watching the game tonight.

He watched as Adam and Will discussed whether or not the refs were fucked in the head (Adam's take) or just doing their best under difficult circumstances (Will's reasonable rejoinder).

Josh laughed at his mild-mannered baby brother hating on the refs.

And then without thinking, he liked Adam's latest text with a thumbs up emoji.

It was like he'd thrown chum to hungry sharks, and they all turned their attention his way. Well-meaning attention, loving brother shit, but still...

attention.

SETH

Hey...about earlier. I'm sorry. We were out of line.

ADAM

I can apologize for myself. (But same...Isla read me the riot act tonight for focusing on the wrong thing)

OWEN

Do you need anything? Want to come over tomorrow to watch the game?

WILL

I still have questions.

OWEN

Leave it alone.

WILL

What? They aren't about her age.

SETH

It's none of our business, bud.

WILL

Do none of you follow him online?

ADAM

No.

SETH

No.

OWEN

Of course not.

WILL

Well, Catie does, and I'm getting quite the education over here. Apparently #ReboundJosh is trending. You might not think this is any of our business, but our grumpy hermit brother is at the middle of a bigamy scandal.

JOSH

Oh fuck off, it's not bigamy. It's not anything.

WILL

You shouldn't have deleted your TikTok account. You could have set the record straight for everyone there. And, you know, your curious family.

OWEN

I'm not on TikTok.

That was the last text before Josh's phone rang. It was Seth. God his brothers meant well, but he couldn't do this. He declined the call, then flipped back to the group chat.

JOSH

At some point, we'll talk it all out. Right now, I need to be alone.

Except he wasn't alone yet. And he might need his brothers' help if local gossip caught up to the online gossip.

JOSH

Monica didn't actually leave today. She was in an accident. That was the call out I got. She's fine, but I've brought her back to my place to sleep off what might be a concussion. She might fly out in the morning.

Which made him think of something he could offer her. An olive branch, maybe. A final generous bit of assistance.

JOSH

Seth, any chance you could fly her to Toronto?

SETH

Yeah, of course. I don't have any charters tomorrow. Keep me posted.

JOSH

And to the rest of you...It's hard, okay? Really fucking hard. And I'm glad I'm not online. I don't know how to explain any of this to anyone else, because I don't know what to make of it for myself. But it's nobody's business but mine and hers, so tell Catie to cool it on the powerpoint presentations about gossip.

One by one, his brothers liked his text, but they didn't chirp again.

He dropped his phone on the couch and leaned his head back. The TV flickered a flash of red. A goal for Hamilton, and they were up three to two.

Good.

Someone should have a good night tonight.

*She was leaving in the morning.*

He'd yelled at her. Told her to get the fuck out of his town. But now, as he made arrangements to safely ensure that was exactly what she did...he only felt hollow inside.

He closed his eyes. Not ready to fall asleep yet, but sort of done with being awake. His brain went fuzzy, drifting. Sinking into memories of a street race, and a fight, and a dagger to the heart. Monica telling him she'd made a mistake.

He woke up, his heart pounding.

That wasn't the order of it, though. Monica had told broken up with him at his apartment. Then he'd gone out that night, looking for a fight. For a race, and not the safe kind. Nothing on a track or even on the highway. He'd headed to the corners of Los Angeles where races went sideways, and he'd driven his car like he had something to prove. Burned out a set of tires and earned some grudging admiration from strangers, which did nothing to fill the wound of his wife saying she didn't love him after all.

The next day, he'd packed up and hit the road, needing to be anywhere but there. Arizona was next, then Missouri. Ohio. That was when he realized that he was heading home, conscious or not.

He cashed out everything he had in the States and bought this garage with a single email.

If he was going home, he decided it would be his choice.

And he hadn't looked back.

Now, he pushed off his couch. The game had ended, so he turned off the TV. He hadn't had the foresight to grab clothes for himself when he showed



Monica the bedroom, so he was stuck in what he was wearing, which was fine.

He'd spent whole weekends wearing the same grimy clothes around races before. He could sleep in his jeans.

He headed to the bathroom to wash up, and just before he got there, heard a groan from his bedroom.

Pausing, he directed all of his attention to the door. To the injured woman beyond, and his pulse jacked up.

He heard it again, a low, upset groan.

Knocking softly, he opened the bedroom door. "Mon?"

She was thrashing in his blankets.

"Hey," he said softly, crossing to her. She was damp with sweat and all tangled up. He freed her from the blanket, and watched, heart in his throat, as she rolled onto her side and curled up in a tight ball.

He settled the covers over her again, folding the top edges down by a good margin so she wasn't too hot.

Then—because she was asleep and he was human—he leaned in and brushed his lips against her temple. Still an electric jolt all the way down to his toes, even after all this time.

"Josh..." His name slipped across her lips on a whisper, and he reared back like she'd slapped him.

She didn't move, though. Didn't get mad at him for kissing her. She murmured his name again, and he realized she was asleep.

*Leave*, he told himself.

This was an invasion of her privacy.

But she was in his bed, wearing his clothes, and saying his name. He wasn't a good enough person to fucking leave.

He sank to a squat at the edge of the mattress and just looked at her. Her brows were pulled into a tight furrow. He smoothed it out with his thumb.

"Leave him alone," she mumbled before rolling onto her belly and

nuzzling her face into his pillow. “He’s...don’t...he’s mine.”

*How can I be yours, he wanted to demand. If you didn’t fight for me? How can I be yours if you told me to go?*

---

ALL NIGHT LONG, Monica kept trying to snuggle into Josh’s back, but he was never there. She could smell him, though, as if he’d just slipped out from under the covers. White bar soap with a touch of citrus. That was *her* Josh, and he was in bed with her. She could feel his nearness, hear his voice, but no matter which way she twisted or turned, all she found was his pillow.

Her dreams slid from private cuddles to darker fights. Her father’s threats were a recurring nightmare, her brain insistent on playing it out every time. Showing her all the other, better ways she could have handled his demands that she get an annulment.

Those were familiar.

The joy of snuggling with Josh was new and unexpected after all this time. She much preferred those brief slices of joy in her long night of disturbed sleep.

As bright light tried to drag her out of slumber, she thought maybe she’d finally gotten her arms around his big, strong torso. But his torso shouldn’t feel like the edge his mattress...the edge of which, she was trying to wrap her arms around like her life depended on it.

She rolled over, trying to be casual, just in case he was there—which he wasn’t. The door was closed, and bright, cool light was pouring in through a high window.

Her heart pounded as she flopped back on the cheap, stiff mattress. His voice had felt so real, but now she couldn’t remember a single thing she thought he said to her.

*Just a dream. A complicated, weird dream, triggered by the scent she’d*

searched for on his clothes last night. The same scent that would swirl around them in his shower back in California, as he worked a bar of soap between his hands, lifting the orange grease cleaner off his skin.

A deep pang of longing shot through her. For those two fools, and how much they wanted each other.

She'd never found that again, so of course she tried to grind up against his phantom body. His actual mattress.

He'd changed up his laundry soap routine, but not the way he scrubbed after a long day in the garage.

Now a new wave of heat rolled through her as she pictured Josh alone in his shower here, just his hands and sudsy streams of water. Dark strands of hair plastered to his body and—

*Oh my God.*

She leaped to her feet, to get away from the soap scent and her reactions, but immediately regretted it when every muscle in her body shrieked in protest. Wincing, she leaned against the wall, then gingerly opened the door.

Josh wasn't anywhere to be seen.

She took her morning painkillers, then grabbed her bag and, after debating whether or not to do this to herself, took advantage of Josh's ancient but clean shower. She gave herself full credit for ignoring the bar of white soap on the ledge, and using her own body wash instead.

Once she was dressed in her only clean change of clothes, she opened the creaky door that led downstairs. The garage itself was also quiet but not in that same still, you're-definitely-alone kind of way. It was quiet in the way that it sounded like someone was working hard on something. If she listened really carefully, and she was, she could hear Josh breathing underneath a minivan.

“Josh?” she called out, not wanting to surprise him and have him hit his head on something underneath the vehicle. “Good morning.”

Metal clattered against concrete as Josh put down whatever tool he was

using.

He didn't say good morning back. But he also didn't yell at her to get out of his garage, so that was a win.

It wasn't the first time she had come looking for him in a garage. But it was the first time she'd had a moment to quietly observe *his* garage, the one that he had bought with his own hard earned money.

It was neat and tidy, well stocked with tools and supplies. And he had even gone to some pains to add a certain aesthetic vibe behind the desk that matched his personality. From a brand assessment point of view, he got full marks.

The wheels on his dolly squeaked and he rolled out from beneath the minivan he was working on. She turned to look at him, because she couldn't not. He came out work boots first. Then grease-stained jeans stretched taut over thick thighs, thicker than she remembered.

And finally he was standing, rubbing his hands on a towel he yanked out of his waistband. He looked at her with a mix of concern and wariness and something else she couldn't interpret.

“Morning,” he finally said, crossing to the sink. “How do you feel?”

“Stiff. But I took something, so I should be able to get going soon.”

He cleaned his hands and grabbed another, cleaner towel. Then he turned around and braced his hips against the counter. “Yeah. No. Sorry. You're not going anywhere. The highway's closed and flying conditions are shit as well. You and me? We're roommates for another day.”

MONICA BLINKED at him in disbelief. Josh knew the feeling, he'd been reeling since he woke up—far too fucking early—and saw the alert on his phone.

She was dressed in her own clothes again, and her hair was damp. Like she'd taken a shower. His brain unhelpfully offered an immediate image he didn't need or want. *Liar.*

Well, he didn't need that mental image. Want...what he wanted wasn't on the table.

She found her voice. "Another day?"

And another long, painful night. "At least. The weather got worse over night."

She looked confused, and looked outside. The confusion deepened. "It doesn't look that bad."

"Sometimes we're in a little bubble down here, by the lake. But the highway is definitely closed. Special alert on my phone and everything. Welcome to winter in The Bruce. We always get a few final blizzards in March and April." He shrugged. "We might get plowed out tomorrow. Or the day after."

"You're kidding me."

"No."

"I...I have..."

He could imagine how busy her life was. How she thought she could come here in a day, in and out, and flit on to something more important than him. “Time to start cancelling your plans, princess.”

She was shaking. “How is this possible? Shouldn’t there be a travel advisory or something?”

Josh almost dropped the wrench he’d mindlessly picked up. The only thing that stopped it from clattering was the basic muscle memory his body had for treating tools well. Numbly, he managed to jam it on top of the tool chest before he advanced on Monica.

Once upon a time, she’d looked at him like he was a god who could do anything. When she pinned her hot little gaze on him, everything else faded away, and he felt seven feet fall. Mighty.

Now he was nothing but an inconvenience. And maybe she didn’t like to look at him, see her mistakes reflected in the grease-covered small town hick she’d once let into her bed.

But it wasn’t his fucking fault she’d driven off the road so fast she fucked up her rental car. Hell, it wasn’t his fault she rented such a little car to come up here in the first place.

It wasn’t his fault she was here in the first place.

That was on her, and her father, and their useless lawyers.

If anyone was unexpectedly inconvenienced by this storm, it was *him*. “It’s called a weather report,” he bit out. “Look, princess—”

She frowned. “Don’t call me princess.”

“Then don’t act like a fucking diva.” He was breathing hard as he loomed over her. God, her eyes were bright. The set of her chin was new. Extra firm. He wanted to take it firmly between his fingers and make her tremble. Make her fucking listen to him, but she’d never been a big fan of that. Not when it came to anything other than racing.

It had been three years since he’d growled an engine up to a start line, too. She’d stolen that from him. Just like everything else.

“I have work to do,” she said carefully. Glaring at him. “Not diva work. Real work. So I guess...” She cast another disbelieving look out the window. “I’ll go do that.”

---

AS SOON AS she got upstairs, she leaned her back against the inside of the apartment door and silently cursed for rising to Josh’s bait.

*Princess.*

Little did Josh know, that was what he called her in her deepest fantasies. Once upon a time, for a few special weeks, she’d loved how special it made her feel—even though it had started as a way for him to highlight their differences, it had quickly taken on an endearing edge to it.

It was for the best if she could draw a boundary around it now. She didn’t need that pointed at her today. Not from him, not now.

She found her phone and searched up the highway closure news, because while she believed him, she couldn’t quite wrap her head around it. Stormageddon, people were calling it.

The worst part was that it made her mother right.

Paranoia 1, Monica 0. She’d be undoing the damage of this Bianca victory for months or years to come.

MONICA

Another weather delay. I’m. Fine.

BIANCA

Could you tell I was nervously waiting for an update?

Monica laughed. *Yeah, mom. I could tell.*

Heavy footsteps on the stairs were a warning to get out of the way of the door, and then it swung open and Josh filled the doorway, his brows pulled tight, a glare pointed in her direction. “I was out of line calling you a princess.”

It was an apology that might sound more authentic if it weren't growled, but she appreciated it anyway. "Thank you. I'm not offended. It just reminds me...of before."

His eyebrows twitched, a little flare of surprise. Then a nod. "I'm also sorry that you're stuck with me for another day or two."

"Maybe there's a silver lining," she offered as diplomatically as possible.

He didn't look nearly as gracious as she felt. "And what would that be?"

"Well, we can... Is it too much to suggest that we catch up?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because we're never going to be friends, Monica. I don't want to be friends with you. I wanted you to be my wife. And no offence, but you showing up here means I get to mourn that all over again when you leave."

His words echoed in the silence that followed. He looked surprised that he'd said even half of that.

"Of course. Of *course*." Her voice cracked and she didn't bother to hide that. "I didn't mean to make it sound like I don't have some hurt feelings, too. And I know you won't believe that, but I do. I mourn it, too. For goodness sake, I just told you that I don't like being called princess for those same kind of reasons."

He gave her a curt nod. "Then let's not spend the last twenty-four hours of our marriage pretending to be friends, all right?"

The last twenty-four hours of their marriage. She hadn't thought about it like that.

He spread his arms wide. "This is what it's like after the honeymoon is over." Sarcasm dripped off his words. "Being married to a mechanic. A stupid fight about a thoughtless word before I go back to finish the brake replacement on a minivan downstairs."

She let out a watery laugh. "I'll be sure to make something good for dinner, then." *The last twenty-four hours of their marriage.* She lifted her



chin, not willing to let him have any moral high ground here. “What else should we do in our only day as a regular married couple? Before we figure out what our divorce is going to look like?”

Something complicated flashed behind his gaze. “Let’s not do that today. No divorce talk. Not if we’re snowed in.”

She nodded. She could give him that. A small peace offering. “Okay.”

That earned her a small half-smile. Just one corner of his mouth tipping up. “It’s a little too late to carry you across the threshold. Should have done that last night.”

“You did that in Vegas. Into the suite.”

He rocked back on his heels. “Oh. Right.”

His eyes hooded, but he didn’t look away.

A highlight reel of what happened next shot through Monica’s mind. Them, *consummating the fuck out of their marriage*, as he made a point of snapping at her yesterday.

Josh’s gaze flashed dark and hot. As if she wasn’t the only one whose thoughts went there.

“Then we’ll settle for talking about our day over dinner,” he said slowly. “Unless you had anything else in mind.”

“No.” She stumbled over the single-syllable word. “I don’t mean—”

“No,” he echoed. “Of course not.”

But now she could see it. How a mechanic might scrub down with grease cleaner first, and then carefully shower with white bar soap. So he was all clean when he pressed his wife gently into a cheap mattress at the end of their day.

Her cheeks flamed.

“Work,” she whispered.

He cleared his throat. “Yep.”

“I have work...you have work.”

He glanced around his apartment. Then to her phone in her hand. “If you

want to work downstairs, you can.”

He disappeared down the stairs and she flopped onto the couch, not sure how to take that invitation.

*The last twenty-four hours of their marriage.* She wasn't going to spend a second of it flailing for deeper meaning. If he welcomed her downstairs, she'd go and...watch. Or something.

It was entirely possible she was going to spend more than a few seconds of it fighting the desire to reminisce about all the consummating they did back in the day.

---

AS FAR AS Josh could tell, Monica's new job was mostly phone calls where she told people, “you've got this!” and asked questions like, “is that really your core promise, though?”

Which, to his ear, sounded a lot like *oh dear, you do not have this at all.*

And in between those calls, she dashed off texts, touch typing with her thumbs while she watched him.

Maybe he put a little extra oomph into reinstalling the brake calipers, leaning into the torque wrench.

Maybe.

The best and worst part of having Monica in his space was being reminded of how much he just liked her. He didn't want to like her.

But he did, he couldn't help it. He liked her curious gaze. The stubborn set of her shoulders so when she unrelentingly went after what she wanted, and right now, what he was pretty sure she wanted was to have a conversation with him.

It was his own fault. *The last twenty-four hours of their marriage.*

Where the fuck had that come from?

His throat had wanted to close up after he said it, and he'd gone mean to

cover that up.

Fuck.

He still felt a little mean. Like she hadn't earned a conversation with him, like he wanted to make her watch him work forever.

He exhaled. When did he become this bitter? If she were telling the truth and this surprised her a few days ago, just as much as it did him, then of course she wanted to talk about it.

Monica wanted to talk about absolutely everything.

And once upon a time, he had loved to stretch out on his back, have her perch on top of him and chatter endlessly about everything.

He loved the sound of her voice, especially when she was excited and full of questions and ideas. God, that woman had more ideas than any single human being had any right to.

*Is that really your core promise, though?*

He slid the last brake pad into place and shot a glance in her direction. “What exactly is your new business?”

She slid her phone into the back pocket of her jeans and pushed off the wall where she'd been leaning. “I work with small but nimble businesses who are at critical pivot points, and need an outside perspective on who their customer is and what that person wants.”

He nodded. “That's...”

She grinned. “Yes?”

“Impressive.”

Her smile softened. “Thank you.”

“And also confusing.”

She laughed. “The shorter version is, I help companies figure out what works and what doesn't.”

“Nice.”

“It is. I mean, for me, and for them. It's rewarding.”

“How'd you get into that?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Right place, right time.”

He gestured. *Out with it.* “You don’t need to hide that stuff from me. Despite what it looks like, I didn’t revert to a country hick who will be scarred if I find out how the business world works—or high society.”

That got him a roll of her eyes. “Hardly high society.”

“People call you a racing heiress, Mon.” He held up his hands. “Not me, of course. Just people.”

“People on TikTok, maybe.”

“Yeah. People.” He winked at her. “Average, ordinary...”

“Shut up.” But she said it softly. “My first client happened to be at a dinner party I was invited to the week I quit Fischer Racing. I was a little... extra that night. Full of vinegar, my grandpa would say.”

Josh had met the elder Fischer Racing scion a few times, when he first started working there. Ronald Fischer had retired not long after that, and his son Michael—who had been groomed to be the next CEO—took over. He chuckled, remembering the grizzly old man. “Pretty sure your grandfather would have said *full of piss and vinegar.*”

Her cheeks turned pink. “Yes.”

“I met him a few times. He was great.”

“I wish I’d known him longer.” She exhaled, a long, stabilizing breath. “He liked my mom a lot. I remember that.”

“You were his favourite. He told everyone that, really loudly. Usually in front of your dad.”

She laughed again.

He’d spend the rest of the day digging up memories that made her smile. “So you were at dinner, and full of a certain kind of opinionated energy...”

“This woman was talking...not really complaining, just externally processing, if that makes sense? She casually says, ‘only one of our apps makes money, of course.’ And I said, ‘So why do you waste even a penny more on the ones that don’t?’”

He could imagine a few reasons why an app developer might continue projects that weren't converting to revenue.

Monica winked at him. "I know what you're thinking."

"Do you?"

"You're trying to apply logic to the situation."

He crossed to where she was standing, then leaned in and whispered, "Got me."

Her breath hitched, and she paused for a beat before she lifted her gaze to meet his. "But it's never logic that holds on to past mistakes," she murmured. "Only emotion."

He reached past her and flipped a switch on the wall, lowering the van back to the garage floor. "Noted."

She pressed her lips together and nodded. "All done with the van?"

"Yep."

"What's next?"

Normally, he'd call the customer and tell them to come get their vehicle. But it wasn't like Olivia Minnelli was coming to get her car today. They were snowed in.

He might as well keep talking to his wife. He turned around again and gestured for the stairs. "Lunch."

LUNCH WAS chicken soup with rice, which Josh pulled out of his freezer and put on the stove to heat up.

As they ate, he asked her more about the “core DNA of a business” model, and her role as a consultant.

“I position myself as a coach and a confidant. Everyone wants to gripe, you know? So I lean into that, and find a way to massage it into self-reflection.”

“Clever.” As he listened, little lines appeared on either side of his mouth. They were nice, those lines. “So you aren’t really suggesting new ideas to them.”

She jerked her attention back to his eyes. “Almost never. They already know what they need to do, at least on some level. Sometimes they need someone to shine a light in the right area. And other times it’s even simpler, they just need someone to validate their choice—and give them permission to cut what isn’t working.”

“Interesting niche. You’ve come a long way from the marketing department of Fischer Racing.”

She glanced down at her soup.

Josh chuckled. “And I make soup now.”

“Well, it is winter,” she deadpanned. “Maybe if it had snowed in L.A...”

No, that wasn't a good direction to send the conversation. She tapped on her phone screen. "I took some pictures of you downstairs. If you want them for your socials?"

He shrugged. "Pretty sure I'm over that, permanently."

"Then maybe for your next bachelor auction promo." The words were out before she could stop herself.

He laughed in surprise, then gave her a funny look. "You know about that?"

"Saw a flyer yesterday."

"Fuck me."

Her lips twitched. "Someone reassured me it wasn't that kind of auction."

"What? Who?"

She cringed. "I stopped at the bakery. Had a very nice conversation with Isla."

He puffed out his cheeks, then shook his head. "Well, of all of my sisters-in-law, she's probably the most discreet. If Catie had met you, everyone would know about it by now."

"Catie is the real estate agent?"

"And probably the future mayor, yeah. She's a very well-meaning emotional tornado. Also, the bachelor auction is her project."

"And you can't say no to a well-meaning emotional tornado on a mission?"

"Something like that."

"I bet you'll bring in a lot of money for a good cause." She meant it. She did. So what if saying it was harder than swallowing razor blades?

He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Not really a top priority, I promise."

"Charity?" She raised her eyebrows, and he chuckled.

"Touché. It *is* for a good cause. But I don't want to talk about that today."

She ticked off the verboten topics on her fingers. "No bachelor auction.

No social media talk—”

“I didn’t say we couldn’t talk about social media. I just said I’m over it. Having my face on the internet, having people make up shit about me.”

“That part is a shame, because you have a nice face. Does it have to be all or nothing?” And then she held up her hands. “You don’t have to answer that. Just being nosy.”

He gave her a look that bordered on affectionate. “That’s just you being you. And if anyone else asked, I would dodge the question, to be honest. But I think—as much as I hate to say it—I think you know me. I always felt like I could be honest with you about my aspirations.”

She sucked in a surprised breath. He said that with more ease than she ever would have imagined.

Then he stretched his legs out beneath the table and leaned back. Relaxing into the conversation, finally. “Yeah, I guess it feels like it does have to be all or nothing. Because if it doesn’t work, why would I do anything?”

She gave that some careful consideration. “Well, some people would say there is inherent value in the doing of a thing, regardless of the result.”

Those lines around his mouth deepened, and his eyes crinkled. Like he was smiling with his whole face, even as his expression grew serious. “Didn’t we just talk about how you’ve built a whole business around telling people to stop doing the things that don’t get the results they want?”

“But only if the goal is to get a result! That’s not the only reason people build an online presence. Sometimes it’s just a celebration of what you’ve done.” She leaned and gestured around. “This is amazing.”

Silence rang out in response.

He didn’t move.

But the easy back and forth stopped, immediately.

Then he glanced around, slowly. Exaggerating his inspection of his apartment. “This,” he drawled with deliberate cool, “is not amazing.”



She swallowed hard. “I mean the garage.”

“Also not amazing.”

She disagreed. Vehemently. Maybe she’d only been here for twenty-four hours, but she’d seen his content a few times.

More than a few times.

He hadn’t hired her, though. Or even asked her opinion. Him recognizing that she understood where he was coming from was a long way from him trusting her thoughts on his life now.

She’d lost that privilege when she made that fateful deal with her father.

As if he was reading her thoughts, he narrowed his eyes. “Do you think this is a better fit for me? A country mechanic?”

“What? No. Not at all. You deserve to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

He pressed his lips into a hard, thin line.

The warmth and excitement of their conversation had evaporated.

She finished her soup in silence. Her phone rang twice, and she silenced it both times. The third time, Josh muttered something about not wanting to keep her from anything important, and he disappeared downstairs.

It was time to put an out-of-office reply on her email. Yesterday, work was a welcome distraction from the dread around coming to see Josh.

Today, the distraction was no longer welcome.

She was down to twenty-one final hours with him—give or take whatever the snowstorm Gods wanted to inflict on her. She wasn’t going to give any of that time to anyone else.

She replayed their conversation in her head as she took another painkiller. Every muscle up and down her spine screamed when she headed downstairs, but it was worth it for the way the tightness around her chest eased at the sight of Josh pulling an old pickup truck into the spot where the minivan had been before lunch.

Cold, snowy air gusted in from outside. She’d left her vest upstairs, so

she wrapped her arms tight against her chest. And then his gaze met hers, which temporarily warmed her up, and he held it for a moment before hopping out of the truck. “Monica, meet Betsy. My latest project.”

She moved closer, trying not to shiver.

Without saying a word, he grabbed a heavy flannel shirt off the wall and handed it over. She took it and slid it around her body, grateful for the extra layer, even after he closed the garage door again.

Josh rubbed his hand on the hood. “I’ve had her for a while, but couldn’t decide what direction to take her restoration. Our conversation at lunch gave me an idea.”

Her eyebrows jerked up. “Oh?”

“It’s been too long.” He shrugged, casually. “Time for me to build another dragster.”

And that was when she realized his words had a brittle edge.

Oh.

“Good project,” she said softly.

“Been a while.”

So he was back to being mad at her. All right. So be it.

“I never meant for you to leave racing.” She had pushed him to accept the annulment for the exact opposite reason, in fact—so he could continue working in her father’s world without any threat. “Maybe I don’t understand why you’re here, then, if this isn’t what you want?”

“Because I couldn’t stay *there*.”

---

JESUS CHRIST, Josh couldn’t go more than a few hours without backsliding into feelings he hated.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, hating the way they shook. Hating even more the way he was sure, fucking certain, that touching her would

make that tremor stop.

And she just fucking innocently blinked at him, confused about why he hadn't blithely carried on his life in California when he gave her up.

As if their supposed annulment hadn't felt like some kind of death to her, the way it had for him. That yes, he had to give up everything he'd built there, because it was nothing compared to her. That in a few short weeks, she had become his everything.

And when she forced him to give up her, nothing else mattered.

The state wasn't big enough for the two of them and his broken heart. So he left. And it didn't matter how far he went, the country wasn't big enough, either.

That was on him. His error. Giving up so much of his heart, so quickly in such a short period of time that he couldn't recover from the blindsiding breakup.

Regret burst like copper in his mouth.

She didn't understand, though.

And it was a live wire dangling between them. Not to be touched, not to be named. Not as long as she was trapped in his garage, snow falling relentlessly outside.

So he walked it back. "Ignore me," he growled. "It's just being cooped up. I need to go for a run or something."

She didn't look like she believed him. She took a step in his direction. "You really aren't happy here?"

He stepped back.

She stepped forward, her brow furrowed.

He stepped back, and bumped into his tool chest.

"Josh, I—" She reached for him, her slim fingers extending out from the cuff of his red flannel shirt.

He caught her wrist before her hand could land on his chest. "Stop."

"I'm not doing anything." She tilted her head to the side, searching his

face. Her lips parted, as if about to say something, then she thought better of it and pressed them together.

He definitely needed some kind of hard workout. Might actually kill someone for a chance to chase a soccer ball around for an hour.

This is what she didn't understand—the ragged edge of control he was constantly riding. And the way her skin felt beneath his fingers...soft, smooth, warm...

“We need to...” He dragged his thumb along the inside of her wrist, his whole body responding to the heavy thud of her pulse against his touch. Jesus, he'd missed her. His limbs felt heavy, suddenly, because it was an effort to keep himself in check. Hard work not holding her. The challenge of a lifetime to keep his distance.

And he wasn't up for it.

“It's so hard to think when you're...” He swallowed. Hard.

She twisted her wrist in his grasp, pulling free.

He let her, even as his body howled in protest.

And he waited for her to step back, to put distance between them.

She didn't.

She just stood there, rubbing her arm where he'd grabbed her.

“Monica.”

Her eyelids fluttered shut and she shook her head. “Don't. You hate me.”

“I don't. I wish I did. It would make all of this easier.” Because he needed to be angry at her. Needed that fuel to keep pushing her away.

Slowly, she blinked her eyes open. Looked up at him. “Easy? Is that what you want?”

Fuck.

What was she suggesting?

“What I want...” He leaned in, closing the gap between them. She smelled like money, like exotic, subtle fragrances he'd never heard of, and something else. Something earthy and delicate and uniquely her—and *that*

was what he really craved. “Princess, what I want isn’t on the table.”

Her eyes flashed. “Because you waste your breath calling me princess.”

“What would you prefer?”

“Ms. Fischer has a nice ring to it.”

“We’re well past formalities, wife.”

“Then we should also be well past stupid fights, *husband*.”

“So if we weren’t fighting...” He dragged in a breath. Fuck, it was hard to think.

“We’d have to find something else to do,” she whispered.

It had been a long time since he’d flirted with a woman, and he was out of practice. And it was deeply unfair that the one woman who made him want to flirt was his wife, who also made him want to be mean.

Because she had hurt him.

Except it was hard to hold on to that truth when she was so fucking soft, right in front of him. Not going anywhere, not fighting him back.

Offering him...what?

A final taste?

Could he have her, if he knew he’d have to let her go again?

No.

He couldn’t seriously indulge this fantasy.

He needed...

*Fuck.*

His instinct to be meaner, to push harder, was wrong. He knew it was wrong, but he couldn’t think of a better plan, other than grabbing her and kissing her. And that was impossible, so he lashed out with the most effective weapon he had.

He raked his gaze down her body. Under his flannel shirt, she was wearing a silky top and a tight pair of jeans that looked painted on to the body he’d once claimed for himself.

He let his attention linger there, and let the heat swarming around inside

him slide out in a slow, dirty smile. “There is definitely a part of me that would do absolutely anything to be inside you again. If I could make a deal with the devil to have you in my bed again, I would take it.”

She gasped. But she didn’t step back. She leaned in, her breath warm against his face. “And in this scenario, am I the devil?”

No, the devil in this case was wholly of his own making. Inside him.

He caught her hand again, her warm little wrist, and pressed it against the heavy bulge behind his fly. “This feel like I’m blaming you for anything anymore?”

“You don’t really want me.” Her words were soft and disbelieving.

“I don’t want to *love* you. I definitely still want to fuck you.”

MONICA FROZE.

And that was a mistake.

She should do something outrageous, like squeeze his cock through his jeans and press up on her toes. Kiss him. Steal something soft and good from his mouth, and shut him up. Because he couldn't mean that. Josh wasn't that cruel. He was that wounded, however. He'd shown her that over and over again.

All she could do was gawk at him, and after a long beat, he stepped back, letting go of her wrist.

"Maybe let me do some work here on my own, eh?" His casual tone gave her whiplash, and she jerked away.

Mumbling something that she hoped sounded like agreement, she escaped upstairs. To the warmth, so she could yank off his flannel shirt. To the quiet, so she could think about how that conversation went so...wrong.

And why it felt strangely right.

*I definitely still want to fuck you.* She squirmed, hating how good-bad that made her feel. The white hot slice of regret lancing straight through all of her favourite memories of Josh's mouth, his hands, his body stretched out above her.

The way he always made it good for her.

If he just *fucked* her, he might not even care about that now.

To distract herself, she dug out her phone and put on a racing podcast, but she couldn't focus on it. Talk of engines just made her think of thick thighs crouched down beside a car, and hot, slow gazes rolling in her direction. *I definitely still want to fuck you.*

She didn't need him, or his complicated desire, or his big, brawny body. She had her fingers and a wide selection of steamy audiobooks to listen to. Some with multiple heroes, all of whom were deeply in love with the heroine, even when she made some pretty stupid mistakes.

And some had magical peens that could go all night.

*Josh went all night, more than once.* Yeah, but that was in the past.

And she couldn't forget that the deliciously shocking line about wanting to fuck her was preceded by another that made her so, so mad.

*I don't want to love you.*

Yeah, no fucking shit.

That was why she couldn't kiss him. Because that was a mean, jerky thing to say, worse than calling her princess.

She paced back and forth in his living room. Then she stopped and glared at his couch, which was in her way. She could see why he'd put it where he did—it was centred in front of the TV, which was centred on the longest wall—but it really foreshortened the whole space.

If he moved the TV a third of the way down the wall, closer to the front window, and balanced it with something else beside it...maybe a bookshelf?...then the couch could move down and the kitchen space would open way up.

There would actually be room for an island, instead of the rinky dink little table he had.

She shoved at the couch. Stupid men. Stupid—

The couch slid, and easily at that.

It was lighter than it looked.



She pushed again, and it glided across the floor without almost any resistance.

Grinning, she moved it almost all the way to the wall. Then she turned her attention to the TV, which looked wall mounted.

She couldn't take it off the wall, but maybe... She peered behind it, feeling lucky. And yes, it hinged. She pivoted it enough that the couch could still see it—and then that gave her an even better idea for the couch, to go on a bit of an angle.

It didn't make the apartment any less dark. Or dated.

But it opened up the space in the middle, and she had a feeling that to survive one more night sharing a few hundred square feet with Josh, they would need all the space she could create.

Then she dug into his closets, looking for a vacuum cleaner, because she'd unearthed more than a few dust bunnies in her rearranging.

And finally, she stretched out on the couch, feeling every inch of her sore muscles.

Time for a well-earned nap.

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JOSH IGNORED the alarming sound of furniture shoving around above him. He ignored the growl of his vacuum cleaner.

But the silence that followed was harder to ignore.

He was trying to build a list of restomod options for Betsy, and all he could think about was how unhinged he'd become about Monica—including, but not limited to, the fact that he was building a fucking list of ways to turn Betsy into a sleeper car for non-existent drag races he wasn't going to enter in.

He was only wearing a t-shirt and work pants, not full coveralls, and the garage wasn't well-insulated, but he was sweating.

He dragged his shirt against his torso, then snapped his notebook shut.

Maybe he should just go upstairs and see what was wrong, why she'd stopped whatever angry re-arranging she was doing.

And probably have a shower. Alone.

He laughed at himself. A desperate, groaning kind of laugh. After the way she stood toe-to-toe with him, calling him on his bullshit, it was definitely going to be alone.

For the rest of his miserable life.

Another self-inflicted injury. He was batting a thousand against himself in this whole "sleepover with the wife".

He locked up the garage and headed upstairs. Opened the door—and did a double take.

His couch was missing.

No, not missing.

It was...on a weird angle. And shoved in the corner.

But it made his apartment look bigger, in a strange way. And the sleeping woman stretched out across it definitely made his apartment look better.

Hell, she actually *made* it better.

And he'd been a jerk to her, again.

Quietly, he grabbed a blanket and covered her up. She squirmed, and he froze, but she stayed asleep.

Exhaling, he tiptoed away.

---

MONICA WOKE up to a mouthwatering scent.

Stretching, she blinked her eyes open. Josh was in the kitchen, cooking. He'd changed, and a soft-looking sweater stretched over his broad back. Dark jeans clung to his legs. Thick work socks covered his feet, and his hair looked freshly washed.

It was a scene from her long-ago fantasies of a domestic life of bliss, and it took her breath away.

She couldn't let her heart—or her memories—go there. Her head knew would only hurt. *I don't want to love you.*

Taking a deep breath, she asked, “What time is it?”

He glanced back. “Six.”

She'd slept the entire afternoon away. She tried to scramble up off the couch, but her back and neck protested so hard she gasped and froze.

Josh put down the wooden spoon he was holding and crossed to her, his face tight with concern. “What is it?”

“Just...” She hunched her shoulders up. “The consequences of my own actions making themselves heard.”

Tightening her core, she pushed up more carefully this time. Josh caught her elbow and braced his other hand in the small of her back.

*I don't want to love you. I definitely still want to fuck you.*

She shouldn't think about that. It was said in the heat of a moment, and that moment had passed.

He found her pills and brought her a glass of water. He set it on the table, then helped her ease into a chair.

“Thanks. I'm more sore than I was this morning, oh my God.”

“Hopefully this is the worst of it, then.” He stepped back, giving her space, but his gaze lingered on her shoulders. “Would a shoulder rub help?”

She made a face.

He laughed.

“No laughing,” she muttered, her sides hurting.

He sobered up immediately. “I promise to make it as clinical as humanly possible.”

She shook her head slightly. Just a little, because any more would twinge too much. “Thank you, but I'm okay.”

“You look okay. Really comfortable.” He gave her another worried look,

then returned to cooking.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Stew.”

“It smells good. Can I help?”

“You can sit there and wait for the painkillers to kick in.”

Which took almost exactly as long as it took for him to finish adding stuff to the stew.

As he put a lid on the pot and turned to say, “I’ll let that simmer for an hour,” she rolled her neck and said, “I think the good stuff just started working again.”

He gave her a relieved smile. “Good.”

And then his phone, which was sitting on the table near her, started playing a song about Saturday night. Loudly.

“Sorry,” he muttered, snatching it and stabbing at the screen. “That’s my hockey alarm.”

“It’s Sunday night,” she teased.

“Saturday night vibes can happen on Sunday sometimes, too.” He tapped on the screen. “Just gotta tell the group chat that I’m not watching tonight.”

As he was typing, the lights flickered, then the power cut out. The light coming in through the window was dim, but enough to illuminate the room softly.

Josh cursed under his breath. “I was waiting for that to happen.”

Monica glanced around. Without the hum of the fridge or the tick of his electric stove, the apartment was suddenly very quiet.

“I have a generator,” he said. “It’ll kick on automatically in a minute.”

Sure enough, after a few seconds of silence, the generator outside started up with a low hum, and the lights flickered back to life.

Josh went around and turned them all off, leaving only the stove and the fridge drawing power.

Monica let out a breath she’d been holding. “For a minute there, I thought

we might be in trouble.”

“It might not look like much, but I’ve got the basics covered here.” He crossed the room to look out the window. “This storm just doesn’t want to stop, does it?”

Monica carefully followed. “It would be very pretty if—”

He glanced down at her. “If it wasn’t keeping you from whoever you need to get back to?”

She resisted an eye roll. “It’s not *get back to*.”

“Ah, but there is someone?”

A high-maintenance bride. “A friend from school.”

“College?”

“Boarding school.” She lifted her chin in the direction of outside. “This isn’t that foreign to me, you know.”

“That’s right. Skiing in the Alps every Wednesday.”

“The Swiss take sports education very seriously.”

“Very.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“I’m reacting to the idea that weekly downhill skiing—in the *Alps*—is a regular gym class.”

They were quiet for a moment, and the wind chose that moment to howl extra hard. It made her even more grateful to be inside, safe and warm, with Josh taking care of her. Even with his reactions to her boarding school experience.

“I have snowshoes,” he said suddenly, breaking the silence. “It’s not quite the same as skis, but—”

“Yes.”

“It’s harder than it looks. A real workout. So maybe not tonight.”

Tomorrow, if the universe was willing, she’d be gone. “No, tonight is... it’s perfect out there. Let’s do it. I could use some fresh air.”

He glanced to where her boots were sitting by the door. “Those aren’t

made for snowshoeing.”

They weren't heels, so she didn't see the problem.

“They're not warm enough. Take the girl out of the Alps for a few years —”

“Almost seven years—”

“And how quickly she forgets.” He ignored her correction. “What size are you?”

“Eight.”

He fired off a text message. Less than a minute later, just long enough for her to lose herself in the snow globe out the window again, he had a reply. “Yeah, as I thought, August wears eight and a half. That's probably close enough for our purposes. You can wear an extra pair of socks. You want anything else from a house with two girls in it?”

“Who's August?” The question burst out of her.

She knew the sisters-in-law by name. There was no August.

“My neighbour across the street.”

Monica hated—*hated*—the spike of whatever feeling *that* was. A neighbour across the street, and he knew her shoe size?

“Can't think of anything,” she said breezily, even as a certain snow globe-loving part of her whispered, *do they have any hot chocolate?*

“All right, I'll be right back.”

THE NEXT THING Monica saw was Josh striding across the parking lot below the window like a man on a mission. He disappeared into the swirling white chaos.

Minutes ticked by, and then he returned, emerging from the storm like a ghost, his parka zipped up around his face. He had a heavy-looking bag clutched to his chest.

Then his footsteps were on the stairs, and he burst through the door, snowflakes flinging off him in all directions. “All right,” he said, slightly out of breath, his gaze a little fierce as he locked on her face. “Got you some boots. You sure you’re up for this?”

“Movement is good for stiff muscles?” She shrugged. “I just want to try.”

“Then we will try.”

He bundled her up in one of his parkas, a wool beanie that he made her call a *toque*—“because that’s what it’s called in Canada, don’t be a brat”—and a pair of heavy duty gloves.

She tried very hard not to react to the warm tease of him telling her not to be a brat.

She failed, and was all warm and squirmy as they tromped down the stairs to the garage. He dug out two different kinds of snowshoes, then pushed the door open and she stepped out into the snow-covered parking lot.

The snow was still falling heavily, but Monica was dressed for it. Josh had done a good job outfitting her for a little adventure. She'd forgotten how much she loved being out in the snow.

Josh set the shoes down and knelt at her feet. "Have you ever worn these before?"

"First time."

"It's worth it to get the fit just right." He explained what he was doing with the buckles, getting the fit just right. "How does that feel? Nice and secure?"

She wiggled her foot and the shoe moved with her. "Yep."

He squeezed her calf. "Good."

Then he stood up and quickly put the older pair on himself, and took a few steps. "Like this."

She crunched forward. The snow had a bit of ice in it, but the webbed shoes cut through the top surface no problem. "Okay, got it."

He grinned. "Let's go see the lake."

The windows on the top floor of the marina across the street glowed with warm light—they had a generator, too, Monica assumed—but the street lights were out, and it felt like they were all alone in this little pocket at the bottom of the hill.

Josh led the way, turning back every so often to check she was following his tracks. He crossed to the north side of the street in front of the garage, where there was an empty parking lot, and then across the snow-drift covered road that ran around the harbour.

"This is a beach in the summer," Josh said.

Other than that brief explanation, the only sounds that broke the peaceful silence of the snow-covered night were the crunch of their snowshoes and, after they crossed the road and were closer to the lake, the faint splash of waves breaking on rocks.

As they walked, Monica savoured each chilly inhale of fresh air. Even



though her legs were protesting the effort a bit, it felt like good work for them. And for the first time in days, she wasn't thinking about her necessary divorce, or Amira's wedding, or the complicating mess of getting into an accident. She was just enjoying the moment. And, she hated to admit, the quiet company of the man beside her.

If only everything had been different, this could have been their life.

Maybe they wouldn't have lasted either way. But she regretted that she never had a chance to be his wife.

And then she slept through part of what might be the only ordinary day of their entire marriage.

Oh regret, she knew it so well. On many levels.

"You weren't kidding about this being exercise." She was properly out of breath.

"Could be worse. I grew up doing military-style training on them—wearing loaded packs and pulling toboggans of supplies."

"Oh, wow."

He made a gruff, quiet sound that he probably didn't realize carried over the still air. "I think Owen and Will did it to scare us off joining the army. I guess it worked."

She knew Josh was the only one of his brothers who hadn't joined the military. When he first told her about his family, she had assumed that he was happy with that choice.

Now she caught a bittersweet edge that made her wonder.

He glanced sideways. "Don't go digging for more to that story."

They stopped near a rocky retaining wall. The sun was down now, the lake a dark, rolling mass of water. If she looked up, she could see snow falling from the sky, but it disappeared somewhere just above the water's surface.

"I love the lake in the winter," Josh said quietly. "It freezes, but then it thaws, and we get another few storms, and it's just kind of..."

Magical.

And tonight, it was all theirs.

She smiled. “How could you tell I wanted to immediately ask more about the army stuff?”

“You’re constantly curious.” He narrowed his gaze, like he was searching for something in the dark, out on the water. “I’ve always liked that. Don’t take it as a criticism.”

“Comes from being an only child. I was deprived of other people’s stories.”

“What about your boarding school friends? The ones you’re going to meet up with when you leave here?”

“Promise not to tease?”

He groaned. “Oh God.” He cleared his throat and seemed to fix his gaze firmly out on the water. “What?”

“It’s a wedding. In two weeks, but there’s a bit of a lead up to the main event.”

He nodded. “Okay. Fun.”

“In Italy.”

His head pauses mid-nod. “Ah.” His lips twitch. “Tuscany, I presume?”

“No comment.”

His whole mouth slowly curled into a rueful but knowing smile. “Sounds fun. Got a date?”

She hesitated.

He rolled his head sideways and raised his eyebrows.

“No!” She huffed and made a face at him. “No date. I just wasn’t sure if admitting that was better or not. There’s no chance of a date. I’m a nun now. All work and no play.”

His expression didn’t change, and he didn’t look away. Finally, quietly, he said, “Same, by the way.”

“You’re tall for a nun,” she muttered.

He laughed under his breath.

She turned around in a slow circle. “Would you normally hear traffic from the town?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah. And see lights, too.”

“How long do you think the power will be out?”

“Not sure. Maybe a few hours. I can check on my phone when we get back. The hydro company has an outage map on their website.”

Hydro. Sometimes he sounded so Canadian. “It’s like the whole world has just...stopped.”

“Totally different than Los Angeles or New York City, eh?”

“I know.” She burrowed deeper into his parka. The cold was starting to permeate. “I sort of love it, though.”

“It’s nice for a day.”

She slide a look across at him. “Then...why you’re still here, three years later? And not in another city somewhere?”

“Dunno.” He shrugged. “Truly, I don’t.”

“Can I say something you might not like?”

“Sure.”

“I saw a lot of love for this town in your TikTok content.”

He squinted up at the sky. “You watched a lot of it?”

“You know how the algorithm is. Once you accidentally click on your ex’s videos, they just sort of...appear.” And then if you watched them again and again, the algorithm served even more.

“Did you ever get into that? Become a content creator?”

Was her whole body shudder answer enough?

He laughed. “No?”

“God, no.”

“Why not?”

Because she knew she would only ever feel the sting of criticism and rejection. And there was no existing in the public space without that. “I don’t

know, exactly.”

A cop out, but she couldn't bring herself to admit the truth.

Josh looked like he accepted it, though. Then he frowned. “That’s probably enough of a snow and fresh air fix, yeah?”

Monica nodded, reluctantly turning back toward the garage. She didn’t want the walk to end.

Slowly, they plodded back.

She wish she’d brought her phone with her, because the garage looked pretty great surrounded by the freshly fallen snow. Maybe once Josh was done being bitter about the internet, she could suggest it to him as a brand image. She bet Pine Harbour had no shortage of snow storms to take that photo in.

Back inside, Josh guided her through the garage and up the stairs with a flashlight. Then as soon as he flipped the flashlight to a lantern mode, he snatched off her beanie.

“Hands off my toque,” she protested.

“My toque,” he corrected. “Your borrowing privileges ended as soon as we stepped inside.”

She reached for it, and he held it up over his head.

“Hey!” She couldn’t lift her arms up that high even when she wasn’t suffering from sore muscles. “Meanie.”

“I’ll make it up to you with dinner.” He gestured to her—his—parka. “Unless you also want me to reclaim that immediately.”

She shooed him away.

The laugh under his breath before he busied himself at the stove did dangerous things inside her chest.

By the time she joined him at the table, he’d lit a couple of emergency candles that had clearly been used a few times before. They were gnarled with knobs of melted wax down the sides and at the base, and he didn’t have a single candlestick for them. One went in a mason jar, another was wedged

into a terra cotta pot.

But the soft glow was cozy and perfect in its imperfection, casting flickering shadows on the walls, and the bowl of stew Josh set in front of her smelled amazing.

“Dig in,” Josh said. “I’m just going to grab my phone and check the outage map.”

She knew it would be polite to wait, but her stomach was trying to turn itself inside out to get at the stew. So as she watched him cross to where he’d left his phone, she lifted the spoon to her mouth...and moaned around the first bite.

Josh pivoted on his heel.

Candlelight was the best and worst way to see one’s ex respond to what could only be described a sex noise, triggered by food they made you.

His brows lifted and the corner of his mouth quirked up. “Good?”

“Very,” she mumbled.

“Excellent.” He grabbed his own bowl, sat across from her, then tapped on the screen of his phone. “Big outage area, all the way to the highway. A crew is on site, apparently. Estimated time to power being restored is ninety minutes.”

“So we don’t need to share a sleeping bag all night to conserve heat?” She was teasing, but the idea of pressing their bodies together—for safety—made her squirm. She shouldn’t go there.

“For the best,” Josh said dryly.

She wrapped her hands around the bowl. “I’ve got this stew to keep me warm.” And then she yawned. “God, sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You need your rest.” He gestured to her bowl. “Eat as much or as little as you want, and then crawl into bed. I’ve got extra blankets if you need them.”

“I’m eating all of this.” But after another few bites, she yawned again.

“Maybe the snowshoeing was too much.” Concern laced his words.

“No,” she protested. Yes, her eyelids felt heavy and her eyes were scratchy. But the walk was nice. “I might be ready for bed soon, though.”

“You can take the lantern with you. It’s an LED flashlight. You can leave it on all night and it won’t run out of battery.”

“And leave you out here homesteading with the candles?”

He held up his phone. “I have a full battery. I’ll watch the last period of the hockey game.”

“Just like the pioneers did.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ve never seen a hockey game. You could put it on if you want?”

“You don’t mind?” He told her about his niece’s fiancé as they finished eating, and explained how hockey has three twenty-minute periods of play, and right now there were colour commentators on the video on his phone, so he turned the volume down and gave her the Josh commentary instead.

Most of it went over her head, but she knew they were cheering for the Hamilton Highlanders.

“The cheer is sometimes, *Go Boars Go*, because their mascot is a wild boar.”

“How aggressive.”

“A bagpipe-playing wild boar.”

She laughed out loud. “How...hilarious? Is it supposed to be funny?”

“There’s a strong Scottish tradition in Hamilton. I think it’s supposed to walk the line of honouring that and also being cute.”

“Go Boars Go,” she murmured.

He nodded solemnly. “Exactly.”

They finished their meal, then Josh pointed Monica to the couch while he cleared the table and quickly did the dishes. She curled up on the couch, snuggling into the blanket that had appeared while she was asleep in the afternoon.

The commentators chirped from Josh’s phone, a steady hum of hockey

lingo that Monica could definitely doze off to, in a good way.

Then, just as it sounded like the game started again, Josh appeared next to her juggling two steaming mugs, and his phone precariously pinched against the bottom of one of the mugs in a long-fingers-only kind of move.

She knew that delicious scent. “Hot chocolate?”

He’d read her mind.

“Gotta keep you warm,” he said, carefully sitting down beside her, their bodies barely touching.

She gratefully took one of the mugs, and he flipped the phone around so they could both see the screen.

As she sipped her hot chocolate, she tried to follow the puck, but that quickly proved impossible. Then she picked a Highlander at random to follow around the screen until he went to the bench. That worked better, and she happily them skate and crash into the other team and sometimes shoot the puck, until her cocoa was almost all gone and her eyelids grew heavy again.

Josh took her mug, and she stretched out, sleeping tugging her under. The last thing she felt before she drifted off was his hand curling around her calf, a reassuring pressure followed by a muted grunt of enthusiasm for something that happened in the game.

JOSH WASN'T sure how he'd earned the last two hours with Monica. No tension, no fighting. Something that would feel like a friendship, if it weren't for the ever-present hum of an attraction that—isolated from everything else—didn't feel nearly as inconvenient as it should.

Like Monica had noted, it felt like the whole world had stopped, if only for a few hours, and he'd latched on to that opportunity for his internal turmoil to stop, too.

Fuck it.

Life was short and he liked his wife way too much to not just soak up her joy.

And take care of her a little.

Stew. A walk. Hot chocolate.

And now her feet were in his lap, and his hockey team was about to win. If he could bottle this feeling and never let it go...

He tightened his hold on her ankle.

She squirmed into the blanket.

She was wearing thick socks, pulled up over the bottom hem of her jeans. When the game went to a commercial break, he dropped his attention to the layers of fabric there.

He had an overwhelming urge to slide his thumb into her sock and find



her bare ankle—which was some fucking Puritan level horny thinking, how much he'd love to stroke her *foot*. Inside her *sock*.

But there was his cock, thickening at the image.

*You cannot molest your sleeping wife's ankle, Kincaid.*

And then to prove that it was a moment worthy of disrupting, the streetlight outside flickered back to life. The power was back. The world was no longer on pause.

His pulse thudded in his neck as he watched the last three minutes of the game on his phone, not bothering to turn on the TV.

Then he carefully extricated himself from under Monica's legs. He thought about leaving her on the couch, and taking the bed, but if she woke up in the middle of the night, he wanted her to be in the more comfortable spot.

"Hey, sleepyhead," he murmured. "Time to go to bed."

"Mmkay." She pushed up slowly, her eyes staying closed.

He helped her stand and pointed her towards the bedroom. She moved, wobbling, so he kept his hands on her upper arms and guided her all the way to his bed.

She went to crawl right into it, and he stopped her. "Want to get changed?"

"Mmkay." She pulled her top up, baring a pale slice of belly.

"Whoa there, princess." He stopped her. Then he grabbed the t-shirt and shorts she slept in the night before and dropped them on the bed. "There you go."

"Gotta...wash my face." She lazily snatched up the shorts and tee and swanned out the door for the bathroom.

He took her absence as a quick opportunity to put on more comfortable sleep clothes himself, peeling off his warm sweater for the tee beneath it, and swapping out his jeans for a pair of sweatpants.

Then he almost collided with her in the doorway.

Her fingers tangled in the front of his shirt, holding on for dear life.

“All right, into bed.” He turned them around and pointed her at the pillow where her head would be safe.

“You too.” As she slid onto his bed, her hand caught his and she held on, pulling him part way down with her.

He caught himself, his arm straight, braced next to her body. “Mon—”

“You called me princess again,” she muttered, shifting over. “You owe me one.”

He could lay next to her until she fell asleep, he supposed. For the slip up on the nickname she hated. That sounded fair.

“Tell me about the hockey player.” She stretched out, staring up at the ceiling.

He rolled onto his back, stretching out beside her, and folded his outside arm up behind his head. “When I moved back, I found out Becca was pregnant. Owen was not happy. That was a whole thing, because my brother wasn't ready to be a grandpa. Probably most people wouldn't be, in his shoes. And he didn't approve of the kid—that's what he called Hayden. The kid. And...a few other more colourful names.”

Monica laughed. “I can imagine.”

“Obviously, I'm no expert on how to do relationships. But we didn't have high hopes. It seemed messy at the time. My role as an uncle is to be worried and threaten to kick ass when necessary.”

“Tell me you didn't beat up a teenager.”

He chuckled. “No, it didn't come to that. He started showing up for her and their son in the way they needed him to. And now...the kid has turned into a bonafide NHL star. She's proud of him. He's really devoted to her and their child. So the whole town is, you know— Now we like the guy.”

“And he plays for a team you like?”

“I'd like whatever team he was on. This is his second team. The first team, the one that gave him a try out contract—they were in a rebuilding

phase, and he was a trading token to them. But it worked out, because they traded him to a team that's just a few hours from here. And the first team they weren't contenders. But now his team plays like every game matters and it looks like they might actually make the playoffs if they just keep winning."

"So you want to watch his game and cheer him on."

He shrugged. "It's as good as any way to fill my evenings, especially now that winter soccer is over and the fields are too wet to play on."

"And covered in snow."

He laughed. "That's only for a few days. But it takes forever for all that melted snow to drain away. I won't play again until May."

"Soccer, huh?"

"Yeah. I play on a couple of different teams. depends on the time of year. Right now, we just finished an indoor season. Getting ready for the spring training."

"A *couple* of teams?" She glanced sideways, and he felt her gaze rake over his chest, his arms. An investigative, assessing perusal he felt like a touch. He resisted the urge to flex. It wasn't like that. "That's hardcore."

He liked to keep busy.

"Can I ask about the garage?"

"Aren't you supposed to be going to sleep?"

"I slept all afternoon." But she yawned anyway. "See? I'm tired."

"And nosy."

"Curious. Someone told me they liked that."

He smiled despite himself. "Ask about the garage."

"Do you have another location? Keep any vehicles anywhere else?"

"Not really. Will and I both have muscle cars that we put away for the winter, but I don't...I'm not at the point of needing a warehouse." He winced at that not-exactly-accurate fib. "I won't need one, actually. This isn't the kind of business I once dreamed of. That's how life goes sometimes."

He was proud of himself for saying all of that as casually as can be.

Monica was quiet for a minute. “So you can’t drive your Gran Torino in the winter here?”

And his casual vibe shattered like a wine glass hitting concrete. “Don’t have that one anymore.”

“Oh. Did you sell it?”

His jaw tightened. “Yep.”

He traded it for a ’71 Cutlass sedan on the way back to Canada. He hadn’t wanted to keep the car they’d had sex in, kissed in, laughed in...and then broke up in.

He liked the Cutlass just fine, but there were days when he regretted selling the Torino. Nights when all he wanted was to stretch out on that backseat and remember.

And that was why he filled both his days and nights with anything and everything.

“I don’t think you like it when I say I’m sorry,” she whispered. “But I am.”

“Don’t feel like you have to keep saying it,” he grated.

“But—”

“It doesn’t make anything better.” He said it as softly as he could. “I loved you so fucking much. And you changed your mind.”

Carefully, gingerly, she brushed the knuckles of her close arm against his, where it lay between their bodies.

He tensed, but didn’t move away.

“I need to tell you something. I will try to do it without words that, okay, I acknowledge won’t make anything better.” She let out a watery laugh. “Oh, this is the worst possible moment to do this. Fuck.”

Ironically, hearing her swear made him feel marginally better. Not great, but it was something to know his posh, well-educated wife was reduced to crude reaction words due to their circumstances. “Is there going to be a better moment?”

She didn't say anything.

He glanced sideways, and fuck. Her eyes were swimming with unshed tears. With a twist of his hand, he caught two of her fingers with his. "Then just say it."

"I was pretty naive. About immigration, and work visas. Remember when I thought we should just get married, so you could have a green card? And you were like, that's not how that works."

Something in his chest pinched, like a cramp in his heart. "Yeah."

"When we got back from Bali, my father..."

Acid rose in Josh's throat. "What did he say to you?"

"He didn't...it wasn't him who came to see me." She groaned, a frustrated, scared sound. Part sob, part growl. "When I returned from Arizona, I was met at the airport by agents the government. An investigator and a lawyer, they said. They'd received an anonymous tip that I was fraudulently trying to help one of my father's employees get permanent status through marriage..." Her whole body shook, for a second. "It was terrifying. And they warned me I couldn't communicate with you about the investigation."

His brain felt like it had been flooded with ice water, and he was hearing her from a distance. "Your father set it up," he said, his words sharp. "They probably weren't—"

"They were legit. I checked them out." Her voice was small, and sad, but sure. "I had those same thoughts. And now...of course, I know *now* that my father was behind it. But the first thing I did was call a lawyer, and they put a halt to the conversation, and then confirmed the tip was real. And then my father showed up. In that moment..." Emotion clogged her words briefly, but then she continued. "I was terrified. And he said all the right things to the agents to make them go away. Then he promised me he could protect you, if we got an annulment. If we did that, then it would be like the violation never happened. He assured me that money could fix this, and you wouldn't be in

trouble and could keep working.”

As her story spilled out, Josh felt himself turn to stone. Her two fingers were still hooked over his, and she felt warm and real and desperate for him to believe her.

And he did.

It all made sense now.

But he couldn't squeeze her fingers and reassure her that he understood, because he didn't.

He didn't understand why she wouldn't have told him.

*She was twenty-one.*

He didn't understand why it took this long—

But then he did. He saw it.

His voice sounded like it was pure gravel when he finally spoke. “When you found out we were still married, you knew the investigation couldn't have been serious. Because if it had been real, we'd have been in deep trouble a long time ago.”

“Yes.”

He slowly, carefully, rolled away from her and swung his legs off the bed. “You must be angry with your father.”

He felt her shift on the bed, getting up behind him. “I was already angry with him, Josh. I had been for a long time. This? This is a betrayal that I wish I'd seen three years ago. And all I can say is, I see it now. So I want to make things right. And in a way...this is better.”

He laughed hollowly. “How on earth is this better?”

“California is a community property state.” Six solemn words. Quiet. Clearly considered.

This is what she'd come all this way to say to him.

She wanted a divorce...not for her own reasons. But for his.

“No,” he said, not caring that his voice was hard and cold and awful. Of all the thoughts rocketing around in his head right now, *no* was the kindest

thing he could possibly say.

At the end of the day, if she thought she could buy him off, she was no different than her father.

“MONEY,” Josh said slowly. “You want to buy me off.”

“No.” Monica’s stomach went into free fall as he shoved to his feet and stalked out of the bedroom.

She scrambled off the bed and followed. “Josh—”

“Go back to bed.”

“No.”

He yanked the blanket off the couch, then stopped and whirled around, glaring at her. “Why did you move my couch?”

She gaped at him.

“There was nothing wrong with where I put it.” He hooked his hand over the arm of the couch and hauled it savagely back to where it was. “You don’t need to come here and fix anything. You don’t need to save me. I’m fine.”

“Are you? I’m not.”

He shrugged, as if to say, *I don’t care.*

And she hated that she’d done that to him, to them. To herself.

“Look, Josh—”

“I really don’t want to talk about this tonight. Or ever. We will get a divorce. I will not accept any settlement from you.”

“It’s the least I can do—”

“No it’s fucking not,” he roared. “The least you could have done was



*nothing*. And instead you *lied to me*, worse than I ever could have imagined. And all of that was made possible by your father's wealth and privilege. So you'll understand why I don't want a cent of his fortune."

"It's not *his* fortune. It was, technically, my grandfather's fortune," Monica said, desperate to not let this spin completely out of control. "But I'm not even talking about any of that. I'm talking about *my* money, which isn't really a fortune, exactly. The money I have earned over the last three years was earned inside our marriage. California is a community property state. Ergo, you're entitled to half of *my* property."

"I don't want your fucking *property*," Josh snarled.

All the work and effort of the last thirty hours...it was as if it had never happened.

He hated her, and she deserved it.

"But you wanted seed money. You wanted a restoration garage with staff and you wanted—"

"I wanted a lot of things. Now, I just want to move on."

"I don't believe you." Fuck it. If he was already mad at her, again, then there was nothing to lose. "I don't think either of us are ready to move on. When I look at you, all I see is what we didn't get to have. Days and nights together. The careers we dreamed of. Adventure and family and—"

"You've landed on your feet." He shrugged again, and his voice was cool now. Careful. "What part of your career isn't what you dreamed of?"

She swallowed hard. "I'll never take over Fischer Racing. That door is closed."

Josh's brows slammed together, his cool expression turning furious. "Why?"

"The company is going public. The board will hire the next CEO."

"But you—" He stopped and scrubbed both his hands over his face. "Your father fucked you over, too."

She nodded, slightly. This wasn't about her. "It's fine."

“It’s *not*.”

“I’m a shareholder. I have a seat on the board. That is my birthright.” Her voice cracked, and she yanked herself back together. “Nothing more was ever guaranteed.”

“Jesus.” He stared at her, his gaze dark and searching and judging.

She’d never felt more vulnerable. “That wasn’t why I left you.”

Would he believe her?

“But you let me think it was.”

She had to make him think the worst of her. It was the only way he would leave.

A muscle twitched on his temple. “That’s quite the act of self-sabotage.”

“I thought I was keeping you out of jail,” she snapped. “Love made me stupid, I guess.”

He rolled his shoulders and nodded. “Yeah.”

Silence stretched.

He didn’t say anything else, and she didn’t know what to add, to bridge this tense gap between them.

Finally he jerked his head towards his bedroom. “Go to bed. Please.”

---

JOSH’S DREAMS were weird fragments.

It started with Monica offering to help him restore Betsy.

“How long will it take?” she asked, not looking at him. “To turn Betsy into what you want her to be?”

“How long can you stay?”

And then she disappeared, right in front of him, and he was alone in his garage.

A flash of sunlight blinded him, and then he was in a Tuscan olive grove, looking for her. She wasn’t anywhere to be found, but he kept catching the

scent of her hair. He knew if he kept looking, he'd find her.

But when he did, he was suddenly in California, watching her flirt with a driver. Their hands tangling together, her leading him out of the room like Josh wasn't even there. And then the door slammed shut.

His eyes flicked open.

It was dark, and the apartment was quiet.

Chest heaving, he sat up and quietly padded to the kitchen for a glass of water. He didn't bother to turn the lights on. He knew where everything was.

But he wasn't alone, being awake in the middle of the night.

In the shadows of his kitchen, he could make out a pair of legs.

"Just having a drink," Monica said quietly. She shifted sideways, propping her hip against the counter.

And then she held out her mason jar.

He glanced past her to the cupboard. Then he slid his gaze back to her extended hand. He couldn't see her face. That was in shadows. But she was offering him a drink, which is why he'd come in here, and if his chest tightened as he took it from her hand.

They'd had an extra twenty-four hours together, and only a handful had been good. The Josh of three years ago would be disgusted with the temper tantrums today.

The Josh of three years ago would take the glass from his wife, set it on the counter, and drink directly from her lips.

All he could manage tonight was taking the glass, not grunting when his fingers slid against hers, and then gripping it like his life depended on never letting it go.

She shifted again, sliding down the counter. Moving more into the corner, deeper into the shadows. He took a big gulp of water, then swallowed it slowly, his eyes adjusting to the dark. Searching for her.

And his grip on the glass eased.

Because he found her, and her eyes were huge. Searching right back.

He took another sip, and handed it back.

She gave him a small smile and turned it around, then lifted it to her mouth. Paused for a beat, her lips pressed where his had just been, and then she took a long, slow drink. She drained the glass, then twisted and set it down on the counter. Her hair tumbled around her face, and that tight feeling in his chest jolted. Hard.

Is this what it would feel like to watch her leave in the morning.

*No, that will be a million times worse.*

She lifted her head, and the vice grip around his heart eased.

A million times worse was an understatement.

At his side, his hands flexed, and then he surged forward, and she pushed off the counter, and his hands were in her hair. He bowed his head and touched his forehead to hers.

She breathed his name.

“Kiss me,” he said on a desperate exhale, and before he finished the demand, she pushed up and her lips claimed his.

This was the rush of cool water he’d been craving. Pure oxygen, and as if every part of his body had been in stasis, waiting to be revived. Waiting for his wife.

He groaned against her and deepened the kiss, tasting her sweetness, her soft mouth, her clever tongue that made his head swim. She kissed him right back, swallowing everything pouring out of him. His need, his want, his desire, and even, God damn it, his fear. Her arms came up around his neck, and as he curved over her, she gave him more.

She gave him toughness. Tension coiled in her body, giving me something to steel his arms around. A little fight, but the good kind. A tussle for who was leading this kiss, who was in charge.

And then an explosion, as he hoisted her up on the kitchen counter and dragged her hips right to the edge, so he could wedge himself between her legs and make it crystal clear just how much she still made his body burn.

---

MONICA WAS ON FIRE, and she loved it. In Josh's arms, with his mouth consuming her and his hips perfectly positioned between her thighs, she could trick her brain into thinking this was a completely different timeline. One where the last three years hadn't been filled with grief and processing and newly constructed healthy boundaries. A timeline where Josh had been her husband for years.

Because that was how right it felt for him to haul her into his arms. How right it felt to breathlessly command him to kiss her.

And the relief she felt when he did...that wasn't a fantasy timeline. That was her, right now, wanting this kiss. Even as she knew it complicated things so much.

She'd wanted this kiss for a very long time.

"Take me to bed," she whispered against his mouth.

He tightened his hold on her, skating his hands down her back to cup her ass, and he picked her up. She wound her limbs tightly around him and clung as he carried her to his bed.

It wasn't fair to do this. But it wasn't fair to either of them, and yet she knew they both needed it.

There was no right way to end a marriage that never happened. She wouldn't deny herself these final few hours in his arms.

This time, when he lay down with her, it wasn't side by side, on their backs. This time, he pulled the blankets back and tumbled on top of her, pressing her to the mattress, his hands big against her wrists. Big, strong, sure.

"I don't have any condoms." He kissed her. "We can do anything else you want, though."

"I..." She nodded, her heart in her throat. "Okay."

"It's not a line. I don't have any reason to have them."

She shook her head. They didn't need to talk about— "What?"

"Never mind. Just..." He slid his hand under her shirt and groaned. "God, you feel good. Can I...?"

"Yes. Anything." She was panting.

He reared up long enough to turn on the bedside lamp. "Want to see every inch of you."

Then he peeled the t-shirt up and bowed his head, pressing his mouth right between her breasts. His hot breath was like an electric shock and her back jolted off the mattress. He murmured something she couldn't hear over the rush of blood through her ears, something soothing, and then he cupped one breast in a hand and took the other in his mouth.

She closed her eyes and gave in to the pleasure of his tongue pulling against her nipple. Long, savouring sucks, and then a slow, wet release that sounded filthy.

Not quite as filthy as his groan as he switched sides. Not quite as filthy as the way she rocked her hips up, desperately needing contact with him everywhere. Her nipples, her bare belly, her aching, needy clit.

Panting his name, she pushed and pulled at his sweatpants until she got her hand inside. And then it was his turn to react like he'd been electrocuted when she wrapped her fingers around his heavy, solid cock.

Oh.

She sobbed with need. "Want you..."

"I've got you," he promised.

His fingers pushed up the wide leg of her shorts and found her slippery entrance, already swollen with desire.

"God damn it," he groaned, his voice hoarse. "Missed your sweet honey on my fingers."

He shifted, his fingers sliding out of her so he could lick them clean. Then he firmly removed her fingers from his cock, yanked her shorts off, and lifted her hips in his hands.

The way he paused for a moment, his eyes closed, she wasn't sure if he was going to continue. If maybe this was too much, too intimate, for a moment they were both probably trying to shove into memory banks even as it was happening.

Then he closed the gap and licked slowly between her folds, all the way to her clit. Where he stopped, inhaled deeply, and fell on her, pulling her whole sex into his mouth. Lips, clit, and dripping wet entrance, all consumed at once, before he pulled off, grinning, and found her gaze. Holding her attention like a hypnotist, he sucked each individual part of her, his gaze growing hotter and more dangerous as she rocketed towards an orgasm.

“Josh,” she pleaded.

He pressed her thighs apart, then casually spread his hand exactly where she needed it, and dropped his thumb just to the right of her clit.

Her magic spot.

Even after three years, he knew exactly how to get her off.

One well-timed roll of his thumb and she snapped her hips up off his hands, as if the orgasm he'd just given her could make her take flight.

“Yes, baby. That's it. Look at you...I love making you come.” He caught her in the air and pressed his cheek against her thigh, his breath hot against her spread wide sex. “So fucking pretty. Can you give me another one?”

“No.”

He laughed. “Yes you can.”

“Josh!” She was still twitching. “Please, let me make you come, too.”

He climbed up her body, letting her touch him again. She teased her fingers over his belly until his body went hard as a rock, until every bit of him was on edge, and then she slid her hand into his sweatpants.

The tip of his cock was wet, and she whimpered at how rewarding that was to feel against her fingers.

She missed sex so much. Making someone else come was so much more fun than getting herself off. And feeling his arousal was a promise—that if

she kept it up, she'd get a reward.

And it had been three long years since she'd had any kind of reward.

Josh braced himself above her as she slowly jerked him between their bodies. At first, her hand worked inside his sweats, but as he grew and her strokes got faster, her hand pulled him out of the soft confines, and then his pre-come started streaking against her belly.

He yanked up his shirt.

She hitched her legs higher around his hips.

He thrust his cock through the tight grip of her hand, pulling his balls up tight against her still twitching pussy.

“Fuck, I can feel how wet you are,” he whispered. “Do you know how sexy that is?”

She stroked him harder.

He braced himself on one arm, his fingers right beside her face, brushing her cheek. With the other hand, he traced down her body, pinching her nipples and then sliding down to her clit.

“Josh,” she moaned. She meant it as a warning—*please, let us be even here*—but it came out sounding like a plea. Simply *please*.

“Shhh,” he murmured, covering her mouth with his.

He slid a finger inside her, fucking her with his hand in time with his hand through her fist. Up against her belly. Wet sounds, slick sensations everywhere.

She came again, faster than she thought she could, and when her pussy clamped down on his finger and her clit pulsed heavily against his thumb, his whole body spasmed, and he spurted his release up her torso. Hot, wet stripes. Her reward, painted across her skin.

He used his shirt to clean her off, then hauled her right against him, on his side, her back against his chest.

She tangled their fingers together in front of her and kissed his knuckles, overcome by feeling.



He buried his face in her hair and inhaled. “It’s okay,” he whispered. “Go to sleep. You have a flight to catch in the morning.”

And then he took another breath, and it was shaky, but he held it together.

She didn’t feel that sure of her own ability to do the same. Hot tears slipped from her eyes and fell to the pillow, but she managed not to sob. She just let the feelings roll over her like a catastrophic wave, zero chance of escaping it. No outrunning it. Just...give in, and be pulled under.

JOSH WOKE up with his arms full of his warm, willing wife, and for a second, everything was perfect. Exactly as it should be.

And then he remembered that he had to let her go today, and nothing was as it should be.

He held his breath and pressed his face into her hair. How many times had he breathed in her scent over the night?

Not enough times.

One of his hands was splayed wide against her belly, under her shirt. His shirt, which she'd slept in for two nights. His other hand was curled possessively around the front of her neck, and his thumb was notched up onto her cheek.

She was pinned against him.

*You don't want to let her go.*

Of course he didn't.

But he'd also said terrible things to her. *I don't want to love you.* And that was still true. He wanted to be mad, because he'd lost three years with her. He'd been wronged, and he was hurt.

But she hadn't been the one who wronged him. Not really. That was her father. She'd been trying to protect him.

She stirred in his arms, her bum wiggling back against his cock. He went

from thick to hard in a second, and she must have felt it, because she swallowed nervously. Which he felt against his palm, because his hand was still possessively curled around her throat.

He couldn't ignore that she was awake.

He should let her go.

Should.

Let.

Her...

He didn't move. If anything, his grip tightened, enough to betray that he was awake as well.

She breathed in, a deep inhale, and then held it.

If they held their breath forever, maybe they would never need to leave this bed.

But that wasn't real life. At best, he could steal them a bit more time. That was it, that was all they would have.

He slid his hand from her neck, up onto her jaw, and gently pressed his index finger to her lips. "Don't wake up yet."

"Who says I'm awake?" she whispered.

Good. They could pretend, then.

Hold on to this fragile, temporary facsimile of what they'd once thought they might have. A fantasy held together only by happenstance and a freak snowstorm.

This wasn't real. But at the same time, nothing had ever felt this real. It should not feel this comfortable to be entangled in each other's arms.

There was real danger in letting this feel right. It couldn't. This was definitely still doomed. But for these final few hours, while the world around them stood still. Maybe they could—

A heavy knock interrupted his thoughts. A knock on the inside apartment door, which meant it was one of his brothers. Nobody else had a key.

"Josh!" Seth called out. "Are you guys all right?"

The world around them no longer stood still.

They broke apart and Josh dragged himself to the door, yanking on a fresh t-shirt as he stalked.

“Come on in,” he said as Seth gave him a look. “What?”

His brother had a jacket on, but it wasn't zipped up, and he looked out of breath. Instead of answering, Seth glanced past him, and Josh didn't need to look back to know Monica had stepped out of the bedroom.

Better if he didn't look at her.

“Do you have a flight window? Good weather?” Josh tried to make his voice sound neutral.

“Not exactly,” Seth said carefully. “You didn't answer your phone.”

He glanced between them a few times, like he was trying to decide who he should address. Then he shook his head and laughed. “Sorry, I'm doing this badly. I'm Seth,” he said, holding out his hand. “We didn't get introduced the other day. I'm the middle child.”

“Monica,” she said. “The only child.”

Seth chuckled. “There's probably some advantages there. Although maybe not today.”

That set off alarm bells for Josh. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the thing is...” Seth gave Monica an apologetic look. “Your mother is on her way here.”

“My...” Monica did a double take. “I'm sorry, what?”

“January and I were at the marina, having breakfast with her sister and the kids. They got a call from a sea plane company out of Toronto, looking to confirm that there was a dock big enough for their plane to tie up, and if they could refuel, because they had a last-minute charter. The customer's name is Bianca Fischer. The plane will land in fifteen minutes. January is standing by to provide a warm welcome committee and I was tasked with coming over to give you a heads up.”

Josh winced. He heard the unspoken, *and make sure you had clothes on.*

Which they did, but only barely.

And there was no chance that his brother had missed the fact Monica was wearing Josh's clothes, and not her own.

“Okay, we'll...be there. Buy us time if she lands before we arrive, okay?”

His brother nodded.

“Wait,” Monica said, her voice tinged with desperation. She winced. “Uh, my mother doesn't know about the car accident. I'd rather we don't tell her, okay?”

Seth gave her another nod, then disappeared down the stairs.

Josh turned Monica to the bedroom. She pulled off his shorts and yanked on her jeans. He grabbed a sweater of his that was a bit small, but fit her perfectly. He tugged it over her head.

Then he caught her face in his hands and kissed her. “It'll be okay.”

She squeezed his fingers with hers, holding his hands against her cheeks. “I don't know why she's coming here.”

“Because you're her only baby and you were caught in a snowstorm with your estranged husband?” He tried to say it lightly but his voice was tight.

Monica's lashes brushed her cheeks as she nodded slowly.

Yeah.

Because despite last night, and this morning, that's exactly what he was. Her estranged husband. Her angry husband.

Her soon-to-be-ex husband.

Of course her mother was worried for her.

He removed his hands from hers, then busied himself getting dressed while she disappeared into the bathroom.

When she came out, she had a full face of light makeup on, and her hair didn't look like his hands had been buried in it for hours and hours.

“You look great,” he said. An understatement. “Polished and ready to take on the world.”

“Or at least my mother.”

“Feels like the same thing.”

She laughed. “Okay.”

At the door, she zipped on her fancy leather boots, and he helped her into her down vest.

Without asking, he shoved his toque on her head. She shouldn't have cold ears, not even for fashion reasons.

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THE STORM WAS DEFINITELY OVER. There was a good amount of snow on the ground, but the sky was clear, and the weather was much warmer, probably just above freezing.

Maybe in another day or two, the snow would all melt, and it would be back to the near-spring green Monica had first seen when she drove into Pine Harbour.

As they crossed the road, two trucks and an SUV arrived like a caravan, and pulled into the marina parking lot.

Josh swore under his breath.

But the first person to spill out of one of the trucks was Isla, from the bakery, and she seemed to very deliberately give Monica a friendly but not aggressive wave.

Monica waved back, surprising herself.

And Josh. “I was going to apologize for my family, but you're handling this better than me.”

“I'm more of a morning person,” she pointed out.

“Everyone else gives me shit for not being a morning person.”

She frowned. “Well, they shouldn't.” She stopped a few feet short of where his family was now collecting, and she lowered her voice. “I'm sorry your sleep-in was interrupted this morning. That was nice for me, too.”

Nice. Ha. She'd been ready to throw caution to the wind on the whole no-

condom thing.

It was probably for the best that her mother decided that a dramatic arrival was a good idea.

Josh held up a hand at his brothers. “Introductions later, she has to get to the dock.”

Which sounded appropriately dramatic enough to pull all of them into Bianca Fischer’s welcome party. And since they all knew where they were going, they charged ahead.

And maybe Monica held back, gripping Josh’s hand, because she wasn’t ready to let go.

But the buzz of an approaching plane meant they had to follow.

As the plane appeared overhead, Monica slid to the front of the pack —“*Excuse me, excuse me*”—and she didn’t let go of Josh’s hand at all, so she was dragging a six-foot-something thunderbolt of tension through the group, too.

The plane circled the harbour twice, then banked away and came in for the final approach.

A float plane.

Why hadn’t that occurred to her?

She caught sight of Seth out of the corner of her eye.

Right. She didn’t want to risk exactly this kind of heads up alert on her arrival.

She had planned to slide in and out of town super quiet.

This was the exact opposite of that.

Josh leaned over and murmured, “Your family orders up airplane rides the way other people call for a taxi.”

She laughed despite herself. So she was smiling as the plane turned and slowly approached the dock.

Was she still smiling when it was tied up and the pilot hopped out, then turned around helped his passenger out? She wasn’t sure. She couldn’t feel

her face.

Bianca Fischer was forty-eight years young, and as she carefully climbed down to the dock, she could be mistaken as Monica's sister. They had matching outfits on, even, which made Monica silently groan.

At least she was wearing Josh's toque.

The pilot climbed back into the plane, then handed out one suitcase. Another suitcase. And a *third* suitcase.

Which was three too many for a drop-in visit from an overprotective mother.

"Mom," Monica burst out, even before she waved or said hello. "What are you doing?"

Bianca sighed so dramatically, everyone behind Monica physically reacted. She could feel it. "Lovely to see you too, darling."

"What's with the suitcases?"

"I wasn't sure what the clime would be, or how long we'll be trapped here."

Trapped. "You're standing in front of a plane, mother. You can get back on it."

"Get on it with me."

"No."

"No?" Beside her, Josh did a double take. And grinned.

Her heart went into free fall. Where did *no* come from?

"Then we're both staying." Bianca looked south, at the dilapidated motel, then north, at the forest on the other side of the beach. "Where is your hotel?"



MONICA'S BRAINED STUTTERED over the question. Where was her hotel? She didn't have a hotel, she was staying at Josh's.

Which...her mother didn't know.

And she wasn't *staying* there.

She stayed there. For two nights.

Now the sky was clear, and she could leave. She had a villa waiting for her in Italy. She had a wedding to get to.

"Mrs. Fischer," Isla interjected, stepping forward. "Or Ms. Is it Ms.?"

Bianca glanced past Monica. "It's Bianca. And you are?"

"Isla." No further introduction. "We're just waiting for your driver, and then we'll get you settled in a luxury vacation home for your stay."

"A luxury..." Bianca exhaled happily and threw her arms around Monica. "What a nice surprise."

"For both of us," Monica muttered.

Bianca squished her in a tight hug and then, without letting go, whispered, "It's time I meet your Josh, yes?"

No. But he was right there, so she couldn't say *he's not mine*, because that was unnecessarily hurtful. Also, the words felt like razor blades in her throat, even unspoken.

So the only answer was yes.

“Mom, this is Josh.” She twisted towards him, her gaze finding his immediately. *I’m sorry*, she said, her constant refrain. “Josh, this is my mother.”

Bianca held out her hand. “Why didn’t we meet three years ago?”

He shook her hand firmly. “Because your ex-husband interfered.”

Monica squeaked.

Josh shrugged. “It’s the truth.”

“And the truth will set us free,” Bianca added. “Are you considering some sort of wicked vengeance plot?”

“Mom!”

Bianca sighed. “Monica, have you considered—” She stopped, because one of Josh’s sisters-in-law had returned, and she had a man in tow. And in much the same way Monica had, the sister-in-law—Catie?—dragged this man to the front of the group. He looked pretty willing to be dragged, a humorous expression on his face.

Monica recognized him as the guy who flashed her a handsome smile when she first arrived here at the marina.

Beside her, Josh quirked his head to the side, as if he were trying to think this through, then gave a little shrug. “Bianca, this is my Catie Berton. She’s my sister-in-law, and our town’s resident real estate agent.” He pointed to a Kincaid standing in the back. “That’s her husband Will. Beside him is my oldest brother Owen....” He went through the whole group, naming people who smiled and looked friendly.

And then he finally stopped at the newest arrival. “And this is Trent Aitken.”

“Bianca’s driver,” Isla helpfully offered.

Catie gave her a slow, communicative look. “Yes, exactly. And he will be driving Bianca to...”

Another sister-in-law, January, held up her phone. “The Blue Heron cottages. Just got a confirmation from Olivia Minelli. We’re good to go.”

Trent slid his gaze straight to Bianca, and flicked a brief look back at Monica. Smiled at them both, but his attention lingered on her mother.

*What is happening?*

“My day just got so much better,” he murmured. “Do you ladies want a tour as well?”

“Not both of them,” Isla said quickly. “Just Bianca. We need Monica here. For reasons.”

“Right,” Monica agreed. “Reasons.”

Josh grabbed the suitcases, the two smaller ones in one hand, the bigger one in the other. “A tour sounds like a great idea.”

---

THE NEXT THING MONICA KNEW, she was being whisked upstairs in the marina, to a comfortable apartment with a big window overlooking the lake, and a wide sectional couch, where all the sisters-in-law plopped themselves down.

Isla took it upon herself to make another round of introductions. “Kerry, January, Catie—my fellow schemer. We’re the wives.”

They were all at least a few years older than her. They looked like they belonged in this town.

“And then our hostess for the morning, with our apologies, August—”

“I’m January’s older sister,” she said. “And you are welcome here any time.”

“You loaned me your boots,” Monica said. “Thank you.”

“We’re all happy to provide whatever you need,” Kerry said.

“You don’t even know me.”

Catie shrugged. “But we know and love Josh. And...”

January glanced left and right, then shrugged. “I’ll say it. He’s still in love with you.”

No. The bottom of her stomach fell out, because she knew what it felt like when Josh loved her. It was warm and bubbly and perfect—for both of them.

And these people were being nice to her because they thought she was going to bring that kind of goodness to Josh's life.

"That's not why I'm here," she said carefully.

The sisters-in-law all exchanged a look. "Are you leaving?"

Yes. "No," she said faintly. "Not today."

Not if they'd somehow magicked up a luxury vacation home. She could stay one more day and talk this through with Josh. Figure out why she kept saying no, when of course she was leaving.

"What do you need?" That was Kerry. She was short, with springy dark curls, and she had a look of genuine concern on her face.

They are all so genuine it hurt.

"Why do you think I need anything?" She swallowed, her mouth dry. "Why did you whisk my mom off with..."

"Trent," Catie offered calmly.

"Trent," Monica repeated.

"He was the only single man in close proximity, and he hits on any pretty smile he catches sight of. Your mom has a very pretty smile."

"Umm..."

Isla's lips twitched. "What I think Catie is trying to say is, we got the impression that this was an unexpected arrival, and you could use some time. And maybe some resources?"

"Reinforcements, maybe," January offered. "We all know how exhausting it is to try to crack that Kincaid brittle exterior."

Isla blushed. "I don't."

Catie rolled her eyes. "Adam is the exception," she explained to Monica. "He's the youngest, and a genuine golden retriever of a man."

Monica's chest twinged, a deep ache. Because once upon a time, Josh had been more like that, too. She looked down at her hands. At some point in the

last two days, her manicure had chipped away. And she was only noticing now, because it hadn't mattered.

Nothing had mattered, except staying present in the moment, with Josh. Standing in the storm, literally and figuratively.

"Did any of you know Josh?" She took a deep breath. "Before?"

Another shared glance.

Catie and January both raised their hands. "A long time ago," Catie said.

January nodded. "As a teenager."

She had so many questions. But she didn't know where to start. She didn't even know why she wanted to pick their brains, these total strangers who had run interference with her mother.

Speaking of which... "Sorry, where exactly did Trent take my mom?"

Catie made a casual grimace. "Honestly, I'm not sure. But they will eventually be at a very nice home just south of town. Hope Creswell once stayed there."

"The actress?" That would impress Bianca. "Nice. Thank you."

"We can take you to see her whenever you want."

"I should find Josh."

"Of course." Catie glanced at Isla.

The baker threw her hands in the air. "Oh! Right! Any requests? We should have a big family dinner tonight, yes? I was thinking maple panna cotta with gingerbread crumble and a bourbon apple compote for dessert. Would that work for your mother?"

"Dinner?" Monica's stomach rumbled. She hadn't even had breakfast yet.

"I know this is a lot," Kerry said quietly. Another smile. "But since you aren't leaving today, and the storm is over...we'd love to get to know you."

"But I'm leaving."

Kerry nodded. "And maybe you'll come back again. But even if you don't, Josh has kept you a secret part of himself for so long, and we've all... truly, we have respected that. It's his life. Your life. But since you're here, if

you want us to know you, we'd all love that. And by knowing you, we'll understand Josh better, too. He's been a hard nut to crack since he came home."

---

JOSH STARED up at the residence on top of the marina, where his sisters-in-law had stolen Monica away from him while he was stuffing her mother into Trent's Jeep and trying to silently communicate to the man to behave, but also, take his time.

A fine line for Trent Aitken to walk.

And now the time he was hoping to buy, so he could have a proper goodbye with his wife—alone—had been taken away from him. By those who claimed to love him the most!

He turned on his brothers. "So when the group chat went quiet...did you all start talking about this in an alt chat?"

Seth shifted uncomfortably. "Mostly phone calls."

Josh pinned a glare on Will. "Because Catie wouldn't want anything in writing."

Will just grinned, clearly proud of his wife.

"And now she has Monica trapped upstairs. I need to go rescue her."

"Let them have her for an hour," Owen said. "Let's go get breakfast."

"Seth already ate," Josh said grouchily.

"Not really. We were interrupted by the call from the airline."

Reluctantly, he dug out his phone.

JOSH

Are you okay up there? Did they offer you anything to eat?

MONICA

I'm fine. They're nice.

JOSH

Let me know if you need to be rescued.

MONICA

Are you okay?

JOSH

My brothers are threatening to feed me.

MONICA

You should let them.

So the brothers all piled into Seth's truck, which wasn't big enough for five grown men, but Adam squished into the middle of the second row, and they drove up the hill and across town to Mac's.

"This feels like an intervention," Josh said dryly after they grabbed their favourite booth at the back of the diner, and put him right in the middle, so there was no chance of escape.

One minute, he'd been in bed, whispering with Monica, and the next her mother was on her way, and his whole family was involved.

And now they'd been separated very deliberately. "What are your wives saying to Monica right now?"

"Probably grilling her for dirt on you," Owen said with a straight face.

Adam nodded solemnly. "Like, where you are most ticklish."

"Fuck off."

Seth shrugged. "Honestly, they probably just want to know what your type is, since you haven't dated at all."

And it was a good fucking thing he hadn't dated, since he'd still been married. "I don't have a type."

"Dark hair, nice clothes—" Seth continued.

"We're not talking about Monica."

"She's the most elegant elephant in the room," Will burst out. "Why aren't we talking about her?"

"Because she's off-limits."

"Why?"

Josh grimaced and grabbed the menu.

Adam snatched it out of his hands, and as the waitress approached, said, “Five coffees, please. And we’ll need a minute to decide.”

Which led to the fastest scurry away ever.

Josh took a deep breath. Held it. Let it out. Arrived at no great new profound understanding about anything, so he shrugged. “I don’t know what to say.”

Owen leaned back in the booth and crossed his arms over his chest. “Try starting at the beginning.”

Was that when he got hired on at Fischer Racing? Or eight years later, when the owner’s daughter tracked him down and asked him for a favour, which he let get so far out of hand, now she was his estranged wife?

He could feel Monica beside him, looking at him in that knowing way of hers. Could hear the laughter that would be in her voice as she said something like, *your brothers don’t care about me, silly. Tell them about the garage you once dreamed of owning.*

“Remember when I came back for a visit in my first restored muscle car? I made some friends along the way on that trip.” He fiddled with a sugar packet as he went back almost ten years now, to when he was twenty-five. He’d thought he was king of the world. Working steadily, saving money. Building cars.

Nothing was out of the realm of possibility for Young Josh Kincaid.

“I started to think, I wanted to own my own place. Not like my garage here. Something bigger. With a warehouse, and...” He trailed off. Started again. Trailed off again.

In between their coffee arriving and ordering their food, he tried to tell his brothers about the vision he’d had for his business. But it felt so out of reach now, he couldn’t even put it properly into words.

So he shifted gears. “I met Monica when she returned to California after being gone for nine years for school. She needed someone to teach her about



racing, and I...it took a single night, and I was a goner.”

Owen frowned. “You didn’t tell us about her at the time.”

“I was sure it was going to be a secret affair I took to my grave. There was no way we could work out in the long run. And then we got married in Vegas and went to Bali for a honeymoon, and we didn’t tell anyone. Not her friends, not her family. So I didn’t tell you, either, because it didn’t seem fair until we were both ready to tell the world. But we never got to that point.”

“What happened?” Will leaned in.

And Josh’s brothers meant well, he knew they did, but he couldn’t tell them the rest of the story. Not when everything he thought he knew about what happened next was now a big, open question, based on what Monica shared last night.

“She was put in an impossible situation,” he managed. “And I couldn’t stick around once I knew it was over. So I came home.”

Will nodded. But he still prompted for more. “And then she shows up after three years.”

Josh nodded. “Yep.”

“And...”

“And nothing? It’s still an impossible situation. She came to see me so we could have some conversations in person, because she cares about me, in the same way I’ll always care about her. But there’s too much water under the bridge.”

Their food arrived immediately after that, buying him some time and space.

But not much enough time for his brothers to let it go. After they dug in, and the frenetic sound of forks against plates slowed down, Seth tried again. “Can I offer you some unsolicited advice?”

Josh grimaced. “No.”

Seth was unfazed. “Well, I’m going to anyway. That’s what makes it unsolicited.”

“Please don’t draw a comparison to you and January. It’s not the—”

“I regret that it took me twenty years to be her friend again.”

Josh’s protest—that he couldn’t get Monica back, no matter how much he wanted to—died on his tongue.

As Monica would say, *oh*.

Seth shrugged. “I have more to say, but—”

“No, that’s enough.” Josh nodded. “I get it. That’s good advice.”

“You seem fond of her.”

That barely scraped the surface of how he felt, but he nodded.

“Don’t let stubbornness stand in the way of showing her that.”

BY THE TIME Josh got back to the garage, he was feeling deeply restless. He didn't bother to text. They'd had Monica long enough. He stalked over to the marina, ready to drag her home.

But as he hit the top of the stairs, he heard peels of laughter. Women gasping for air. And then Monica's voice, clear as day. "You're joking. Oh my God, get her over here right now!"

As much as he was jonesing to see her, she was having fun.

So he headed back to the garage.

The first thing he thought when he stepped into his apartment was that the couch really did work better over against the wall, where Monica had put it.

He shoved it across the room, then did a slow circle. What else could he do to improve the place?

Fuck, he should have painted. Ripped out walls. Replaced the bathroom.

Adam and Isla did a DIY bathroom reno and it looked great. He should have asked them to help him with his place.

Why had he lived in it pretty much exactly as he'd found it? It was horrible.

The peel of laughter he just heard deserved a much nicer space than this, even for a short visit.

*She won't be visiting again.*

He rubbed his chest. Fuck.

Maybe he was too hasty in leaving California. If they found a new kind of friendly peace on the other side of divorce, would he want to be closer to her?

But that just made him think about how sweet she tasted beneath him.

Friends.

Ha.

And now his cock was thickening like it had any chance in hell of a repeat encounter with Monica. That was a middle of the night, bittersweet one-off.

He ground his teeth together and thought of what might distract him. Dishes. Laundry. Starting to tear down the wood paneling that made the apartment so dark...

All of it reminded him of Monica.

The glass they shared last night was next to the sink.

Laundry would include her clothes, the only time it ever would.

And while taking a sledgehammer to the paneling did have a certain appeal, if there was a chance she was staying another night, he couldn't turn this place into a construction zone.

*She'll probably stay with her mother.*

Right.

He knew that.

Fuck.

He rubbed his chest, then went downstairs to dig into the never ending admin work for the garage. He was running a seasonal tire swap clinic starting on Wednesday, for four days leading up to the charity weekend Catie ran, that would culminate in the bachelor auction. He needed to—

*Fucking fuck.*

He winced and sat heavily in his creaky old desk chair. He needed to get out of the bachelor auction. For one thing, it wasn't technically true. For another, he would feel awkward as fuck pretending to be an eligible anything

so soon after...

After...

And now he was thinking about last night again.

The kiss.

The confident demand that he take her to his bed.

The way her legs wrapped around his hips and didn't let go.

He huffed a breath and rocked back, spreading his legs in a fruitless attempt to make some room in his jeans. Nope, they were impossibly tight now, the denim stretched over a cock that wanted to relive every single second. The way her fingers felt, the sound of her orgasm, the scent of her arousal and the gorgeous flush across her skin as she trembled afterwards.

A spreading pink he got an up close view of as he wiped his come off her belly.

He hadn't spent enough time kissing her tits. She should have come more times than just once. He could have—

“Josh?”

He yanked his hand off his throbbing cock and threw his upper body forward so he was leaning on the desk when Monica appeared in the doorway.

“Hi,” she said softly, and the warmth in her gaze only made his balls pull even tighter.

*Don't go*, he wanted to say. Instead he swallowed around the lump in his throat and said, “Did you have fun?”

The wide smile said she did. She came in and propped her hip on the edge of his desk. “They're very concerned about you.”

He choked on a laugh. “Really?”

“They want you to be happy.”

*I am happy*, he wanted to say. But he wasn't. He hadn't been happy when she arrived, and he wouldn't be when she left. He hadn't even managed to be happy for most of the time she had been here, but there had been some

moments in there where he couldn't have been happier if he'd tried.

Because Monica made him happy. The realization swelled inside him, a big, bright knowledge that begged to be shared. *You make me happy*, he tested out in his head.

He couldn't tell her that. It would make their next steps so fucking messy. And he really didn't want that.

What he wanted, more than anything else, was to not cause her any more pain.

So he gave her a rueful smile. "They think they're marriage counsellors."

Her eyes crinkled as she shook her head. "We don't need that."

"No." He held out his hand, and she hooked it with two fingers. Warm, sizzling energy coursed up his arm. From the way her eyes flared bright, she felt it, too.

He pushed his chair back enough to turn his legs sideways.

She glanced down at his lap, and yeah, he was still hard. Even if he hadn't started that way, the electric spark of her touch would have filled him tight.

He patted his free hand against his thigh. An invitation, if she wanted. "Come here."

She stepped around the corner of the desk and slid onto his lap. Her hands wrapped around his neck, her fingers like silk against his skin, and she exhaled shakily. "Hi."

He brushed his knuckles against her jaw. "I realized something over breakfast."

"What's that?"

"I want to be your friend."

She laughed, a low and throaty reaction.

"It sounded better when my brother said it."

"It sounded nice when you said it, too." She took a deep breath. "I realized something, too. I'm not ready to leave yet."

“Then stay for a bit.” He managed to say that sounding cool and casual, even though inside he didn’t feel either of those things.

She made a face. “It’s tricky. Plus, my mother is going to insist on staying, too.”

“Trent will keep her busy.”

“Oh my God.” This time, her laugh wasn’t at him, but with him.

He drew her deeper into his arms and nuzzled his head against hers. “It’s nice to laugh together,” he murmured. “Seems like something friends would do.”

She nodded and exhaled, relaxing into him. “I don’t want to fight anymore.”

“We won’t. We’ll find a way through this together. As friends.”

---

*AS FRIENDS.* Ugh, it was such a bittersweet place to land. And definitely complicated by the fact that Monica’s ass was definitely nestled right up against a very hard erection.

On a scale of one to ten, how terrible of an idea was it to be friends with benefits with your almost ex-husband?

At least a twelve.

She needed something else to focus on. “What should we do if we have a bit more time?”

He smiled with his whole body. “Another twenty-four hours?”

“At least. I spoke with my mom. She *loves* the house they found her, and thinks we should stay for at least two nights. Although now I wonder how much of a factor Trent is there.”

“Don’t think about that.”

“Mmm.”

Josh chuckled. “Well, my brothers go to the farmer’s market with their

wives. I've generally thought that's fucking weird." But he said it in a way that promised it would be nice, if they did it.

"Tomorrow's Tuesday. Is it open during the week?"

"Every Tuesday and Saturday."

"That sounds like we really should go." She curled her fingers into the slightly-too-long hair at the nape of his neck. Every single strand of his hair caressed her skin, curling around her fingertips as if whispering, *stay even longer*.

She pressed her forehead against his temple. "I do have to go after that, though."

"The wedding in Tuscany."

"Yes."

"In two weeks?" His fingers walked up her back and slid under the loose waves of her hair.

She shivered. "There's...yes. But..."

"You have to go there soon."

"Mmm."

"So we'll go to the farmer's market tomorrow." His voice was a thick, velvety whisper now.

"And we're having a big family dinner tonight."

He paused, his questing fingers, his flexing body, his sexy whispers all going still.

"Did your brothers..."

"They didn't mention that, no."

"Mmm."

His hand settled at the back of her neck like a collar. "So this might be our only chance to be alone together before—"

"Hello?"

At the sound of her mother's voice, Monica scrambled off Josh's lap. "Sorry, oh God, sorry..."



“Your toque is lopsided,” Josh said under his breath.

“It’s your toque,” she whispered back, fixing it before she sprinted to the office door.

Her mother was standing in the middle of the waiting area, with Trent lounging against the pillar beside her.

“Darling, we’re going to the brewery for a beer tasting. Do you want to come?”

The only place she wanted to come was on top of Josh. “Uh…”

Josh stepped out of the office and slung his arm casually around her waist. “Beer tasting? I’m in.”

“You don’t have…work?”

He shrugged. “Do we look busy?”

Bianca clapped her hands. “Great. I was worried when this one…” She playfully poked Trent. “When this one absconded with me that we weren’t going to get to spend any time together, Josh, before I rescue my daughter and get her back to New York so she can pack.”

Monica squirmed at the word *rescue* and winced at the reminder they needed to go to New York.

Maybe she could just order new clothes to meet her in Italy. Although they’d have to stop and re-fuel anyway, and New York made as much sense as the east coast of Canada.

But it was another task now on her mental to-do list, bumping up the timeline for when she would have to leave.

*For now.*

Maybe she could come back after the wedding.

Or…

She turned her attention to Josh, who was pulling on his coat. She bit her lip. Would he want to come with her?

IT TURNED OUT, Bianca had used the beer tasting as a ruse to get some one-on-one time with her daughter. The Trent distraction only worked for a limited time when a mother was intent on helicoptering.

As soon as they arrived at the brewery, she brightly said she needed to powder her nose, and dragged Monica to the ladies' room.

So now Josh was at the tasting bar with Trent...waiting. He paced across to the full-length windows that looked out over the new gravel parking lot to the back of his own garage.

When he was in here for the pancake breakfast, he'd mostly be focused on keeping Charlie's sticky syrup fingers off the windows, and he hadn't actually *looked* at the garage. Or more specifically, the lack of any identifying detail there.

"What's on your mind?" Trent asked.

Josh almost turned around and said his idea out loud. But the thing that stopped him was a strong desire—no, an intense need—to tell Monica first. "Just a half-formed thought," he mused. "How's the construction going on the other half of the building?"

The brewery occupied a third of the new building. They had plans to lease out the additional space to cover some of the costs, and also bring a diversity of business down to the harbour.

“We just had a tenant back out on the third unit, so we’re pausing construction on the interior until we know what it will be used for. But other than that, we’re actually ahead of schedule. A pottery studio is going in next door, and they’ll be open for the May long weekend. We’re going to have a big block party.”

“Excellent.” And Josh meant it. It really was good news.

The ladies returned from the bathroom. Monica immediately looked at Josh and rolled her eyes, then gave him a flash of a private smile before hopping onto a bar stool and tapping the counter. “Okay, what are we trying?”

“That’s up to you. What kind of beer do you like?”

“Rosé,” said Bianca, at the same time as Monica cheerfully said, “Prosecco.”

Trent grinned. “Tough customers. All right, all right. Let’s start with our light lager, then. It’s bright, thirst-quenching, and has a really nice crisp note.”

They all liked that, so he followed it with a pale ale with citrusy profile, and then a grapefruit wheat beer that Josh didn’t like, but Monica loved, so he immediately imagined himself stocking the fridge with it. He’d learn to like it.

The last beer they tasted was a chocolate stout with “creamy mouthfeel,” which Trent said with a straight face and Monica immediately dissolved into laughter over.

Bianca blushed. “Darling,” she said reproachfully. “Please be polite to our hosts.”

“I can’t,” Monica said, tears streaming down her face. “He said creamy mouthfeel.”

Trent nodded sagely. “Lingers on the palate. Slightly sweet finish.”

Now Josh was laughing, too, which only sent Monica spinning further into body-shaking guffaws. She slid off her barstool and paced away, waving

back at them. “I need a minute to compose myself,” she said between hiccuping laughs. “Go on, keep drinking the...”

Josh abandoned his drink with a good-natured smile in Bianca’s direction and followed Monica across the room.

She took a deep breath, then looked up at the ceiling. “Ah, that wasn’t nearly as funny as it felt, was it?”

“I’ve never known you to have the sense of humour of a thirteen-year-old boy, but it was funny enough.” He grinned. They were standing in front of the windows. “Hey, can I distract you with an idea?”

She took a quick, sobering breath. “Of course.”

He pointed at the back of the garage, currently a faded cream colour that didn’t match the rest of the whitewashed concrete blocks. When he painted the building, the back wall had been covered in ten feet of wild brush, but that had all been removed now. “I should get a mural painted back there, right? Something Instagrammable, for when people spill out of here—or if they are waiting to get in.”

“Oh, yeah,” she breathed, leaning to brush her shoulder against his arm. “Good idea.”

“Angel wings are over, right?”

She cringed. “Very.”

“What’s hot in murals right now?”

“Something about the town, maybe. Make it specific. Definitely have the garage name in there, too.” She squinted. “What about big letters that say, Meet Me At the Corner of Main and...”

“Old Whiskey Harbour Road,” he finished.

“Shut up, seriously? That’s perfect.” She bit her lower lip and squeezed her hands together. “I love it. I can draw something up for you if you want?”

“Yeah, if you—”

She twisted around. “Trent, do you have paper?”

---

WHILE THEY FINISHED DRINKING the chocolate stout, Monica sketched a mural for Josh, ignoring her mother's curious and concerned gaze.

In the bathroom, she'd made herself clear: she was fine, she just needed another day or two to finish mending these bridges with Josh, and then she was going to get back to real life. Or a wedding, and *then* real life.

She really needed to text Amira and let her know she wouldn't be arriving on Wednesday, because the farmer's market would probably take the entire morning tomorrow, and then...

And then she would want to be alone with Josh again.

Tonight wasn't going to be enough.

She snapped the pencil down on the counter. "I think we need to work on this more over at the garage," she said. "Trent, you've got my mom for the afternoon, yes?"

Trent looked delighted.

Bianca looked...suspicious.

Whatever, Monica didn't care. She hadn't been able to bring herself to say, "I'm not staying at the lake house with you, I'd rather sleep in Josh's serial-killer-aesthetic apartment one more night," so maybe this might be their only chance today to be alone.

She wasn't letting it slip through her fingers.

"Dinner tonight will be brought to the lake house, Mom. Expect guests at six. You don't need to prepare anything."

"Well, that's good, because I wouldn't even know where to begin."

Monica narrowed her eyes. That wasn't true at all. Her mother was a great entertainer, an excellent cook, and only put on that particular tone when her feelings were hurt.

Too. Bad.

Bianca had the rest of her life to have Monica's full attention in New

York. Josh only had her for one more day.

---

JOSH WAS PRETTY sure whatever they were doing right now was like some out of control, runaway freight train of hormones and desperate last chances, but he didn't care.

His body ached nonstop today, like it was a physical hardship to go an hour or two before holding her again. He'd never had the freedom to hold her in front of people. Not people they knew.

He'd been so fucking demonstrative on their honeymoon. And then, in an instant, that had been turned off. For three years, he hadn't been able to touch her, hold her, kiss her.

So when they held hands over to the marina, it had felt significant. And then she slid into his lap at the garage, which felt right.

Him wrapping his arm around her waist? Risky, more than anything, he knew that. But also necessary on a primal level.

Which was ridiculous. She was leaving, and he should be putting distance between them, not closing the gap at every single opportunity.

But then they were dragged apart, over and over again, and that simply felt wrong.

Right was getting her just inside the garage and hauling her into his arms for a long, slow, deep kiss.

"We were interrupted earlier," she panted. "Should lock the door."

He laughed as he did exactly that. "They know we're here."

"I think we have plausible deniability if we're upstairs and the door is just locked. Oops, we can't hear knocking."

He unzipped her jacket and slid his hands around her waist. "If we can get upstairs."

That got him a delighted laugh, and he notched a thigh between her legs

while he kissed her again.

Never enough kisses. Her mouth was a sweet, boundless pool to lose himself in.

And the sounds she made as he worked their bodies closer and closer together were the stuff of his fantasies. Of his memories, too. Beautiful, private, lush noises he never thought he'd hear again.

She breathed his name against his lips.

Fuck yes. His cock throbbed in his jeans.

“Upstairs,” he managed to say.

She paused, then nodded.

But that pause... He pulled back. “You still okay?”

“Yes.” But there was another pause as she searched his face. “This doesn't change anything, right?”

His pulse jacked up, slamming at the base of his neck. *Be. Careful.* “It doesn't have to.”

She exhaled in relief. “Good.”

He braced his arm on the wall above her head and lifted her chin. In this bright light, he could see a faint bruise on the bridge of her nose he hadn't seen yesterday in the gloom of his apartment. He traced the edge of it with his finger, featherlight. “Does this hurt?”

“What?”

“You have a bruise. Just a little one.”

“Oh.” She raised her fingers to touch the spot, too. “I think the airbag smashed my sunglasses there. They must have flown off in the collision.”

He leaned in and kissed that spot, his lips impossibly soft. Then he stepped back and hooked her hand with his. “I have something for you upstairs.”

“What?”

“Let's go upstairs and you'll find out.”

She sprinted ahead of him, racing up the stairs as if to prove that she was

recovering just fine, although he'd still be careful with her.

He'd offered without thinking that in order to get the surprise for her, he'd have to dig out the box he'd brought home from California—and hadn't looked at since. It was the top of his closet, so while she unzipped her boots, he stalked ahead to yank it down.

She joined him in the bedroom just as he was replacing the lid on the box, so she didn't see anything else in the box—which was for the best.

“Here,” he said, holding out a pair of sunglasses.

She frowned. “Are these...?”

“Yours. Yes.” He dragged in a breath. “I think you lost them under the seat of my car.”

He found them when he sold the Gran Torino. Had shoved them in the box.

He shrugged. “It's going to be sunny tomorrow. Can't let my socialite wife get on a private plane without designer glasses protecting her eyes.”

She lifted her head, a determined expression on her face. He recognized it as her *call me princess all you want, buddy, but we're going to be friends* look. The first time she'd pinned him with it, years ago, he'd ended up with his pants around his ankles and his hands in her impossibly shiny hair.

Because they were never really friends. Always something so much more complicated than that.

“You called me your wife,” she whispered.

“Not the first time.”

“But maybe the last.”

“I'm sure I'll squeeze it in one or two more times before you go.”

She twirled the glasses around her finger, then set them carefully on top of his dresser. “You got rid of the car, but you didn't get rid of these.”

It would have been extraordinarily petty to throw out glasses that cost more than his first car. “Thought I might pawn them some day.”

She laughed. Because it didn't matter how much he tried to underline the



differences between them, she just didn't care. She never had.

He sighed. "I wasn't going to throw out your sunglasses."

She smiled and planted her hand in the middle of his chest. "You like me."

"Very much."

"But you *like* me." She pushed him onto his back.

"Jesus Christ. Yes."

"Josh."

"Monica."

"You *like me* like me." She straddled him and pulled her shirt off.

"Oh." Fuck. "Yeah."

"I'm supposed to be leaving."

"You don't want to leave."

"But I have to." She tossed her bra aside and grabbed his hands, cupping herself with them. "You could come with me."

He groaned. "This isn't fair."

"Why not?"

"Because I have a whole life here that I can't just abandon to go to Italy."

"It's really nice in the spring."

That made him laugh. "I bet it is."

"What are doing instead of coming to a wedding with me?"

He pinched her right nipple. "Putting all-season tires on pickup trucks."

She laughed again. "Okay."

He pinched her other nipple, and her eyelids fluttered half-shut.

"I was thinking..." Her breath hitched, and she rolled her hips. "If you don't want to come with me, maybe I could come back? We should take our time, figuring out the best way to..."

"Get divorced."

"Mmm."

Could his heart handle a protracted divorce negotiation where his wife

spent most of the time naked, grinding on top of him?

No.

Was he going to make his heart do its God damned best to survive, because he wouldn't be able to turn her away? Yes.

"New rule," he growled, flipping her onto her back.

Her tits jiggled and her eyes went wide.

"No divorce talk in this bed." He flicked open the button on her jeans and slid his hand in to cup her pussy possessively. She was warm and soft, and where his middle finger slotted right against the puffy seam of her sex, she was already slippery for him. He groaned. "Only this," he murmured as he leaned down to take her mouth. He kissed her hard. Thoroughly, ravishingly hard. "Only you and me, separate from all of the external complications."

There was a part of him that wished they'd stuck to a secret, private affair. He would have had her longer that way. Maybe he would still be her dirty secret, and fuck, he would take that.

He would take this, even if it was impossible to not touch her out there in the world, if it was all he could have.

The truth was, he didn't want anything else. Anyone else. All he wanted was Monica, however he could have her.

He dragged his finger up that puffy seam, dragging her arousal up to where her clit was nestled between her pussy lips.

She jolted against his touch, but his hand was firmly wedged in her jeans, and she couldn't get away from his fingers.

"Ahh, you feel good," he groaned. "So wet for me. Are you always this wet, baby?"

"No." She trembled beneath him. "Only for you."

"Tell me you missed me."

Her eyes found his. "I missed you."

"Tell me what you need now."

She whimpered. "You. Just you."

“How do you want to come? On my fingers?”

She reached for his belt. “Josh...”

He still didn't have any protection. Could have grabbed some this morning, and he didn't think of it.

Fuck. “Anything but that.”

She bit her lower lip. “Because you don't have any condoms.”

“Yes.”

Her eyes were wide and almost glazed over. “Why don't you?”

He eased his hand out of her jeans and tugged them down her hips. He needed her bare for him. He knew she was waiting for an answer, but instead, he kissed from one hip bone across to the other, his lips ghosting over her bare belly.

“I like this spot here,” he told her as he drifted back to the centre of her torso, just below her belly button. “Right here. When I'm inside you, I can feel you squeezing around me.”

He slid his fingers into her again, thrusting them all the way deep, and pressed up. Her belly lifted to meet his lips.

“Oh.” Her mouth fell open and she cried out, her hands coming up to clutch his head. “Josh.”

“I don't have any condoms,” he whispered. “Because I haven't been with anyone since you.”

Her shocked exhale was the only sound in his bedroom.

Her pussy contracted around his fingers. He pulled them out, until his fingertips teased her entrance, then thrust in again.

Kissed the rise of her belly, then lower. Lower, lower...until he could lick her clit and make her cry out.

“I want you to come for me.” Another lick. “I want you to come, thinking about how the only pussy I want on my tongue is yours.”

“Josh...”

“You like my mouth on you.” He licked her again, savouring her musky

sweet taste. “You love it when I suck this hard, pink clit...” She wrenched her hips off the bed and screamed his name. She came in long, shuddering waves that left her gasping.

He kissed her belly again, then eased off the bed and kicked off his jeans.

He didn’t have a plan. Fuck, he’d be happy to jack off just looking at her, messy-haired and pink-cheeked, still shaking from her orgasm.

But she rolled over and crawled after him, coming to the edge of the bed. “Please,” she gasped. “Use my mouth, too.”

“What?”

She licked her lips. “I want you to come in my mouth.”

“Monica.”

She wrapped her hand around his cock and squeezed. There was that determined look again, and why would he argue with her? When he dreamed of her mouth far too fucking often.

“Fuck. Yes, please.”

She licked at his crown, then made an eager little noise before swallowing more of him into her mouth. A wet, hot pull, and then a happy hum, and it was so much better than his dreams.

He groaned as his balls pulled tight, threatening to explode already. “You’re too hot,” he murmured. “So perfect, baby. I’m going to come for you.”

She stroked the length of him that didn’t fit in her mouth, and each slow pulse of her hand primed his pump with painful efficiency. He was so close, already.

His hands came up to hover around her head, to pull her off, maybe, but then it was too late to even warn her.

She sucked him once more, this time with a swirl of her tongue in exactly the right spot, and he went off like a rocket, coming in her mouth. Hard. Maybe the most intense release of his life, as if he’d been saving up forever.

Which, in a way, he had.

Fuck.

Monica rolled onto her back, gazing up at him as he twitched and worked through the aftershocks.

Then he pounced on her, cupping her jaw and kissing her deeply. Tasting himself, and the warmth of her mouth. She absorbed the kiss, letting him pour himself into her on a whole other level.

They were both breathing hard when he eased up and stroked her hair back from her face.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he said roughly.

“Please.” She winked. “That was for me.”

AFTER A LAZY SECOND round in the shower, Josh showed her how to use his ancient washing machine, and she did some laundry ahead of dinner that night.

He went downstairs to do some work, so she did some quick time-zone math, and called Amira.

As soon as her best friend answered, Monica knew it was a mistake to do a video call.

“Where are you?” Amira gasped.

Monica got closer to the phone, blocking out the background. “Nice to see you, too.”

“Have you been kidnapped? Is this a ransom call?”

“Stop it.” But even as Monica sighed, Amira was tapping the screen, and before she could say *oh no, please don’t*, Sylvie and Cathryn were added to the call. “Hey, everyone.”

“Ladies, this is urgent. Monica, please step out of the camera view.”

“No.” She was laughing now.

“She is in a *shack*, friends! A. Shack.”

“It’s an apartment,” Monica said firmly. “And I’ve come to like it here, so please be nice.”

“Does it have indoor plumbing?”

Monica frowned. “Wait a second. How can you get all of this from the five-second shot of panelling over my shoulder?”

Amira pressed her lips together, trying to look innocent.

Sylvie ratted her out. “Your mom got us all on a group call a couple of hours ago, after a very handsome man kidnapped her. She said if we didn’t hear from her again before the end of the day, that we had to come to her rescue, because she didn’t want to have to call in your father.”

“Oh my God.” Monica scrubbed her hands over her face and sat down at the kitchen table. “Okay, so I have a situation. And I don’t even know why I’m calling you all, because you will not understand, but...”

“You don’t have any friends who understand the appeal of yellow linoleum?”

She jumped up and spun around. But there wasn’t a single good angle in this entire place. “I’ll have you know, this place is very cozy,” she said calmly. “Now, are you going to listen, or are you going to razz me nonstop?”

“Razz,” all three friends said in unison.

She hung up on them.

They called her back, immediately, and between laughs, apologized and promised to zip their lips.

She told them almost the whole story, leaving out the mutual masturbation, the oral sex, and the mutual masturbation and oral sex combo repeat in the shower. All of that was summarized with, “and we’re reconnecting on a... you know. Personal level, too.”

They all stared at her.

She rolled her hand in a permissive wave. “You can speak again now.”

“So...you’re married...surprise, yes?” Sylvie asked.

Monica nodded. “Yes.”

“And you want a divorce.”

“I—” She cleared her throat. Want was the wrong word. “We live separate lives. We *are* divorced, basically. This is just a formality.”

Cathryn frowned. “But the...personal level...stuff?”

Amira leaned in. “Was it good?”

“It was...” Monica poked her tongue into her cheek. “It’s been three years. Of course it was good. And I think we needed it, you know? Like, healthy closure. But that’s all it is. We’re trying to be friends.”

Sylvie cackled. “We are friends, Mon. We’re not reconnecting like that. Doesn’t matter if three years go by, you know?”

Heat licked up Monica’s cheeks. “No, this is definitely just...something. It’s not *more*, because I asked him to come to Italy with me and he turned me down.”

“Oh, then ditch him, honey! If he doesn’t want all of you, he shouldn’t get any of you.” Cathryn shook her head vehemently. “Get your mom and get on a plane.”

Monica thought of Josh leaning over and whispering that her family ordered up planes the way other people called a cab. “Can’t do that. We’re having a big dinner tonight.”

“With who?”

She squirmed. “Uh...”

“Monica...”

“His family. His brothers and sisters-in-law. They all seem really nice.” And she never got to spend time with them the first time.

She was met with skeptical silence.

“What are you thinking?” She looked at each of her friends, who had known her for a decade, and had been like sisters during the rockiest years of her parents’ divorce.

“You deserve to be loved without reservation,” Amira finally said. “Don’t lose your heart again to a man who can’t do that.”



I'm not doing the bachelor auction.

CATIE

We can be clear that you're sort of, not really a bachelor.

JOSH

There's no "sort of" about it!

CATIE

We could pivot away from the whole bachelor schtick completely.

JOSH

It's on the flyer. Right above my face.

CATIE

Let's discuss this tonight.

JOSH

We are not discussing this in front of Monica. Or at all. I'm not doing it.

CATIE

It's for a good cause.

JOSH

Tough. I'm out.

CATIE

In that case, I need you to tend bar, and I'll swap Garrett in your place.

JOSH

Fine.

---

MONICA HAD CLEAN UNDERWEAR, and after the last few days, that felt like a real victory. But they were also a reminder that she only had one other pair with her, that she had to leave this town and go back to New York to literally have more clothes to wear.

A reminder that this wasn't where she belonged.

She pulled them on, along with clean jeans and Josh's sweater, because her blouses couldn't go in the dryer. They were air drying in front of the heating vent.

Then she went downstairs to check on Josh, who had been working for what felt like hours.

She found him crawling out of what looked like a completely different tow truck.

"Oh, wow."

He gestured to the totally clean cab. "Thought I'd detail it before you have to get in it to drive to dinner."

"Your truck cleans up almost as nice as you do," she said.

He looked faintly amused at that and flexed grease-streaked arms. "You overestimate what I'm going to be able to do in an hour. I had a customer drop off a car that needs a new muffler, so I got a little dirty before I started this job, checking that out."

She pressed her lips together.

He grinned. "Say it."

"I like it when you get a little dirty," she whispered.

He laughed, and it rang out through the whole garage. And then for the third time that day, a private moment was interrupted by someone arriving at the garage—but this time, Monica didn't recognize the visitor. And from the way Josh greeted the wiry young white man, she didn't think he did, either.

He waved. "Can I help you?"

"Hey, yeah..." The guy glanced around. "I'm new to the area and I'm looking for work."

"I'm not looking to hire anyone right now, but I'm happy to take your resume for the future." Josh crossed to the counter and grabbed a business card. "Here's my contact information. Josh Kincaid."

"Will Smith." The guy gave a faint smile. "No relation."

Josh's smile was equally faint. "All right."

The guy pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. “I have a resume here.”

Josh took it and glanced it over. His brow furrowed a little, but he didn’t say anything. “I’ll put this on file.”

“Okay. Thanks.” The guy glanced around the garage again, his gaze lingering on Monica now, in a way that made her wish she was wearing Josh’s heavy flannel shirt on top of the sweater. “This your girl?”

Josh gestured for the door, ignoring the question. “We’re actually just about to close.”

The guy pulled out his phone, holding it and the business card up at the same time. “Okay. Can I just put your—”

“Hey!” Josh planted one hand in the middle of buddy’s chest and shoved him backwards, hard enough that he bounced into the door, which swung open. The guy stumbled backward, almost sprawling flat on his ass—and he would have if Owen wasn’t standing right there to catch him.

Monica gasped as Josh’s brother glanced from the customer in his arms, to her furious husband, and then finally to her.

She had no idea what was going on.

“This guy—”

Owen cut off the whiny protest. “Hey bud, didya trip backwards?”

Even from where Monica stood behind him, she could tell Josh was scowling simply from the squared-off set of his tense shoulders. “He sure did. Right after he tried to take a picture of Monica. Check his phone.”

The guy yelped as Owen snatched up the phone and held it, for a split second, in front of the stranger’s face, then tossed it to Josh.

“Rule number one of being some kind of sneak,” Josh said coldly. “Don’t use Face ID to open your phone. Are you paparazzi or a private investigator?”

Monica’s blood chilled. She didn’t like either of those possibilities. And how had Josh known so quickly?

Josh tapped on the screen a few times. Grunted. Tapped twice more, then

tossed the phone back. “Get out.”

“Fuck you.” The other man shrugged out of Owen’s grip, then pointed at Josh. “That was assault.”

“Don’t fucking trespass.” The words dripped ice. Josh wasn’t scared about the assault charge in the slightest.

Owen patted the guy heavily on the shoulder, ushering him out the door, and Josh followed.

When the brothers turned around and stepped inside, Monica sagged against the pillar.

“Was he a photographer?” she asked.

Josh shook his head. “Investigator. Low level. He texted someone that he’d located you, and that person asked for photographs of you and me together.”

She shivered. “Did the person have a name?”

“Not in his phone, but I texted myself the contact card.” He pulled out his own phone and handed it over. “Recognize this number?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Probably a burner.” He looped an arm around her shoulders, drawing her tightly into his side as he glanced at his brother. “Did you stop by for something other than catching a sneak with me?”

“I wanted to ask a brotherly favour, but it can wait.”

Monica shifted in Josh’s hold to look at Owen. “No, it’s okay. I’m okay. Ask whatever you need.”

Owen frowned for a second, and in that moment, the brother similarity was so strong. “It’s just that I forgot to sign up for the winter tire swap out calendar, and now it’s full online. Can I get our vehicles in at the start or end of one of the days?”

Josh nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Thanks.”

“Wednesday is better than later in the week.”

“Noted. Thanks.”

And then Owen was gone, and they were alone in the middle of the garage. Josh was still hugging her like he had no intention of letting her go.

She wrapped her arms around his middle and pressed her cheek against his body.

“That was hard,” he finally muttered. “I got a weird vibe off him right off the top. His resume was bullshit. I just wanted to tell him to get the fuck away from my wife, even before he tried to take your picture. And as soon as he lifted his phone, I knew I should have kicked him out sooner.”

Monica pulled back to look at his face. “Hey, it’s okay.”

He shook his head. “It’s not. It’s fucking not. I...” He puffed his cheeks out and exhaled. “Ah, fuck.”

“What?”

His arms softened around her, like he might let go, but then he didn’t.

Instead, he lowered his head and covered her mouth. It was a kiss, but it wasn’t. It was a pause. It was a need for a moment.

He didn’t take anything. Didn’t pull her tongue into his mouth, didn’t force his into hers. He just...connected them. She could feel his pulse through his lips, and then there was a slight tremor. So slight, if they were actually kissing in a more active way, she might not notice it.

“Josh,” she whispered.

He growled and sank his hand into her hair, fisting his fingers at the base of her skull. Holding her still.

Monica gasped, but not from fear. This was different. This was Josh showing her that he was hers and no one else's. That she mattered. She leaned into his embrace, deepening the connection between them.

His mouth finally, finally moved against hers, taking control but not in a forceful way. It was like he was trying to convey a message that words couldn't express. His tongue brushed across her bottom lip and the tremor in his body grew stronger.

He was holding back.

For her.

She opened to him, giving him more, and he tasted her with a hunger that made her moan. His hand slid down from her hair to her waist, pulling her closer to him. His hard length of him pressed into her stomach and the bold display jolted desire deep into her body. She ran her hands up his chest, feeling the thick, well-used muscles under his shirt. He was so strong, so powerful, and yet he was gentle with her, as if she was something precious he didn't want to break.

Finally, he tore his lips away from hers, panting heavily.

“Fuck, I feel out of control,” he whispered, his voice rough with longing.

“It’s okay. I want you.”

It was the truth. She’d never wanted anyone or anything this much.

He growled low in his throat, then lifted her off her feet, tucking her legs around his waist, and carried her through the garage to his office.

The door had barely shut behind him when he had her propped up on the desk, sweater up yanked up, his head bowed against her chest.

“Fuck, I’m getting you all greasy, Mon. I’m sorry.” But he was still vibrating with tension, all keyed up. He didn’t sound sorry. He sounded desperate and needy. Angry, almost, but not with her.

“I don’t care. Touch me.” She squirmed in his grasp. She needed to feel his hands on her bare skin.

"I'm seriously filthy. I—"

“Josh, I need you. It’s okay.”

"Help me, then. Give me your tits. Pull 'em out."

She yanked the bra cups down and his mouth descended, sucking hard on one nipple, then the other.

She gasped, her head falling back.

“Please,” he begged, his voice rough. “Give me more.”

He probably meant her clothes, he wanted them off, he wanted more skin.

But she wanted him naked, too. So she started with his shirt. She lifted it up and over his head. As soon as he was bare chested, she leaned in and kissed him right where his big, fierce, protective heart was. He hissed.

She hummed her approval, liking him this undone and desperate.

She stripped off her own sweater next, dropping it somewhere on the floor, then her bra followed. Finally, she tugged his hands to her waist, settling them on her skin. Hoping he got her greasy, hoping it would imprint on her skin like a tattoo.

Reverently, he scooped his hands higher, around her ribs and up to her breasts, where her nipples were still wet from his mouth. He stopped well short of them, only cupping her so his mouth could descend again. She arched her back, pressing into his touch as his teeth sank into her skin, then his lips soothed the sting of those gentle bites.

She was on fire, burning from the inside out. So close, so ready, she could come right then, just from the heavy throb of his cock pressing the seam of her jeans up against her clit, and him cupping her breasts to his hungry mouth.

But it wasn't what they both needed.

"Josh." His name was a throaty moan spilling from her lips. "Naked. Now."

As if caught in a spell, she watched him unzip her jeans, push them down, and catch low on her hips.

"Show me how much you need me," he said huskily. "Show me where you want me."

Hands shaking, Monica reached down and pulled her panties aside.

He unzipped his own jeans, then laughed. "Fucking too many clothes. Wanted to fold you in half, but you can't hold your panties to the side and get my cock where we need it, can you?"

She joined him, giggling as she let go of her panties and shoved her jeans all the way off.

He reached for her panties and she waved him off. “These have to stay clean-ish. I only have two pairs.”

His laughter deepened at that, until he was leaning fully against her, his whole body shaking.

She wrapped her bare thighs around his waist, loving the warm press of his heavier body against hers. Between them, his cock throbbed. Both of them naked enough for this to happen.

And that sobered up the laughter.

Quiet settled as she wrapped her fingers around his shaft. He let out a shuddering exhale when she rolled her thumb over the slick bead of precome at the tip.

“It’s...we...”

She nodded. She knew. “We shouldn’t do this.”

Because she was leaving. That would probably explode their fragile peace, and the most intimate sex just added extra-jagged fragments to that.

Could she leave him, and honestly expect to come back for more whenever she wanted? This man who vibrated with the need to hold her, claim her, protect her at the slightest threat?

If she left, she couldn’t come back.

It wouldn’t be fair.

And she had to leave.

“But I want you,” he said, his voice cracking. “I’ve always wanted you. In every way.”

“There’s nobody else,” she promised him.

There never would be, she was painfully certain of that. She was too young to lose her heart, but it was what it was.

She loved Josh Kincaid.

He reached past her and swept everything off the desk with a single heavy push, then carefully lay her back.

As she fit them together, she saw a streak of grease on her lower belly,



and her pussy fluttered in delight around his tip.

He groaned and pushed inside.

Nothing had ever felt like this. The pleasure of him filling her was almost too much. She wanted to feel everything, every sensation. It didn't have to be good, or nice, or pretty. Just full. She wanted him to be completely buried inside her.

Her vision tunnelled as his hips met hers, his cock taking up residence inside her for the first time in years. Demanding room in her body, stretching her wide.

She sucked in a deep breath and dug her fingers into his shoulders. He groaned and thrust, just a little bit harder. She tightened around him, ready to cry out, but he swallowed the cry with a deep kiss. A kiss so rough and hungry she thought it might tear her in two.

Then he caught her ankle, circling it with his fingers—*leave marks there, too, please*—and shifted her leg up, folding it, opening her body more for his thick, deep intrusion.

He hunched over her, slowly dragging his cock out, then thrusting back in, his hips starting to move like a piston. Needing effort at first, then with more ease. He gripped her hair in one hand and the side of her neck with the other. Her hands slipped to clutch at his forearms.

They couldn't hold on to each other any tighter than they were.

He drove them both fast and hard, but she needed more. She wrapped her legs around him, her heels against his ass, and hitched herself against him. He pulled out, then pulsed back in until his cock slid against her g-spot.

“Yes! Josh!”

“There?”

She sobbed.

He did it again, and again.

“I'm so close.” He growled the words into her ear. “So close, baby. You feel so good.”

“Please,” she begged, not sure what she was begging for, but he gave her what she needed.

More, just more.

And then her orgasm rolled over her, catching her off guard and pushing her under a wave bigger than she expected, one that tumbled and rolled and pummelled. And through the chaos, she heard him groan her name, and go still.

When she caught her breath, his head was bowed, his hands were clamped against her body, and he held himself deep in her belly.

Neither of them moved.

She held her breath and felt his cock throb.

“Monica,” he whispered.

She turned her head and kissed his sweaty cheek. Oh God.

What did they just do?

## Chapter Twenty-seven

JOSH LEFT HIS OFFICE FIRST, just long enough to make sure the door was locked, and the blind drawn. Then he gave Monica the all clear, and she raced upstairs buck naked, clothes bundled in her arms.

He found her in the shower.

She gave him a small smile as she made room for him. “That was hot,” she whispered.

His heart hammered in his chest. “You don’t regret it?”

She let out a weak laugh. “No. I mean, I question whether or not it was smart. But no regret. We both needed that.”

He pulled her against his chest and exhaled hard. “I got big, greasy handprints all over you.”

This time, her laugh was more delighted. “That was definitely the highlight for me.” She blinked up at him, water drops clinging to her eyelashes. “I always did have a thing for you in the garage. Watching you change tires was...inspirational.”

He snorted. “Well, I’m about to run non-stop tire changes for the next two weeks.”

They both fell silent.

She wouldn't be here for that.

He grabbed his soap and scrubbed up. Rinsed off. And got out, letting her have the shower to herself.

---

“YOU REALLY DO CLEAN UP NICE.”

Josh had dressed and disappeared downstairs again before Monica got out of the shower.

She found him putting his office back to rights, from where he'd thrown everything off his desk so they could...

He glanced up, and the flare of heat in his gaze almost melted her.

Yeah.

So they could do *exactly* what both of them were thinking about right now.

She forced herself to think about his nice clothes. How good he looked with clothes on, instead of how much she'd enjoyed his hardworking hands all over her naked body.

He was wearing the same soft sweater and fitted jeans he put on the other night, but he had a dress shirt under the sweater, and he'd shaved.

It was all very...nice.

Like he'd dressed to impress, or at least, look good beside her. For her.

He glanced at the duffel bag she was gripping in her right hand.

“I'll probably have to sleep at the lake house tonight with my mom.”

He took a slow, deep breath and nodded. “Okay.”

“Maybe I don't have to. I'm not afraid to tell my mother that I'm staying with you, I mean. You're my husband. I'm allowed—”

“Mon, it's okay. Stay with your mother.”

And that was the end of that conversation.

He helped her into the truck, then opened the garage door.

Once they were on the road, she reached across the cab and covered his hand with hers. His skin was warm, in a way that made her want to spread her fingers wide and settle in against him, the way a lizard might stretch out on a rock.

Like Josh held all the energy of bright sun and simply touching him could warm her from the inside out.

She'd never let herself dwell on the intensity of their connection. Not like that. She'd loved him, intensely, and then she had to give him up. End of story. What was done was done.

But spending time with him again, after all this time—after years of being alone—made it impossible not to think about the what ifs, and not just in fleeting, emotional bursts.

Regret was a five-course meal these days.

And she had a maple panna cotta with gingerbread crumble in her near future. She couldn't fill up on regret before that.

*I love you*, she wanted to say. Wanted it to be enough, wanted it to mean something real. But she'd told him that once, and then broke that trust into a million splinters.

So she pushed it down into the same space she'd locked her *I'm sorry* feelings, too.

It wasn't what he wanted from her.

---

WHEN THEY ARRIVED, Adam and Isla were the only people on the main floor of the house.

Adam was unpacking food in the kitchen, and Isla was decorating an oversized dining table that stretched in front of a window that looked out onto the lake.

“Can I help?” Monica asked.

Isla gave her a bright smile. “I’m good. Your mom is upstairs getting ready.”

“Oh.” Monica glanced around. “This is a beautiful home.”

“One of the nicest in the area. The family who own it were in the construction business for a long time before they retired. Now they rent it out most of the time.”

A knock at the door announced the arrival of Owen and Kerry, who had a sleeping baby in a carrier, as well as Owen’s adult daughter, Becca, and her son Charlie, who raced to Josh.

“Hey buddy,” he said, hoisting the little boy in his arms. “This is Monica.”

Her chest squeezed tight, and she cursed the universe for being so extra-pointy in showing her what she could have had if she’d only trusted Josh.

Charlie frowned at her, and she was fully prepared for the toddler to loudly announce to the room that he didn’t like this strange lady.

But after a second of suspicious appraisal, his expression softened, and he tilted his head to the side. “Monny?”

She smiled. “Yep, I’m Monny. Nice to meet you, Charlie.”

“Monny pretty.” He kicked his feet. “Down!”

As soon as Josh set him down, Charlie grabbed Monica’s hand and dragged her to the stairs.

“Uh…” Becca chased after them, but Monica was fine. She could supervise a toddler on the stairs.

She gave the young mom—who wasn’t much younger than her—a fast wave. “We’re good.”

Charlie climbed, fearless in his adventuring, and Monica hovered right behind him. Just before they lost sight of the main level, he hollered, “Buh-bye, Mama,” and everyone laughed.

Upstairs, he poked his head into one bedroom, then the next. Like most

vacation homes, it was nicely decorated, but very empty.

“No toys up here, little guy,” she murmured.

Then the bedroom door ahead of them opened—and her mother stepped out, looking crisp and cool.

And not alone.

Behind her, Trent Aitken was adjusting his shirt.

“Mom!”

Bianca’s step halted for a split-second, but then she dropped her gaze to Charlie. “You’ve found a child.”

Well, that was one way to avoid talking about whatever had just happened behind closed doors.

Not that Monica was one to talk. She’d had sex with Josh three times today.

Charlie pivoted far too fast for Monica’s liking, and she sprinted to the top of the stairs to cut him off.

He giggled.

“How do you go down the stairs? Do you get down on your belly?”

He giggled harder and ran straight at her.

Panic flooded her limbs, and she caught him against her body.

“Monny pretty,” he said, then immediately started thrashing. “Down!”

“Becca,” she called out. “How does he go down the stairs?”

“At a terrifying top speed of a hundred miles an hour,” his mother called from downstairs. “Charlie! On your bum, please.”

Monica gave her mother a *we’ll talk about this later* look, which Bianca ignored, and they all went downstairs together, Monica’s pulse not settling back to anything near normal until Charlie was safely on the ground floor again.

---

JOSH HADN'T WANTED to do a big family dinner.

But as he watched Monica cuddle with Charlie, sandwiched between Becca and Catie on the sofa in front of the fireplace, he wondered what other amazing ideas he'd rejected far too quickly.

"I can see why my ex-husband felt threatened by you," Bianca said, sliding onto the seat next to him. She had a glass of wine in her hand. Rosé.

Josh wondered if Trent had made that appear. Or if Bianca had manifested it out of thin air.

He wished he could manifest a how-to manual for mothers-in-law. "I'm no threat to anyone," he said slowly.

"That's a shame. I would prefer it if you were."

"I think you're seriously underestimating my resources, Mrs. Fischer."

"Bianca. And it's not your resources that give you power, Josh. It's how much you love my daughter." She took a sip of wine. "You do love her, don't you?"

This was a trap. There was no right answer. So he said nothing.

"It's important that you never let anyone—and by anyone, I mean Michael—tell you that anything is more powerful than that love."

"He leveraged the full weight of the United States government against your daughter the last time I dared to love her out loud," Josh said. "There's no Valentine's Day card that outweighs the threat of a federal investigation."

"That was bullshit."

"So it would seem—three years later."

"You should let go of that."

He laughed. He couldn't help it. "Ma'am—"

"Bianca. Really, I don't like to be called anything else."

"Okay." He took a deep breath and turned sideways. Looked at her, really looked at her. "Bianca."

She smiled, and it reached all the way to the depths of her unwavering gaze. "That's better. I like it when you look me in the eye, Josh."



He had to hold her gaze, then. “I promise I have let go of a lot of old hurt in the last few days. And I promise I only want the best for your daughter. She means the world to me, and always will.”

“Then don’t let her divorce you.”

“That’s not up to me.”

“Of course it is.” She squeezed his arm as Adam announced that dinner was served. “Just remember how powerful your love is. It gives her everything she’s ever wanted.”

THAT NIGHT, Josh had to be satisfied with a long goodnight hug at the door to the lake house, after all his siblings were gone. Monica's mother was inside, probably opening another bottle of rosé.

It wasn't the time to ask her if her mother was a deluded romantic or a scheming mastermind—or to find a way to politely say he wasn't interested in Bianca's games, either way.

Not when he had limited time, and needed Monica to know more important things, like the fact he would miss her that night. That he loved having her in his arms.

And that he couldn't wait to see her in the morning for their farmer's market date.

She pressed up on her toes and brushed her mouth against his. "Thank you for tonight."

"It was fun."

"My mom cornered you." She glanced over her shoulder. "Speaking of..."

"Yeah. Go." He kissed her again. "Text me when you're in bed."

She gave him a secret smile, which carried him all the way back to his garage.

And when she texted him two hours later, he was filled with such a bright

fucking light he was sure she'd be able to tell from where she was sleeping on the edge of town.

MONICA

Did you ma'am my mom? And survive?

JOSH

Not my finest moment.

MONICA

She likes you. You're fine.

JOSH

She scares me.

MONICA

She'll like that, too.

JOSH

And you got the Charlie seal of approval.

MONICA

Speaking of terrifying. That child has no fear.

She'd hovered over Charlie every time he wanted to climb the stairs, which he did repeatedly after dinner. Josh hadn't been able to see anything else. There was something captivating about her care for the little boy.

He typed—and deleted—two variations of a text asking Monica if she wanted kids.

That wasn't any of his business.

Instead, he changed the subject to the mural idea she had, and then she called him, and they talked about it until he heard her yawn.

"Go to sleep, Mon," he said softly.

"You go to sleep."

"I will."

"See you in the morning?"

"Can't wait."

And it was true. He couldn't wait. He ached to see her again.

He drifted to sleep on a tangle of fresh memories. Delighted laughs, brave toddler giggles, and warm, shared looks across a room filled with family.

He dreamed. Woke up hard in the middle of the night. Forced himself back to sleep because he had a date in the morning with his wife, and he had to find a way to keep this going, and it wouldn't be an easier if he was running on zero rest.

Tuesday dawned warm and sunny, the kind of early spring day that promised it wasn't too soon for a seasonal tire change clinic, even though there would be at least one more storm before winter finally relinquished her hold on the Bruce.

It was hard to believe there was a storm just two days earlier. It was almost like it hadn't happened.

But Josh wasn't at home, watching the group chat fly about who was going to be at the market with their spouse.

He was walking under a banner that stretched over the entrance, declaring this the final week of a maple syrup festival at the farmer's market.

And his wife was holding his hand like that was just a thing they did now. Tangle their fingers together in public.

"It's very cute that you have a maple syrup festival," she said as they waited in line for a sample.

"You came at the right time. Next week is the start of an asparagus festival, I'm pretty sure," he said. "Brought to you by Big Asparagus."

She laughed. "I like asparagus."

"Me, too. I just don't think we need to pretend it's festival worthy."

"What's after asparagus?"

"Apples? No, that's in the fall." He shrugged. "I don't know."

"What's your favourite season up here?" It felt like a leading question. As in, when should she come back?

"There's something to like about all of them. Even winter. It's brutal in the depths of it, but it's quiet. No tourists. Gets dark real early, which is

surprisingly nice.” He tugged her close and brushed his lips against her temple. “Long nights at home, all cozy together, could be fun.”

She smiled up at him. “Like yesterday kind of fun?”

“Fuck yeah.” And now he was at risk of getting a hard-on at the farmer’s market. He cleared his throat and glanced down the aisle. “What else do you want to get? Cheese?”

“Cheese is always good,” she said, her voice ringing with laughter.

They strolled around the entire market, tasting samples and buying food that Josh would eat on his own. And they didn’t talk about what was going to happen next.

When he had a full hand of shopping bags—the hand that wasn’t holding hers—they headed back to his truck.

“This was good.”

“It was...” Great. It had been amazing. And it had been nothing. A walk in the sunshine with his wife. A few samples. But he’d got to loop his fingers through hers, light and easy, and that was something he never thought he’d ever have again.

He stowed the bags behind her seat, then closed the gap between them, curving over her in the relative privacy of the open door. “You sure you can’t stay longer?”

---

MONICA WASN’T sure about anything.

Josh exhaled. “Don’t answer that. I know you can’t.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Come on, let’s get you back.”

“Wait.” She set her hand on his chest.

Last night, she’d told her mother about the private investigator. Bianca had rolled her eyes and promised Michael couldn’t do anything with the information that Monica was being civil with her husband. It was a free

country, her mother insisted. And then she'd said, "*You're allowed to be more than civil, you know. If you still love him...*"

And Monica had burst into tears.

She didn't want to cry over Josh.

She just wanted...

Deep down, she knew she wanted him to love her. It wasn't enough that she loved him. She wanted to be loved, and that would take time.

*I don't want to love you.*

They'd come so far from that angry outburst, but she couldn't forget how hurt he was.

Yesterday, she'd been so focused on not hurting him any more that she had drawn a hard line in the sand. She had to go, and not play with his feelings.

But her dreams last night were all soft, and full of Josh, and she woke up full of hope.

Now she was seriously considering every possibility.

Could she actually go to Italy and never come back?

No. Impossible. And actually cruel to consider.

So all the what ifs that *were* possible included her returning to his side. Maybe they would never be more than friends. Maybe this round of their affair would sputter out once they had fully exercised all their unfulfilled desires.

But she would be back.

And she knew there was a difference between what she wanted—his love—and what she needed. He was working hard to build a life for himself, and it might not have space for her. She didn't need him to make room for her if he wasn't there yet.

She wasn't going to demand anything from him. Wouldn't be any kind of drain.

All she wanted was an open door when she returned.

Now, she smoothed her hand over his beating heart. “I can’t stay. But I can come back, if you want. And if you aren’t sure—”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I want you to come back.”

“We don’t need to explain that to anyone.”

“No, but that won’t stop them from asking.” He tugged on a strand of her hair. “I don’t mind the questions, for the record. I just don’t like people talking about you.”

She frowned. “And I just don’t like people talking about you.”

“Me? I’m a grownup, Mon. Big shoulders. I can take some gossip.”

She slid her hands up to hook behind his neck. “I’ve been trained to ignore people talking about me since birth.”

“Well, la di da,” he whispered, lowering his mouth to hover over hers.

“I think I left my sunglasses at your apartment.” Her breath hitched.

“Then we’d better go get them before I relinquish you to your mother.”

“Might take a bit to find them...” She brushed a kiss against the corner of his lips.

“I’ll help you do a thorough search, don’t worry.”

JOSH WAS MISERABLE.

Monica had been gone for four days, and he'd had work to pour himself into—nonstop tire changes, as everyone in Pine Harbour rolled up to his garage to swap out their winter tires for the all-seasons or summer tires they used when it wasn't fucking freezing out.

It wasn't enough to distract him from the painful, clawing sensation in his chest, like his heart wanted to tear itself out of the hollow shell of his being.

And her scent was on every surface of his apartment.

By Saturday morning, he'd given up trying to sleep. He dragged himself out of the bed that made him think of her, strapped on his running shoes, and headed out the door for a punishing run.

He found himself on Seth and January's street, clear across town, before he slowed down.

Chest heaving, he texted his brother.

JOSH

You up?

SETH

Yeah, what's wrong?

JOSH

Nothing's wrong.



SETH

It's two hours before you're usually willing to speak to another human being.

JOSH

I'm outside your house.

The door swung open thirty seconds later, and Seth gestured for him to come inside, a look of concern on his face.

"I really am fine," Josh lied.

Seth didn't say anything. He just led the way into the kitchen, where he put on coffee and dug out a carton of eggs.

Josh didn't protest being fed. He hadn't eaten much since Tuesday. Most of the food they bought at the farmer's market, he'd taken across to August and her kids. And then immediately made himself scarce, because he didn't need August's questions.

At least Seth didn't ask—

"You miss her," his brother said.

Technically, that wasn't a question.

And statements of such clear, painful fact didn't need to be confirmed.

"What is she doing right now?"

Probably grilling some olive farmer on his marketing practices. "Dunno."

"You could give her a call. Let her know you're thinking about her." Seth shrugged. "Honesty is always a good policy."

Josh had started texts to her a dozen times a day. "What time is it in Italy?"

"Noon, I think."

He nodded.

Seth gestured at the coffeemaker. "That needs five minutes. I'm going to go have a super quick shower."

Giving Josh some privacy.

It took three of those minutes for him to work himself up to calling her—

and then the phone wouldn't connect. "God damn it," he growled.

When his brother returned, he was nearly finished with his first mug of coffee.

"Did you reach her?"

"No answer," he muttered. "I need to go there."

"Where?"

"Italy."

"Uh..." Seth exhaled. "Okay. When?"

Josh swung around. "You don't think it's a bad idea?"

"It's a big idea. Could go either way, but it's probably not bad. Don't you have tire clinics all next week?"

"Yeah. Want to learn how to use the tire changing machine?" Josh was already texting the rest of their brothers.

JOSH

I'm going to Italy.

WILL

Wait, what?

JOSH

I know you guys need to work, but Seth is going to run the rest of my tire clinics and he needs help.

From across the kitchen, Seth groaned. "I walked into that."

"You aren't busy right now," Josh pointed out. "And it's good money."

"Yeah, good money you need to cover a last-minute flight to fucking Italy."

January appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Who's going to Italy?"

"Josh."

"Oh." She looked surprised. "That's a big decision for seven in the morning. You don't want to sleep on it?"

"I can't sleep without her, so...no."

"Catie will kill you if you skip out before the bachelor auction tonight,"

January said.

“Don’t care.” He was looking up flights on his phone and ignoring the texts from his brothers streaming back in.

ADAM

I can help Monday and Tuesday.

OWEN

I’ve got Thursday through Saturday off.

WILL

I can help after school each day.

“Fuck,” Josh muttered. “There are no flights today or tomorrow.”

“Okay, let’s just...” January crossed the room and took his phone from his hands. “We’ll put the feelers out. Maybe Olivia knows a good travel agent. Unless you want this to be on the down low?”

He shook his head. He didn’t care who knew what he was going to do.

Seth plunked scrambled eggs and toast in front of him. “Eat. And then we’ll go to the garage and you’ll show me how to be you for the day.” His brother kissed January. “I got a new job, honey. I’m Mechanic Seth for the next week.”

“Just Tire Technician Seth,” Josh corrected.

Seth flipped him the bird.

---

IN BETWEEN CUSTOMERS THAT DAY, Josh rearranged the appointments for the following week, making Wednesday as light as possible for Seth. Then, once the day at the garage was over, he had a lightning quick shower and dressed for his evening responsibilities as Catie’s bartender at the bachelor auction.

Even though he wanted nothing to do with the event, he was impressed with what she’d pulled together. This would be the biggest charity fundraising weekend Pine Harbour had ever seen, he was sure of it.

And they wouldn't miss him not being on the stage.

Olivia Minelli found him as soon as the school gymnasium doors opened. "Hey there, Mr. Bartender."

"What can I get you?"

"One lemonade and one light beer, please. January told me you're looking for a travel agent who can find you a last-minute flight."

He grabbed her drinks. "Yeah. At this point, I'm considering driving to the airport tomorrow and begging for a standby seat."

"I don't think that'll be necessary. I'm pretty sure Isla knows someone who can get you a flight." A line started to form behind her. "I'll find you later."

He lifted his voice as she left. "Thanks!"

Business was steady after that, even after the auction began.

"Our first bachelor tonight is Pine Harbour's own Bailey Patel," Catie said, flashing a megawatt smile from her MC podium on one side of the stage. "Bailey is a businesswoman who loves a new challenge, and a soccer player—"

Josh let out a whoop for his sometimes teammate, along with a few of their other friends.

Catie waited for the cheering to die down. "Her favourite food is her mother's biryani, and she loves animals. This year, she's going to take her winning date on an after hours midnight prowl through Pine Harbour's favourite businesses. Break into *Bake Sale!* and raid the cupcake icing. Bust into Pine Harbour Brewery and steal a six-pack of their wheat beer. And end the night by sneaking onto the dock at Howe's Marina and watching for shooting stars. Leashed pets are welcome on this date. Let's start the bidding for Bailey at five hundred dollars."

There was a fast bid from someone on the soccer team, and then it was immediately one-upped by the local vet.

"I hear six hundred, do I have six-fifty? Six-fifty to the young man in the

County Country t-shirt. Do I have seven hundred? Seven hundred to the good animal doctor, thank you. Seven-fifty...”

A few people hopped in on the bidding, but the vet prevailed, and a night of hijinks with Bailey was secured for fifteen hundred dollars.

An exceptional start to the night.

Josh didn't pay attention to most of the other bachelors. He focused on serving beer, and keeping an eye on Olivia Minelli, who hadn't come back yet.

He'd track her down if need be.

Or just go to Toronto. Hell, he could drive across the border and catch a flight out of Detroit if that was easier.

“All right folks, we have one more auction to get through, and then we'll bid you all a good night. As a reminder, if you have won any of the auctions already, please see the cashier before you leave for the night, or our trusty enforcer will visit you tomorrow to collect payment.”

That was Will, who gave everyone a menacing look, which would probably be more fearsome if he weren't wearing a polo shirt and khakis.

Josh rolled his eyes.

“Our final bachelor of the night is...unavailable to walk the runway. But to represent Pine Harbour's favourite mechanic, we have a stand-in. Please welcome Isla Petersen, the owner-operator of *Bake Sale!*”

The crowd broke out in delighted shouts as his sister-in-law strutted onto the stage in grease-marked jeans and a faded t-shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal her biceps—which were also streaked with grease. She waved a wrench at the crowd.

Josh almost dropped the can of beer in his hands.

Slowly, he set it down and gripped the edge of the counter.

He was going to kill them.

Isla reached where her sister-in-law was standing at the podium and gave a final, exaggerated flex. Catie turned to the index card in her hand. “Josh

Kincaid is a thirty-four-year-old married man who likes to restore muscle cars, play soccer, find hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and sleep in late. His idea of a hot date starts with an oil change and ends with a lube and filter check. The winner of this auction gets a year of free engine maintenance—if you know what I mean, ladies—”

Isla gave the crowd a wink when Catie paused for effect.

“And a special night out on the peninsula, searching for the best tacos east of Lake Huron. To make up for the fact that his kisses are reserved for another, his wife has agreed to match the winning donation.”

“What?” Josh barked. He pushed himself up and over the bar, not caring if he was making a scene. “Catie—”

Everyone around him looked over.

He also didn’t care about the bidding, which Catie was gamely trying to start at five hundred dollars, but the room was buzzing.

She tapped her gavel against the podium. “Let’s get this auction underway, folks!”

“Six hundred,” Esther Kim said as Josh waded into the crowd, trying to get to the stage. She winked at him.

“Seven hundred.”

“Eight hundred.” That was Olivia Minelli, whose husband was standing next to her.

“One million,” a nervous voice said from the back of the room.

Josh spun around.

Monica was standing in the open doorway.

Everyone went silent.

He started to push his way through the crowd, his eyes locked on hers. She stood there, seemingly frozen, then laughed and raced towards him.

He caught her in his arms and spun her around. “What are you doing here?”

“Missed you too much,” she whispered.

Then she grabbed his hand and pulled him in the direction of the stage.  
The crowd parted.

When she reached the stage, she repeated what she said at the entrance.  
“I bid one million dollars,” she said, voice clear as a bell.

Catie looked at Josh. Then she picked up her gavel. “Do I hear one million and one?”

The room stayed completely silent, aside from the soft hum of the overhead lights.

Josh suddenly needed to be alone with his wife. He leaned over and whispered, “Can we go somewhere and talk?”

She nodded, and he grabbed her hand.

Behind them, Catie’s gavel banged. “Sold,” she shouted as Josh dragged Monica out to the schoolyard. “To his wife!”

There was hooting and hollering, but nobody followed them, and pretty soon they were alone. Just them and the sound of his nervous exhalation.

Monica paced ahead of him when they reached the junior climbers. She went up a ladder and perched herself at the top of a slide.

She pointed behind him. “Look at that.”

He glanced back.

The moon was just rising, a big orange orb hanging heavily just above the horizon.

“Mon, you don’t have to—”

“I do.” When he turned back to face her, she had a determined look on her face. “You don’t want my money, so it’s important that I give it away. And I can’t think of a better set of charities than the ones in my new hometown.”

“Your...”

“Mine.” She nodded definitively. “I mean, eventually. After you ask me to stay.”

“I—” He cut himself off. “Why aren’t you in Italy?”

“I told you. I missed you. I’ll fly back next week for Amira’s wedding, but I don’t need to be there for all the pre-wedding nonsense. And don’t worry about the carbon footprint. I’ve offset that. And I promise this will be the last trip I take for a while, after I move everything here. Although that may have to happen in stages, because you don’t have room for even a tenth of my wardrobe.”

“Monica!”

She stopped. Blinked at him. And burst into tears.



“I’M SORRY,” she blubbered against his shirt as he scooped her off the top of the slide and hauled her into his chest. “I’m extra emotional this week. I thought this would be romantic.”

“It is,” he promised. His heart was galloping against his ribs, and he was slow to react. “I’m just shocked.”

Fuck, he’d made her cry.

This was their chance to get it right. Their moment, that they’d tell their kids and grandkids about. And he’d been so shocked, he’d ruined her big grand gesture.

He started to laugh.

It had all clicked into place for him this week. Their history faded away. And he’d seen her, really and truly. Her love, her hope, and her faith—in him. In *them*.

But he hadn’t considered for a second that she might come back for him.

“I was going to come to you in Italy,” he murmured into her hair. “I’m being a big idiot right now because I can’t believe you’re actually here.”

“You were going to...” She drew back and looked up at him, shock written all over her face. “What?”

“I woke up this morning and I couldn’t handle the thought of not seeing you for another week, not being able to tell you that I still love you. I

couldn't get a flight out tonight, so I..." He trailed off. "Wait. They knew."

"Who knew?"

"Monica."

She gave him a shy smile. "The sisters-in-law? Yeah, they knew. I told them yesterday I was coming back for the auction, and they should find a way to get you into it."

"Catie didn't even try."

"I liked what they did."

"January was there when I decided I needed to go to Italy. She re-directed me and promised she'd help me find a flight tomorrow."

"I owe her a drink." She wound her arms around his neck. "You love me?"

"I love you."

"You didn't want to love me."

"That was fear talking." He couldn't believe she was right here, in his arms. "I love you so much it fucking hurts. And when you showed up here, that was confusing. Because it hurt, and it was hard. But I'm never again going to mistake this ache as anything other than the rawest need for you. You know what it tells me?"

"What?"

He stroked his fingertips along her jaw and up onto the bottom curve of her cheek. Finding the edge of her smile and drawing it out with his thumb. Savouring this moment, his heart hammering against his ribs. "That you're mine, and you'll always be mine. No matter what."

"I'm going to hold you to that," she whispered. "Because I love you, too."

"I know."

"Josh!" She laughed. "So cocky."

"It's not cocky. You just seriously overpaid for a year of oil changes. There's only one reason to do that."

"Maybe I did it for the incredibly hot sex."

He grinned. “What we did in my office? That was love.”

“It really was.” She shivered. “Do we need to go back inside? Or can we go home?”

“Will knows where to find you tomorrow to demand payment.”

He held her hand the whole way back to the garage. Carefully locked the door behind them, then followed her upstairs and showed her just how much he loved her.

Twice.

It wasn't marathon sex. It was fast the first time, and sort of silly and quick the second time. But it was incredible. A little gritty, a lot real. The best sex of their life, probably, because it felt joyously like the start of something. Like the start of forever.

And when they were finished, she rested her cheek on his damp chest and they came up with a plan.

Step one was to make a midnight snack.

Step two was to go for a walk down to the lake.

“I can't believe the snow has all melted.”

He caught her hand. “Careful. Stay on the path. The mud is disgusting.”

She sighed happily and spun in a circle, then she looked up at the sky.

“The sky is different here,” she whispered.

He knew it was, but he wasn't looking at the heavens tonight. He couldn't look away from her upturned face.

She'd come back to him.

“Josh?”

“Yes?”

“What star is that?”

He dragged in a long, slow breath, then gathered his wife in his arms and followed her finger to a bright spot just above the horizon. “Sirius, I'm pretty sure.” He pulled out his phone to check an app to be sure. “Yeah, that's Canis Major just about to disappear. And that's Canis Minor. So if we go over from

there, that long constellation is Hydra.”

She snuggled in against his chest. “Nice.”

“Ready to go back to bed? You must be exhausted.”

She glanced up at him and bit her lip.

“What?”

“I am tired.”

“Good.” He paused. “But?”

“There’s something else I need to tell you. Something my mom told me, and I wasn’t sure...But you said you’ll love me no matter what.”

He set his hands on her shoulders and looked her right in the eye. “And that’s true. I will. Now, out with it.”

“The thing is, we’re sort of between a rock and a hard place.” She gave him a funny look, one that warned him not to argue, even though he wouldn’t—couldn’t, because he didn’t know what they were talking about. “And I don’t want you to get all defensive when I outline what the rock is and what the hard place is.”

“All right.”

“The thing is, I know this isn’t ideal. But we don’t get to pick the perfect circumstances in which to fall in love, or stay in love, or fight for love. We just get what we get.”

“Okay.” He liked the way she said *love* three times. He’d never get tired of that.

“Three years ago, my father played us against each other. He knew that you wanted to be your own, self-made man. He knew that if he pushed the *she’s an heiress and you can’t take her money* button, you’d get defensive, because of course you don’t want my money.” She held up her hand, as if to stop him from interrupting.

He couldn’t even if he wanted to. He was transfixed by her fire.

“And he knew that all I wanted in the entire world was to love you. To be loved by you, yes, of course, but *loving you* was the best thing I’d ever found.

I went twenty-one years not really understanding what love is, and then I found you. So he knew he could use that. Make me give you up *because* I loved you. And he manipulated me into telling you it was about the money, to hide the legal threat...*for your own good.*”

“I hate how effective that was for him,” Josh admitted.

“Me, too. We both resented him for that then, and now. We saw him as a bully, right?”

Josh nodded. “Yes. And I’m sorry—”

She shook her head. “Don’t be. I’m not. His loss. But Josh. *Josh*. He’s not a bully. Well, he is. But that’s not *all* he is, and not what primarily drives him. He’s scared. *We* scared him. Because...” She took a deep breath. “And this is where the rock and the hard place comes in, and please please please don’t leap to any conclusions, okay?”

“Sure.”

“I need a stronger assurance than that.”

“I love you. I’m just listening. I promise.”

“Well, the thing is, I can’t let you divorce me without a fair settlement. I just can’t. So that’s the rock, although I did just give away a chunk of money, so that reduces how much you could get from me.”

He had zero intention of divorcing her. “And the hard place?”

“If you stay married to me, you are entitled to a seat on the Fischer Racing board of directors.”

JOSH'S EYES NARROWED, and he tilted his head a little, but he didn't say anything.

Monica took that as a cautiously good sign and steamed ahead. "Not just entitled to—once the board is notified that I am married, they have to provide a protected seat for you. It's written into the governance documents. And the seat comes with shares—"

He held up his hand.

She stopped.

The head tilt slowly rocked to the other side. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I didn't know." That confession came out in a rush. "I knew my father's ex-wives all have seats and shares, but I thought that was part of their divorce settlements. It was something my lawyer dug up while I was gone, with my mother's help."

Josh rocked back on his heels. "Your mother said something to me...I don't think she wanted to tell me that outright, but she was really adamant that I not give up on you. And I wouldn't, but I didn't want to tell her that before I had a chance to tell you. I was waiting for the right time."

"My grandfather built it into the design of the company to ensure that it could always stay a family business, if a majority of the stakeholders want it to be so."

“You said your father was taking the business public.”

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Nodded it.

“Do you want me to take a seat on the board to try to stop that from happening?” His brows were pulled tight now.

“No.” Oh, now she felt small. “I want you to take a seat on the board because it’s your right as my husband. As part of my family.”

“All right.” He bounced on his heels, his body relaxing again. And he held out his hand. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s after midnight, baby. What more do you want tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll have questions later.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe we can discuss them on the way to your friend’s fancy wedding.”

---

THEY DISCUSSED nothing about the business on the flight two days later. They napped, because private planes have full-sized beds, and they were both exhausted after a quick stop in Montreal for Josh to be outfitted with clothes for the week ahead.

After they woke up, Monica gave Josh a quick primer on her friends.

Amira, the bride-to-be. Lebanese-American, but was raised in England until she was sent to the Swiss boarding school where they met.

Sylvie. Very French. Mother was a model, father was a politician.

Cathryn. English. Came from a long line of industry magnates. Her mother was a pop singer in the 80s, and her father famously had a dozen other children as well, from a variety of women.

“In some ways, it was much simpler when we kept our relationship a secret,” she murmured as she leaned her head on his shoulder. “I can’t

promise that you're going to like them."

"I will, though. Because they are your friends."

"They can be a bit much."

"So you can, princess." He was laughing at her. "And I love that."

"You know what you're going to love?"

"What's that?"

She smiled to herself. "Driving in Italy."

---

JOSH COULDN'T BELIEVE his eyes. Waiting for them at the airport, on the other side of the world's fastest customs clearance in the concierge building, was a vintage Iso Grifo muscle car. Cherry red and gleaming, it was a thing of beauty, and he groaned at the sight.

"What is this?"

"Our ride."

He groaned again.

She leaned in. "I'm not going to say, stop making sex noises about the car, but I think the guy behind us might proposition you if you do that again."

Josh glanced over his shoulder. "Worth it. Did you ever want to have a foursome with a car?"

"Wasn't top of my bucket list." She giggled. "You like?"

"Jesus Christ, I can't believe this is real." He circled it. "We get to..."

"Yep."

"Is this where you tell me this is a perk of being a board member?"

"And shareholder," she added. "But no, I was saving that for when we visit the Ferrari campus in Maranello, after the wedding."

"Okay. I see what's happening. I'm being bribed." He pressed his hands to his chest and grinned. "And princess, feel free to keep bribing me. Hop in. You're navigating."



The car started with a heavy, satisfying rumble that made Josh's cock twitch. This was a car that wanted to race, but she would have to wait. Traffic was heavy, but Monica gave him ample warning for lane changes and merges. And once they were on the A1 heading south, the highway opened up ahead of him. They twisted around Florence, then the rolling hills of Tuscany came into better view.

Olive groves spilled right down to the freeway's edge, and towns dotted the tops of the hills.

"We're three exits away," Monica called out over the rush of wind through the open windows.

He nodded.

In his rearview mirror, he spotted something yellow racing up on his ass.

A Bugatti, he realized, as he pulled up alongside.

And the driver was checking out his wheels.

Josh flashed Monica a grin. "Look, we've got company."

She leaned across him and waved. The woman driving the Bugatti waved back. And then she pointed ahead.

"She wants to race," Monica said excitedly.

"We're in a foreign country. This is a car I cannot afford to wreck. I have precious cargo. And most importantly, she would kick my ass in that thing."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "What did you tell me? Sometimes cars just want to play on the highway?"

He remembered saying something like that. He floored the gas pedal, surging ahead. The Bugatti played chase. Then he dropped back, and she raced ahead. His turn to catch up.

They leap frogged up the highway like that until their exit was upon us, then he regretfully slowed down.

The Bugatti slowed down, too, pulling off behind him.

From Monica's self-satisfied smile in the passenger seat, Josh was pretty sure she knew the driver. "Is that Sylvie?"

“Cathryn. I told her to try to find us on the highway.”

The villa they were all staying at was a decent drive off the highway. Twisty turns and tight lanes, climbing all the way to the top of a hill, and then part way down the other side.

But when they finally arrived, Josh had to admit, it was worth the insane effort to get there.

“This might be the most beautiful place on earth,” he murmured after they hopped out and he gave the Iso Grifo a pat for being such a good ride.

Behind them, Cathryn parked on a splashy angle.

As she was getting out, a group rushed out of the villa to greet them.

Josh would have known who Amira was even if she wasn't wearing a Bride-to-be t-shirt.

“You've missed so much,” she scolded Monica, but then she turned a warm smile on Josh. “But this is worth it. The secret husband.”

Josh wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders. “Not that secret anymore.”

“We were just about to go for a swim. Everyone, this is Josh. Josh, this is everyone.”

In the pool, Josh got the story of their friendship from the other side. Sylvie explained how the four had bonded over parental disasters. Cathryn interjected to make a clear point that she won the prize for most high-profile family mess. And Amira summed it all up by explaining they had spent their teen years dodging paparazzi around Europe.

It really put his own very brief brush with being TikTok's main character for a day in perspective.

And once the four friends climbed out to dress for dinner, and Amira's fiancé Hassan offered Josh a beer, he had a chance to catch his breath.

“Glad you could make it,” Hassan said, holding out his own bottle for a clink.

“Cheers. Thanks.”

“How was the drive?”

“Good. Monica surprised me with a nice set of wheels for the trip.”

“I saw. Pretty sweet.”

Josh grinned. “Yeah.”

“You have anything like that at home?”

He laughed. “Let me tell you about this pickup truck named Betsy.”

MUCH LIKE MONICA'S own wedding, Amira's was fuelled by Prosecco and had a joyous, laughter-tinged soundtrack. Unlike Monica's, Amira's was well-attended by friends and family. In addition to her friends who were sharing the villa, the bride had fifty other guests who joined them on Friday night for a casual late night feast, and then again on Saturday for her exchange of vows with Hassan.

By the time Josh carried Monica back to their room, her pretty but totally impractical shoes dangling from his fingertips, she was decidedly tipsy.

"Does this remind you of anything?" she asked as he unzipped her.

"Last night, but fancier?"

She giggled. "I was thinking of our own wedding. It's the same happy, bubbly feeling."

"That's called champagne."

"Prosecco."

"Potato."

"Potah-to." She twirled around, only wearing her slip now.

He caught her by her hips and smoothed his hands up her thighs, under the scrap of silk. "You, my wife, are drunk."

"Tipsy."

"Po—"

She caught his lips with hers and shut him up.

His fingers hooked her thong, then shoved it aside. She was drenched for him. Being happy was such a turn on.

He hummed in pleasure as she rocked against his fingers, then groaned when he sank them into her body.

“Fucking love how hot and tight you,” he growled as he turned them both, so he could sprawl against the headboard.

She straddled him, smoothing her hands over the expensive shirt she was about to rip off his body. “Take this off.”

“Patience.”

“Want to fuck my husband.”

He took it off. Buttons pinged in a few different directions. A problem for tomorrow.

She trailed kisses across his jaw and down his neck. Over his shoulder and—

He caught her jaw and dragged her face back to his mouth.

Kissed her hard. “Then fuck me,” he growled, unzipping beneath her.

He was as hard as she was wet, and it felt like she was cleaving herself in two as she sank onto his shaft.

She tossed her head back, and he latched his mouth onto her neck. Kissed and sucked her there, then lower.

God, she loved it when he sucked on her tits. Fucking loved it. Fucking craved it.

Okay, she was drunk.

But it was fine, this was wonderful, he was her husband, and he was inside her. He was so big and hard, and—

He pinched her nipple.

She squeaked and dragged her face back from the ceiling to look at him. “You pinched me.”

He grinned. “You were just moaning and staring at the ceiling. Which is

hot. Totally hot. But do you want to come so we can go to bed, my darling, tipsy wife?”

“Drunk wife,” she whispered.

“Mm, yeah you are.” He re-arranged her limbs around him and took over, slowly fucking into her from below. Stoking a fire, making it burn bright and hot and dangerous inside her.

“Are you coming to come inside me?” Her pussy clenched at the thought.

His grip on her tightened. “Yes.”

“I want your babies, Josh Kincaid.”

“You’ll have them.” He groaned and thrust harder, deeper. “God damn it, say that again.”

She clung to him. “Make me pregnant.”

“Fuck, Monica!” He growled and flipped her over. Dragged her to the edge of the bed and hitched her hips up, thrusting into her again. “Look at you take your husband’s cock. So fucking hot.”

She gazed up at him, a big, thick beast of a man, inflamed by the promise of claiming his wife. And all she could think was, *he’s so beautiful. He’s mine.*

Josh found her gaze and held it as he pumped into her. Slower now. More deliberate. “My wife,” he rasped. “My bride.”

“Yes.”

He spread her legs wide and nestled a heavy hand low over her belly, his thumb curving over her mound to her clit.

“My. Wife.”

“Yours.”

“Forever.” Her breath hitched.

He rolled his thumb, amping up the sensation, and the fire he’d stoked turned into an inferno. She cried out, and he groaned her name twice, sending her into a climax that ripped through her like a wild blaze.

“Mine,” he murmured as he fell on top of her. “Always.”

THE NEXT THREE weeks were an absolute whirlwind of house hunting (because Monica wasn't going to live in the serial-killer apartment long term) and legal preparations (because there would be a Fischer Racing board meeting in a few months where she was going to drop a bombshell in her father's lap).

But most of all, the next three weeks were more of the same fizzy, bubbly feeling she'd recaptured in Italy.

It felt like their own honeymoon, but even better, because neither of them dreaded what was coming next.

She was so excited to move to Pine Harbour.

So it was very annoying that on her first week back there, she felt totally exhausted. Not sick, exactly. Just...tired. And a little queasy.

And it was deeply, deeply silly that it took both of them three days of making mint tea and going to bed early and taking it easy in general to consider that it might be because she could be pregnant.

"What do you mean, there's no pharmacy we can get a test at?"

Josh grinned. "Welcome to small town living, princess."

"I'm supposed to pee on it first thing! So we have to wait until tomorrow to buy it, and then the next morning to take the test?"

"Maybe. It's not like it's going to change the situation if we know or

not.” He curved over her. “Let me spoil you while we wait.”

“But I want to know now.” She pouted at him.

He kissed her stuck out lower lip. “There is another option.”

“What?”

“Inspired by Bailey’s bachelor auction date offering...we could break into Kerry’s midwifery practice. They have test strips there.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea! Not the breaking and entering into her clinic. That sounds reckless. But we could ask her for a test.”

“Do you really want anyone else to know we’re doing this?”

“Kerry would keep it a secret for us.”

“She would.” Josh lowered his voice to a low burr. “But wouldn’t it be fun to have a little adventure?”

“This is terrible.”

“Yeah. Terribly fun.”

“Terribly criminal. No.” She thought about it. “But you could ask her if you can break in. Maybe she’ll take pity on your desire to practice your lock-picking skills.”

---

IT TURNED out that wasn’t necessary, because Kerry was on her way back from a birth, and was planning to swing by the clinic to restock her delivery bag.

There was a parking lot behind the midwifery clinic. At this time of night, it was basically empty, other than a few cars that probably belonged to the people who lived in the apartments above the stores on Main Street.

Josh parked where Kerry told him she’d meet him, then jogged around to open the passenger side door for Monica.

As she hopped down, Kerry’s car lit up the parking lot and slowly rolled to a stop next to them.



“Good timing,” she said as she joined them.

“Josh wanted to break in.”

Kerry chuckled. “You talked him out of it?”

“I had to pout.”

“Always a good strategy.” Kerry unlocked the back door. “Tests are in the washroom halfway down the hall. Grab a couple in case you want to test a few times.”

Monica nodded and headed in.

Kerry paused and looked at Josh. “That was quick.”

He choked, then nodded. “Making up for lost time.”

“If it’s negative, she might just need a few more days.” Her lips curled up in a soft smile. “And I can order a dating ultrasound in a few weeks, to be sure.”

“Thanks.” He dragged in a rough breath. Wow, that just got real.

Monica returned, a few pH dip sticks clutched in her hand. Her face was a little paler than before, like maybe this had just hit her, too.

Very, very real.

Kerry repeated her good luck to Monica and promised nobody would ever know about the midnight raid. “Keep me posted if you need any support.”

He took Monica’s hand and led her back to the truck. Opened her door.

And then, being careful of those pH sticks, he caught her in his arms and kissed her. A good, bruising, claiming kiss. To make sure she knew his possessive thoughts about her only increased with this potential change to their life.

If she was having his baby, he was going to be so fucking happy. And if she wasn’t, he was still going to be so fucking happy.

“Love you,” he whispered. “Every day. Every night. No matter what.”

## EPILOGUE

*Three months later*

MONICA TRIED to keep the fact she was pregnant under wraps, but somehow her father found out, and suddenly the board meeting was moved months down the road—to a point where she wouldn't be able to fly.

Or she would have to go to California well in advance and stay there.

Which she couldn't do, because her husband owned a garage on the other side of the continent, and she wasn't prepared to be apart from him for months on end.

Fucking. Bullshit.

But Bianca went to work, getting the other ex-wives on board with demanding the original board meeting date be stuck to. After that, it was only two other board members who needed to be convinced, and Monica made those phone calls herself.

Now the date had arrived. They arrived at the Fischer Racing campus with their attorneys in tow, just in case. Bianca flanked Monica on one side, and Josh strode in on the other.

When her father saw them, he tried a joke. "My daughter has returned for another attempt to learn racing," he said with a chuckle.

A terrible, not funny joke.

Josh curved his hand around her elbow, slowing her down. He stepped between them and leaned in, giving her a reassuringly warm look. “You don’t need to talk to him.”

“I know that. You know that. But he doesn’t know that, so let’s show him.” She swallowed hard, kissed her husband, and then stepped around him. “I’m not interested in your opinion on anything, Dad. Not my business knowledge, my level of experience in the racing world, or my marriage. None of it is relevant to the fact that I’m the granddaughter of the man who founded this company, and on the day of my birth, I was granted the right to be here. Because this is a family business. You seem to have forgotten that.”

“I would go to the ends of the earth to protect this empire. My empire. And it could have been your empire, too, if you weren’t such a foolish girl.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t believe it was ever going to be mine. You always wanted to take it public. Because it isn’t *yours*, but the money could be if you got to sell your shares. Which is not what Grandpa wanted. Not what *he* built the business for.”

Michael’s expression took on a mean edge. “And you’ve forced us to gather here today because you have some misguided desire to give away a part of this business...which you have *never* done anything to grow...to a nobody?”

Beside her, Josh stiffened.

Her father noticed. He wasn’t obtuse, just craven. “Is that why you knocked her up, mechanic?”

Monica’s blood ran cold. “Don’t call him that.”

“Why not? That’s all he is. A dumb car buff who tricked the right girl into spreading her—”

“Enough.” The word exploded out of Josh. Sharp. Loud. Silencing. “Do not speak about my wife that way. And I’m either dumb or conniving. You can’t have it both ways, because they have opposite meanings.”

“You can’t—”

Josh took two fast strides, stopping just in front of Michael. “I can. I will. We are equals in this room, whether you like it or not. You will never threaten her ever again. Do you fucking understand me?”

Time froze.

And Josh didn’t move a muscle.

Finally, Michael nodded. “My apologies for the indelicate suggestion.”

Josh clearly didn’t look like he accepted it. “That is your fucking daughter,” he growled. “How dare you speak to her like that?”

“Because he resents that I’m his daughter.” She sounded sad, and she wasn’t. She was accepting that her father didn’t love her the way others in her life did. She took a deep breath. “Let’s get this meeting under way, shall we?”

Everyone sat around the board table. After the meeting was called to order, Monica stood. She was going to be recognized for the first order of business, whether he liked it or not.

“I am now formally informing the board that three years ago, I got married, and due to the negligence of another board member, I was unaware I had the right to present my husband to the board as a family member. I am now claiming that right. Here is our marriage certificate.” She nodded at her lawyer, who passed around notarized copies. “And, given that this board only meets a few times a year, you can take this as my advance notice that at the next meeting, I will be notifying the board that I have had a child. I will accept a board-appointed trustee to hold that seat for my child until they turn twenty-five.” She smiled. “And I am ready to assume my own seat on the board as well.”

The other board members murmured amongst themselves, and her father’s face turned red.

Good.

He could sit on it and rotate for all she cared. Her real family now had four seats, with two ex-wives in affiliation with them, on what will soon be

an eleven-seat board.

Also known as, a majority.

---

“READY TO GO HOME?”

She was standing in her empty closet, where months ago, Amira told her that her name had been attached to a TikTok scandal.

She turned around.

Josh was leaning in the doorway. Backlit, he looked big and strong. Everything she’d imagined he might be when she first saw him almost four years ago.

She stretched. “Yep.”

His gaze dropped to the slight swell of her belly. “How’s our bean?”

“Active.” She crossed to him, and he curled his hand over the curve. “I can’t wait until you—”

Right on command, their little coffee bean kicked, and Josh gasped. “Hey.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s...that’s our kiddo.” He dropped to his knees and pressed his cheek to her belly. And he got kicked again.

The grin that spread across his face was the best thing in the world.

In the living room, she found her mother on a video call with Trent. “See you soon,” Bianca said, her voice low and sexy.

Which Monica was choosing to love for her mother. After years of bullshit, she deserved a hot younger guy who treated her like gold.

But the extra-thick carpets in this condo made it too easy to walk in on something private.

“Okay,” Monica said, extra bright and cheery. “We’re good here.”

“That’s my cue to say goodbye.” Bianca’s voice lifted half an octave,

immediately yanking on the vocal equivalent of a few layers of clothing. “We should be wheels down in six or seven hours.”

Once they were settled on the plane, Monica decided to ask her mom about her plans. “You know you can’t just move to Canada, right? There’s an immigration process?”

“I know, darling.”

“And I’ll be able to sponsor you once I’m finished that process myself.”

“Yes, darling.”

“But in the meantime—”

Bianca reached out and squeezed her hand. “Darling. You aren’t the only one who can secretly get married to a boy from Pine Harbour.”

---

Want a little more of Josh and Monica? [Click here for a multimedia bonus page on my website, including a “five years later” bonus story.](#)

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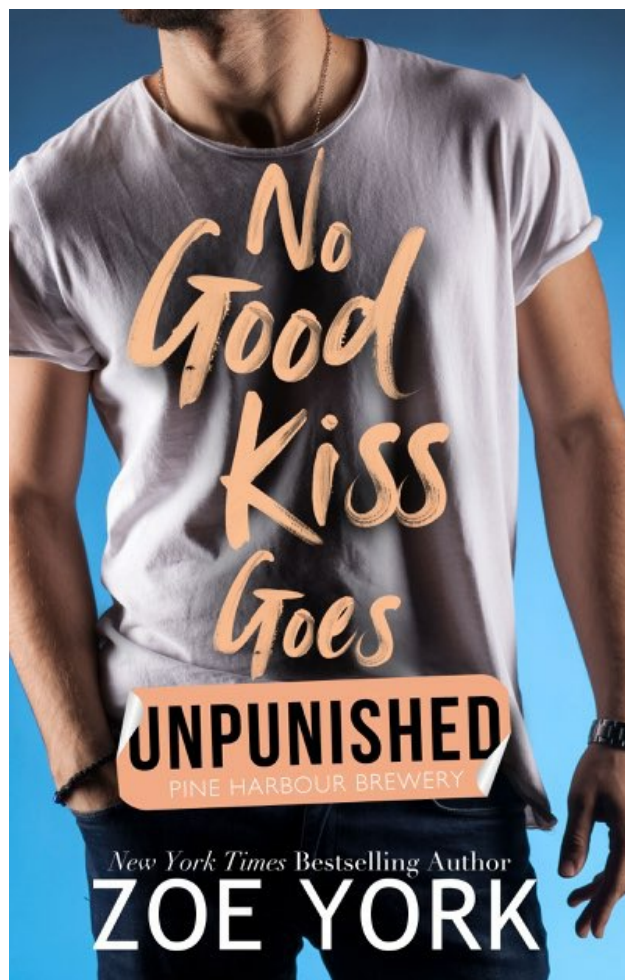
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No Good Kiss Goes Unpunished

(Pine Harbour Brewery #1)



[www.zoeyork.com/pine-harbour-brewery/](http://www.zoeyork.com/pine-harbour-brewery/)

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This is my second complete series in Pine Harbour. As always, I'm grateful to my editor, Kristi Yanta, for her guidance and questions and excellent critique; and to my husband and kids, who have lost me to the deep dive into these novels thirteen times, and already know we're going to do it again next year.

But most of all, I'm grateful for the readers who have been coming back to this small town in Bruce County every year since 2014.

Thank for letting me show you my home, because that's what Pine Harbour feels like after all these years!

## THE ORIGINAL SERIES

Before *The Kincaids of Pine Harbour* there were eight other books. *Pine Harbour: The Original Series* is now complete!

Meet the Foster boys: **Dean, Jake, Matt** and **Sean**. A cop, a contractor, a paramedic and an adventure racer. All soldiers. None of them looking for love, but it's coming!

Their best friends are the Minellis: **Zander, Rafe, Tom** and **Dani**. A full-time soldier, a cop, a park ranger and a paramedic. Dani's the only girl in the entire bunch and she's not sure how she feels about that. When Rafe got married, she was thrilled to have a sister—and even though he and Olivia have split up, Dani's not giving up that bond. (And neither is Rafe, for that matter).

## **The Books of Pine Harbour**

### ***Love in a Small Town***

*Rafe and Olivia*

Six years. Two break-ups. One divorce. They should be over each other...

### ***Love in a Snowstorm***

*Jake and Dani*

Never fall in love with your best friend's little sister...

### ***Love on a Spring Morning\****

*Ryan and Holly*

Duplicity. Desire. Denial. They were doomed from the start.

### ***Love on a Summer Night***

*Zander and Faith*

Sometimes saying goodbye is just the beginning.

### ***Love on the Run***

*Dean and Liana*

She needs a bodyguard. He needs a job. But there's nothing strictly professional about their attraction.

### ***Love in a Sandstorm***

*Sean and Jenna*

It was supposed to be a fling. Two weeks in the south of Spain before they returned to war. They weren't supposed to fall in love...

### ***Love on the Outskirts of Town***

*Matt and Tasha*

She fell for him over cupcake decorating, with her daughter sitting between them. And then she learned his name, but it was too late.

***Love on the Edge of Reason***

*Tom and Chloe*

Friends with benefits worked just fine—until the double lines on the pregnancy test.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe York lives in London, Ontario with her family where she writes romance novels set in the places where she grew up and fell in love herself. She's currently sipping a cold brew coffee, planning her next travel adventure, and dreaming of heroes in and out of uniform.

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