A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace on a mountain peak at night. The woman, with long dark hair, is leaning in to kiss the man on the cheek. The man has a beard and is looking towards her. They are both wearing white tank tops. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a soft glow of light. The foreground shows the rugged, snow-dusted peaks of the mountain.

THE  
SNEAK  
PEAK

VICTORIA WILDER

# THE SNEAK PEAK

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A RIGGS ROMANCE

BOOK 3

VICTORIA WILDER




Edited by NiceGirlNaughtyEdits

Cover by Echo Grace, Wildheart Graphics

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*To the girls who really know what it means to have a crush on somebody: If those crushes only knew the imagination it took and the long game you were willing to play, they would have been crushing right back.*

*I hope you still believe in love, enjoy daily doses of lust, and, every now and then, catch a glimpse of unexplained magic. For all of you who ended those crushes years ago or are still going strong, this story is for you.*

## A NOTE TO READERS

The Sneak Peak contains adult material. It's a romance with offensive language, explicit sexual scenes, and child abandonment.

The main character discusses his anxiety and how he manages it with routine, medication, and therapy. I recognize that this is not everyone's experience with anxiety or panic attacks. And while this character is fictional, how his mental health is portrayed and nurtured is done so with sensitivity and care.



## PROLOGUE

I SQUEEZE TIGHTER...

*Stop.*

My thumb and fingertips will leave bruises.

I should care. But I don't. I want to leave marks.

I've unleashed something I don't know how to stop, how to put back where it belongs. It was a part of me that never would have surfaced if it wasn't for *her*. If I had better control. But I don't. And I'm going to feast on the freedom of it.

I slap her hard, watching as she writhes underneath my grasp. She liked that I was rough. So, I slap her again, same pressure in the same spot, but this time, one, two, three, four slaps in rapid succession. She just smiles in the mirror at me, the muffled sound she's trying to make pulling a moan from my throat. In the wake of my hand colliding with her left breast is a bright red mark, and I grow harder seeing it. I pinch her nipple and loosen my grip on her neck.

Spinning her around to face me, I keep my hand clamped just under her jaw. Her pulse races so fast, I can see where it pushes against her skin, protruding right below where my thumb rests. This neck is too delicate. It's not the one I want.

Her hair falls down around her shoulders and hangs in her face. Brunette. Same color and the same length. It's what had me looking twice. But now I feel like I've made a mistake.

*What am I doing?*

I squeeze tighter. She looks like... I shake my head. *Don't fucking think it.*

As I loosen my fingers, she gasps to catch her breath. "I knew you'd be filthy," she groans as her hips swerve from left and right, urging me to fuck her.

I'm not interested in anything she has to say. I knew what I was doing. Who am I kidding? I wanted this woman to be someone else. Someone who I have no business being around. I'm disgusting.

My mind is starting to play tricks on me. Maybe it's the alcohol. This is why I don't drink. I don't lose control like this. I prefer to watch. Maintain control over my every thought and action, consistently weighing the outcomes of any decision I make. But all of that is gone, evaporated with any caution or care I once had. No, right now, I have no interest in being a spectator or hearing a single word this woman has to say. My skin is on fire, and I feel like I'm clawing my way out of whatever stifled cell I was waiting in.

Her arousal drips down her leg. I'll slide into her easily and give her an out if this is too much. If she's changed her mind, I'll leave.

"Tell me to stop."

"No," she says immediately, as she rubs her hand up and down my suit pants. The friction edges me on.

I don't want her hands on me. I don't want her touch. I don't want her exploring me or trying to figure out what I like. This doesn't go past tonight. We'll never see one another again.

"Put your fucking hands on the mirror, and don't move them."

She does as I say, and then I move quickly to work my pants open. I take out my cock, one hand still holding her against the mirror by the throat. I pump myself twice, but I'm so damn hard, even that doesn't alleviate the pressure. It makes me grow harder. More impatient.

Squeezing my hand harder around her neck, I lean in. I graze my teeth along her chin and kick her legs apart. She's tall, so it only takes a small bend for me to drive into her cunt.

I thrust my cock, punishingly and to the hilt. Hard. Fast. Repeatedly. She screams, but moans are laced throughout. And I unravel. Every emotion I've felt in the past seventy-two hours billows like smoke in waves, stifling me. I come inside of her with everything I have in me. I feel a sense of completion until I lift my eyes higher, and my mind reels.

When I pull out of her, I watch as my cum drips down her thigh. As she leans there, panting, I realize I have no idea who this woman is. The entire scene in front of me is horrifying. I've never fucked anyone like that. I've never just used someone the way I used her. I had no interest in making her feel good. No, I wanted to punish her. Punish myself.

Black creeps into my peripheral vision, and that's when I realize there's not enough air. My breath comes in short puffs. I don't remember leaving the room until the cold smacks me hard across the face and chest. Standing there barefoot, I stare ahead. The sun isn't up, but it's starting to wake. The sky is lighter, with a muted hue of blue that makes the tree line in the distance look black. I stare in a daze, making it blur.

I had no control.

I never lose control.

That woman could have been anyone. I should feel lucky it wasn't *her*. A wave of dizziness hits again, and the blackness starts to creep in along with it.

*Don't pass out.*

I keep staring at the tree line, blurring it out. Not focusing on what just happened is the only thing keeping my heart rate down. But I still can't pull in a deep breath. So I count. Count to four. Start over. Keep counting. My toes are numb. My fingers are the same, but I lean into it. Lean into every uncomfortable feeling I'm having. I should feel like shit. And I do. Stupid choices. Losing control like that. Fuck, what's wrong with me?

My scalp hurts from pulling at my hair. My lower lip is puffy. I can taste copper. It feels like static rising into the upper part of my chest, moving swiftly into my throat. Emotions. Those fuckers need to stay down. There's no way I will have a panic attack, and then cry on top of it. I need to keep it together.

*Keep it together, dammit!*

I take the heel of my palm and smack it against my temple.

One. Two. Three. Four. Again! *Stupid! So fucking stupid!*

I continue counting. I keep hitting. Because then maybe I'll never forget how *this* feels. How it feels to be *this* kind of person. That this wasn't what I wanted, *she* wasn't what I wanted. And the one that I did want, I can't even think about it.

I can't stop berating myself. Never forget this feeling. I hit my temple with the palm of my hand until the sun breaks the horizon line. That's when the hangover sets in, and I dry heave. I count to four at least a thousand times before I start to reassemble myself, before I'm able to breathe. I make a promise to never allow this to happen again. Never put myself in a position where I would feel tempted, feel like I needed a proxy, and lose control like that.

---

I left that morning and never thought about it again. About her.

Not until I was forced to.

Because, a year and a half later, on Christmas Eve, I was smacked with the kind of news I never expected. The kind of news I couldn't believe at first. Information I would dissect and question. I examined every single moment, because that's what I do. And this time, I had to. There was a good reason for it—specifically, two very small, very real and living reasons who came into my life who'll never allow me to forget that night.



## *Grace*

“GRIP IT HARD, AND THEN SWING YOUR LEG OVER.”

I take a steadying breath and look up at the beta—the path where I’m heading. Glancing down at my foot placement, I pinch my fingers tighter, shifting my weight to gain enough leverage and momentum to leap.

“That’s it. Now, keep moving,” Michael coaches from below.

“You don’t need to call out the obvious,” I huff out, pulling my weight up to the next jug to get a full grip.

“Go ahead, keep talking. You’re definitely not beating my time now, Kid.” I hear him sniff out a laugh as soon as he says it, because he knows exactly what he’s doing by goading me.

The one thing I’ll never back down from is a challenge. Especially one that comes from his lips. I grew up believing, if you liked a boy, you played what he liked and got so good that you could beat him.

“That sounds like a challenge, Riggs. You know how I feel about those.”

*Spoiler:* It didn’t work. I didn’t get the guy. At least not in the way I wanted.

I push the ball of my foot down, shifting my weight to my right, and swing my left arm up, then reach. I’m spread on the wall and can see the line I need to follow.

It takes me less than a minute to finish the climb and top out. I look down to make sure he’s paying attention before I lean back and drop.

Michael tilts his head back and smiles up at me. It’s impossible not to mirror it when he smiles at me like that—proud, happy, and easy. “I got you,” he yells to me.

Some men manage to get better looking as they get older. But not Michael Riggs. No, my best friend was good-looking a

dozen years ago. But now, I have to let out a small laugh, because he's catapulted past that. He's disarming. His hair is so much darker now, but there's some gray there that hugs along his temples, sprinkled into his sideburns and scruff. Someone more sophisticated would say it's debonair, but when you pair it with his deep green eyes and the square jawline, it's rugged perfection.

When my feet hit the ground, he pulls the rope loose from the carabiner and unties the knot from my harness. It's a simple, no frills move that any belayer would do for their climbing partner, but when he's close to me like this, it still makes my insides swoop. It's not just my stubbornness that won't let my crush on him retire, it's the physical responses I have when I'm around him that won't lie low. It's a hazard to the age-old concept of 'getting the hell over it.'

Like right now, he's close enough that I can smell the orange he peeled this morning and his soap or deodorant working overtime from the workout we've just finished. It's that clean smell mixed with warm masculinity that, quite frankly, is annoyingly delicious. Our proximity to one another is always challenging, but that comes with being as close as we are. So I do exactly what I have to do, and ignore my feelings. I pretend like he's not one of the most attractive men I've ever met, and I focus on having something instead of nothing.

But for some reason, as I look up at him, I'm suddenly struggling to justify why that's enough for him. Because today, it's not for me.

"Tell me again why you won't compete this year?" I pant. Out of breath, still from that last push. I *did* just beat his record time.

He doesn't say anything right away. Michael is exceptional at answering me without words and depositing long enough blips of quiet space that I fill. And then I forget about what I asked for in the first place.

I hold up my hand because I know what's coming. "Don't say it."

“I’m old,” he says, as if that’s a reason, or even remotely true.

“Thirty-seven is not old.”

“Compared to you, it is,” he says simply, always reminding me about the years between us. “My busy season is about to kick off. And I have two very aggressive dictators living at my house, demanding things like constant attention and snacks.”

“Soooo many snacks,” I tease. I can’t help but smile when I think of his kids.

“See, you know.” He laughs, lifting his hand and running it behind his neck. One of his anxious tells, because he knows I won’t let this lie. He’s one of the best climbers I’ve ever seen and has coached a roster of experienced athletes. It’s insane to think he wouldn’t make a name for himself on the professional circuit. He just needs to go for it.

I drop my harness and shoes into the return bin and follow him to the juice bar. “I still don’t understand why you won’t throw your name in and try. You say you’re too old and don’t have enough time, but I’m not buying it.”

“Why are you pushing this so hard?” he asks, his brow furrowing with genuine curiosity.

Maybe I need to push him about something.

He combs his hands into his hair, pausing at the nape of his neck. “I’m fine not doing all that, showing off, and trying to put myself into an even brighter spotlight. No thanks. I like the roles I already have.”

I know he thrives on consistency and routine, but the idea of abandoning something he wanted at one point in his life feels disappointing. Complacent.

He pulls out an iced coffee from the lower refrigerator. One I know he brought from home because I always forget and then complain about forgetting.

“You remembered,” I say, taking a sip. My eyes close. Something about the first sip of a good iced coffee is like a



little snippet of heaven.

“Because you never do and then whine about it.”

“It’s not like you’re not already training.” I ignore his teasing, bringing the subject back. “Don’t you want to push yourself? You could easily do a couple of competitions and see where you qualify. And if you like where you’re at, or how it feels to go up against—”

He interrupts. “I’m perfectly fine with how things are now.”

I wince at the idea of that. And it hits me. Almost like a slap. *Perfectly fine. I like the roles I already have.*

“I feel like you’re mad at me here,” he says as he combs his hands through his hair again. And when he peers back, he gives me that smile. The flirty one that says, “*Don’t be angry with me, Gracie.*” It’s the smile that always makes me second-guess our friendship. The lines he drew and that I’ve stayed behind. The gray areas always linger and wait for my misinterpretation.

But, maybe I am mad.

He takes a deep breath, and I know whatever he’s going to say now, I won’t like it. It’s his tell. The big breath, the pause, and the rub behind his neck. He’s anxious about whatever he’s going to say.

“Climbing competitively was something I wanted. But life happens. Hell, my life went in directions I never expected. I don’t have time for more. It’s chaotic enough with Sammy and Miles, trying to be good parent and run a business. I’m trying my best not to overthink about having to live at my dad’s house this summer while Molly stays at mine with the kids.”

*Shit.* He doesn’t talk about her, not even just to vent, but I know how much she upsets him.

“You know I’m busy as fuck this summer, and Molly’s stepping up for a change, so I’m not going to focus on how conflicted I am about it and I’m going to let her,” he says with a final huff.

Is it awful to love his kids, but loathe their mother? Probably, but I do. A woman who should, by all accounts, be in her kids' lives, but she barely wants the role. She chooses herself over them time and time again. Maybe this summer will be different, but I'm not holding my breath.

"But even with that folded in, I'm not—" He flexes his hands at his sides. "I like how my life is right now."

The words feel like a proclamation, instantly making my stomach hollow out. It feels like I've had the wind knocked out of me. By all accounts, I should be happy to hear that my best friend is happy—content with his life. But I'm not. In fact, I'm on the verge of freaking out.

"You're making a face." He leans forward on his elbows, and his eyes move quickly around my face. "Shit. You're pissed off."

I take a big sip of my iced coffee. Another one. And then one more so that it's nearly drained because I need to focus on something. What he's being so open in sharing with me, is bringing a realization that has me reeling. One I've ignored because of my endless hope that things could change.

The things I want aren't happening because *I* haven't allowed them. I've been waiting for this man in front of me to change his mind about who we are to one another and want more. But apparently, "*he likes his life how it is right now.*"

The concern on his face has now morphed into borderline terror. "Okay, I said something wrong, but I'm just not sure what it was. What do you need right now?"

*You*, I think to myself.

I've painted myself into a corner. I've let my feelings for him linger on the outskirts for years while we've built this friendship. I've been kidding myself into believing that it would be enough. If he's happy with how things are in his life, then maybe that's it. There's not going to be some kind of grand gesture or transition from blurred lines to the love I want. He was clear with me from the beginning; I just haven't wanted to hear it.

I think... it's time to call it.

"I honestly don't know what I need." I laugh, but it's lacking humor. "I just don't understand how you could abandon something you've really wanted. And now, what? You just settle and convince yourself that you're happy with how things are?" I'm borderline yelling at him now. I can't help it.

The look of confusion on his face annoys me. "I feel like, maybe, this isn't about me anymore," he says tentatively.

*That's not entirely true.*

He flexes his hands, and then looks toward the front of the facility as some of his employees start to filter in. Then he shoves his hands into the pockets of his joggers, straightening a bit before he meets my eyes again.

"Is this a *you* thing? Or are you really angry with me for not wanting to compete anymore?"

"Apparently," I shout and throw my hands out to my sides. "It's a *me* thing."

I move away from him a bit, needing some space to breathe.

"I have an amazing career that I love, but when I look beyond that, there's nothing else. I don't remember when I decided that was okay. Like how I got here."

He lets the air calm around me slightly before asking, "What else do you want?"

I hesitate to tell him exactly because it won't be the right thing to say. He's been honest with me. It may have been years ago, but at least he was clear.

*I know what you want this to be, Kid. But that's not something I can give you.*

"Now, I want more. Just... more. I want the full life. The house. Kids to fill it. A husband who's crazy obsessed with me. Like so much that he aches for me."

“That doesn’t sound healthy,” he says, to which I send him my best “shut-it” look.

“I mean, is that even real? Finding someone who’s just as enamored with me as I am with him. Someone who sees me as more than just nice and sweet Gracie McKenna.”

“You’re not *that* sweet.”

I glare at him, and he laughs. “What? You’re not! And... we don’t talk about this stuff.”

He tilts his head to the side, his thumb rubbing along his bottom lip.

God, I hate when he does that. It makes me want to do it for him. Feel that lip underneath my fingertip.

“You’re right. There are things we don’t talk about. We don’t venture into the territories that might make things with us ‘uncomfortable.’”

“Why are you using air quotes?”

“It’s already a crazy concept for most people to swallow that we’re friends. And I just assumed you didn’t want the details about my dating life.”

“What dating life?” he asks quickly.

He did *not* just say that.

My reaction must be written all over my face because he holds up his hands. “Okay, I’m not saying—”

I cut him off, because he’s right. “Exactly! I don’t know why I would think this full life I want is just going to magically appear.” I put my hands on my hips. Without consciously knowing it, what I’m about to talk about needs a power stance. “I can’t spend all of my free nights with you anymore.”

I don’t miss the way his brow furrows at that admission. If he doesn’t like that, then he should speak up. Dammit, why won’t he tell me what I want to hear?

“I need to meet people. Men. I want to meet them and date them. Try them on.”

He lets a laugh escape. “Try them on?”

He thinks this is a joke. “Yes! Have drinks or meals. Get turned on. Kiss them. Have sex!”

I groan because it’s been more than a minute since I’ve had anything remotely close to decent sex. “Like, *really* good sex, too, the dirty kind.”

That thumb stops moving along his lip, his brows raising.

But I continue, ignoring that glint in his eyes that I want to interpret. One that could be full of nerves, or intrigue? “And I want to try things. Things that aren’t romantic or vanilla.”

Michael clears his throat. “What—like, what kinds of things?”

“I don’t know, that’s my point. I want to explore what I like. I’ve never explored. Not even in college.” I’m rambling now, unable to stop the train of thought from leaving my lips. “What a cliché that is, thinking people are going to study, figure out a career, and just fall into sexual explorative relationships. It didn’t happen. Also, how do I know if I like breath play—”

“Um, what play?” he asks, confusion written into his expression. I would laugh if I wasn’t so aggravated.

I’m so worked up, my voice just keeps getting louder. “Or if I like being tied up. Or spanked. I’ve heard multiple orgasms aren’t a myth. And maybe I’m into back-door activities. But...” I giggle despite myself. “I’ll never know if I don’t try, right?”

I hear him whisper, “fucking hell,” as he drags his hands through his hair again. I know this is making him uncomfortable, but now would be the time for him to say something. *Anything* to stop me from doing the things I’m babbling on about, with anyone who’s not him, that is. But instead, he looks toward the lockers and to the clock above the counter. It’s just before seven a.m., and I know he will freak out about being late to the office if we don’t start moving out the door soon.

With his shift in attention, I realize that he's not going to do it. Declare anything that remotely looks like a romantic gesture.

"My point is, I don't know what's out there because I barely date. I don't pay attention when men are paying attention to me. And I don't know how I got here. So when I hear you say you're happy with your perfect life, I can only think..." I swallow and take a breath. "I'm so far from that level of satisfaction."

"I didn't say it was perfect."

"You kind of did," I argue.

I drop my bag to the floor, sighing. "What do you see when you look at me?"

His eyes dart back to mine, and I'm locked in place. I want him to say it. I want him to tell me he's so attracted to me that he can't stand it any longer. But the moments tick by, and he doesn't. Say. Anything.

He shifts his weight, and then crosses his arms, folding them over his chest. His eyes break away from mine to look me up and down quickly. And it's simple, because if he wanted more, he would say it. Usually, this is right when I misunderstand things. I mistake the intensity in his stare for want. I can't do it this time.

The one person I've craved for as long as I can remember barely wants to look, never mind tell me what he sees.

I snatch my empty iced coffee cup from the counter, grab my bag off the ground, and don't give him any more time to answer. I don't want to be angry at him. I'm only really angry at myself. So, I toss my bag over my shoulder, and turn away. "I've got a client coming in soon. Gotta go."

"Grace, come on. You didn't let me answer," he yells after me.

But I'm already down the hall, through the gym. And all I can think is, *time's up*.



## *Grace*

“RIGHT. THERE. AWE, FUCK YEAH. YUP. I FEEL THAT.”

I dig in deeper. Hold my breath. Exhale as I lean into it.

It’s a choice. I know that, deep down, I’ve always known it. This isn’t some kind of epiphany. I’m not a kid anymore, despite what he may think. Or what he calls me. I’ve chosen *him*. Repeatedly. And over myself sometimes too.

A crush can make you feel so many things, but this is the first time I feel it needs to end. No matter how often I think about him, dream about him, and spend time with him, the reality is that nothing has changed. Sometimes he’ll look at me, and I think, “There it is. You feel this too, right?” But then nothing happens. It’s a glimpse of respect and affection, but I’ve been interpreting it as lust and longing.

It’s honestly ridiculous that I hash out my complicated feelings for my best friend as I move my hands along another man’s body. It’s almost disrespectful. The idea that I’m making a choice after more than a decade of loving him, taking the hints that life is giving me now, and moving on. Or is it getting over?

I suppose the question should be, how do you get over someone you never really got under?

*Ugh, focus.*

“I’m going to push a little harder.” I dig the heel of my palm in and put all my weight into it. This knot is massive.

“Damn. Okay,” Bishop grits out. And I know it’s not meant to sound like a good thing, but how it comes out makes me smile. There’s maybe a dash of a sadist residing just under my surface, because I get a bit of a thrill from hearing him groan. Having power over a man like him, it’s a nice perk.

“You’re going to keep feeling the pressure until it releases, okay?”

“You’re killing me, Grace,” he grunts.



“Just breathe for me,” I say as he smiles back. The man can smile, that’s for sure.

I roll my eyes at myself. My level of experience with men—dating, hooking up with, hell, even flirting with—is abysmal. Far from where I’d thought I’d be when I hit my mid-twenties. I thought I’d have a good variety of experiences and the confidence that comes with that. But here I am, instantly putting this very attractive man into a category I’m used to labeling as unrealistic.

“I should have stretched afterward, but I was trying to...”

As soon as the knot releases, I can feel it. He can feel it. And the tension that he’s been holding in his body completely relaxes. I move the muscle around enough to keep the blood flowing properly and ensure no additional knots seize up. Most of my athletes are here when they get off the slopes or just out of the showers from training.

High-impact sports will always take a toll on muscles, whether athletes are charging into other players or pushing their bodies to the next level. The goal is to build that muscle for improved performance, stretch it properly, and soothe it to give it time to recover. An overexerted muscle that goes unattended has a stronger chance of turning into an injury to the tendon or bone. I was trained to help keep that from happening. The athletes I’ve worked with know their sessions with me won’t be pleasant if they don’t stretch.

Since it’s late spring, most of the skiers and snowboarders I work with have moved to New Zealand or Australia for the summer. They follow the winter. Bishop is one of the few who takes advantage of summer mountain sports for a little while before heading across the world.

Bishop Jones is the type of athlete who never stops. The kind of client I thrive off of treating. When I saw his name on my schedule this morning, I had a feeling he’d be coming to me with something strained. He’s an Olympic-level alpine skier who glides down mountains at intense speeds. And while skis and poles are his tools, his body is his key equipment.

Damn fine equipment. Muscle groups that have been honed, pushed, and punished. “You seem distracted today.”

I laugh, because he’s obviously right.

“Thinking about your summer plans?”

I have summers off from clients. It’s the nature of the types of athletes I work with. Sometimes I’ll have private sessions, but overall, my profession, in the way I’ve built it, is seasonal. I’m not paid that way. I do pretty damn well for myself. It’s a dream job, really. But my distraction has nothing to do with my summer.

“Just doing my job, ensuring you’re good before heading into summer training.”

He shakes his head. “You really are the best. Honestly, I’ve been considering hiring you to be on my team directly.”

My eyes widen, hands pausing their movements. I wasn’t expecting that. “Seriously?”

“Of course, I’m serious. Would it be something you’d consider?”

*It’s tempting.*

After finishing my undergraduate in London, I interned with sports therapists who worked with England’s National Football team, and later, for players on Ireland’s Rugby team. It was amazing to be with them pre and post games, work on their movement dynamics; not just strained issues, but train for muscle memory. When I chose to come back home, I thought that type of experience would be enough to land a spot on a professional baseball, basketball, or even in a collegiate program. But I was wrong. When I returned to the U.S., thousands of others like me were looking for the same jobs. And the few that paid were swooped up fast. Anything remaining in higher-profile sports were internships that only paid in experience or abysmal stipends.

The experience sounds great until the bills are due. I had student loans, not to mention, a life to maintain that doesn’t accept the currency of knowledge. I’m comfortable now, but I’ve never been wealthy. There was never a trust fund or hefty

bank account to fall back on. But I did know the right people. There's something to be said for a small town with big connections. And my small town has some of the biggest.

"I'm flattered by the offer. But I don't think so. I've got a great thing going on here. Plus, this is home for me."

"Well, if you ever need a change. Come talk to me first."

I smile at him, but I don't think I could only treat one person. I like the versatility of seeing multiple athletes. Especially when some of them are so good they're on the U.S. Olympic team. Riggs Outdoor is *the* job.

Anybody who touches the winter sports industry in Colorado knows the last name Riggs. And I more than knew it. I worked for them now, but I also grew up around them. *I've been in love with one of them since I was a teenager.* I helped build out their winter sports therapy program. Plenty of snowboarders and skiers came into Strutt's Peak and trained professionally, but the support they needed expanded beyond the slopes and half-pipes. If Riggs wanted to maintain a foothold on the winter sports offered here, they needed to deliver on things that athletes needed to stay and train, not just visit for weekends away. If they offered trainers who would work with athletes in the snow and a place they could recover and train indoors, then they'd have something entirely original for a sports brand. So that's what we've built. This offer from Bishop was the original dream job. But I've cultivated my own.

"Are you staying here for summer or traveling?"

"I'm staying. Planning to enjoy some time with my friends. Nothing too crazy."

I've been so focused on my work, on the athletes' lives who have taken a gamble in training here, that I can't remember the last time I disconnected from it and just had some fun. And maybe, finally, unravel me from a crush that's taken far too many years of my attention.

Bishop clears his throat and then leans on his elbows to watch where I'm massaging. "Your hands just worked

something fierce out of my glutes. Everyone else is just a pain in my ass lately. My publicist, manager, and Olympics Committee are all breathing down my neck. You're the only one that does the opposite."

I bark out a laugh. "You're going to be sore in about an hour. So let's remember you said that. I'm going to get some heating pads on you."

"I don't mind a little bit of pain," he says with a wink. "As long as there's a pleasurable payoff at the end of it."

Smiling back at him, I double take when I catch the way he's looking back at me. He's an insanely talented athlete, but also a world-class flirt. And the roster of celebrity women he's been photographed alongside is intense. In comparison, his experience outshines mine conservatively by the dozens. And that's just with celebrities. I can only imagine how many average, everyday women like me spend time with him.

I drape the heating pads over his glutes, then wrap them around his quads so that the areas I worked out remain nice and loose before he's ready to move again. As I walk around the space and bring my towels, salves, and massage gun to the sink, I think maybe Bishop Jones is interested.

"What's your policy on grabbing a drink with a client?"

I drop the massage gun, and it makes an awful clattering sound. *Smooth.*

"I don't think I have a policy. Specifically. On that," I stammer out. Jesus, it's like I've never spoken before. "Is that what you're saying? Or asking, I mean. Or is this a hypothetical?"

"Have a drink with me tonight, Grace," he says in a deep tone that's coated in sex appeal, and it drips all over my body like caramel.

He smiles, and then a small but confident laugh escapes as he pulls his shirt over his head. The thin shiny blue fabric molds over his physique, showing all the dips and bulges on his shoulders, arms, and chest. The man is exquisite. Is that all

it took? A choice. Choosing to move away from fantasies of another man and focus on what's in front of me?

“Okay, Jones. Let's do it.”

---

“Here is my best advice.” I wait and stare at my best friend in the reflection of the mirror. She studies me like I'm some kind of puzzle. “Don't wear underwear.”

“That's not advice, Riv. That's a bad idea. Who actually does that, anyway?”

“I do,” she laughs back.

“I didn't ask what *not* to wear.”

“Fine. Don't listen to me. You'll regret it when you want to throw something unexpected his way tonight. Worse case, you don't have panty lines, and nobody is ever the wiser. It's like your ace in the hole.”

I snort. “I'll consider it. But let's talk about actual clothes. Do I wear the dress or the sexy black top with jeans?”

We were *not* friends growing up, River and me. We've known each other our whole lives, but she was part of a different crowd. The kids with money flaunted their nice things, expensive snowboards, and name-brand gear. I was not in that circle. It wasn't like we didn't get along. We just didn't have anything in common. She vacationed in the Italian Alps. I vacationed at home in our pop-up tent, somewhere around Strutt's Peak in the summertime. Or I'd go with my dad on fishing trips, but that wasn't vacationing. Those were Saturdays.

When it came time for college, I chose to go as far as a scholarship would allow me. That's when River and I ended up in London together. The funniest part is that I expected her to stay in the UK, but she hightailed it out of there and returned home as soon as we graduated. Our small town isn't a place to escape from, but leaving for a while was always my plan. For River, she couldn't come back fast enough. Now,

she's somewhat of a social media influencer catering to an audience of twenty-somethings like us, who enjoy new hair and makeup trends. When she told me what she made last year alone, I almost choked.

"You're kicking off your *fierce female, doing-ALL-the-me-things* summer! You're going on a date with Bishop Jones. You're stunning, and you're going to wear something that screams it."

I smile at the compliment.

"How do you end up with these out-of-town, almost laughably sexy men taking you out? I need to learn." She shouts, "Teach me your ways!"

"Stop. This is one date. And you're exaggerating because I haven't gone out on an actual date with anyone in forever. I don't count the late-night hook-ups with Brody Shaw."

"Brody Shaw was fucking hot too. Also, an athlete from out of town, I might add. What happened to him? I forget."

"He ended up getting a place in Vail when he didn't make the podium at the last Olympics, and things just kind of fizzled out."

"Listen to yourself. You casually hooked up with Brody Shaw, and now you're going out with Bishop Jones. You're like catnip for Olympic alpine skiers."

"Brody was half-pipe," I correct her. "And that was a while ago. Barely anyone knew about it. It was more of a booty call situation, if anything. And before that..." I just shake my head because there haven't been many.

"Whatever. I'm saying you have decent standards, and I applaud you. You've decided that you're going to go after the things you want. And I just think it's about time. You've been waiting long enough." She tosses two small clutches on the bed beside me. "Pick one. Those just came in from Saint Laurent." I can't even wrap my mind around their actual cost, and she just gets samples sent to show off to her fanbase. "And I know you're trying to move away from this long-ass crush

on Michael, but let's not forget how you managed to bag one of the hottest men in our town for prom, too.”

I saved all of my hard-earned money to bid on him to be my prom date of all prom dates, hooking the biggest fish Strutt's Peak Central could ever imagine. Granted, he had just turned thirty, and I was eighteen, but in my mind, that was the ticket. The way that my ultimate crush went from just a fantasy to a real-life boyfriend.

I did my homework, too. Watched every John Hughes and Nora Ephron movie I could get my hands on, picked the most incredible dress, and perfected everything. I learned all about rock climbing because he was the best at it. I decided to master the art of knowing everything I could to impress him. It was ambitious and sweet, but also incredibly naive.

I have to laugh, because if I think about it in any serious way, I still feel embarrassed at my attempt to end that evening. But with time, unpredictable circumstances, and the way that small towns burrow into one's personality, it ended up turning just a surface-level crush into my all-time favorite person.

I roll my eyes. “You know I literally paid for that.”

“Oh, I remember. But I bet he would have gone with you for free if you had just asked. The way he looks at you,” she says on a sigh. “We were all so jealous.”

I almost groan with frustration. I thought I saw it too. Not all the time, but in the moments when we finish laughing at something one of us said. Or when I catch him playing with my hair during a movie. But I'm not interested in changing his mind about us anymore. I want someone to want me, lust after me, and fall in love with me, but I want it intensely. It can't be one-sided, and I've somehow become the captain of one-sided feelings.

“That man might be just a friend now, but holy shit, did he age well. He's a dick, but a damn fine one. I bet he *has* a damn fine one too. He was hot years ago, but now...” She widens her eyes and puffs out her cheeks. “Now he's like refined hot. Total Zaddy.”

“Not helping.” I point at her. “And, please don’t say Zaddy again.” I snort a laugh, though, because he kind of is. “Also, he’s not a dick.”

*“Can we dance? This is one of my favorite songs.”*

*He looks at me and doesn’t say anything in response. One thing I’ve learned is that he’s not one to react. He takes his time with things. With words. With actions. So, I wait for him to turn to me and answer.*

*“You like Fleetwood Mac?”*

*I nod and stand because I’m ready to enjoy tonight.*

*“My dad’s fault. Lots of the seventies and eighties music. You should see the roster of my favorite movies. You would probably recognize them.”*

*He laughs, because the elephant in the room, or rather, the very obvious person in this room, is him. He is probably one of the best-looking men in this town, and he’s definitely not in high school. Standing, he holds out his hand for me to grab. I expected some kind of jolt of energy, or that when we touched, it would light up the sky or something, but it didn’t. His hand is warm, and he cautiously holds mine as every set of eyes follows us from the table to the dance floor.*

*Stevie Nicks serenades us, and I do my best not to smile like an idiot because at this very moment, every single girl, who has ever had a crush on a guy, the kind of guy who would normally find her invisible, should have a sense of vindication. My crush, THE crush, isn’t just here as my prom date. Nope. He’s dancing with me, looking at me like I’m beautiful, and I never want to forget how that feels. This is my Jake Ryan moment. The part where Watts gets the guy.*

*“Thank you. For this. For the entire night. If I forget to tell you later, I want to make sure you know, it means a lot to me that you didn’t get weird about coming to my prom.”*

*“You won the bid. Which, by the way, how much did you end up bidding?”*

*“Three-thousand, five-hundred and fifty dollars,” I say proudly. I earned every single dollar between babysitting,*



*organizing the back room, and sitting at the front desk of Hideaway Ink Tattoo Shop. I'd even take over random driving shifts for my mom during the busy season.*

*"Jesus, Grace," he says loudly, and everyone who wasn't already looking at us is now.*

*I smile and move in a little closer to him. He smells really good. All the guys I know either smell like body odor or a very aggressive evergreen tree mixed with sour candy. It's always weird, but Michael smells like clean air. That "just before it snows" scent mixed with a campfire. It's unforgettable, and it's making me want to call him mine. And he is, at least for tonight.*

*"That's a lot of money, Kid. Especially for a prom date. I'm sure you could have asked any of these guys who can't seem to stop looking at you, and they would have said yes."*

*"Didn't want any of them."*

*He looks down at me, and then back up around the crowd. When his eyes track back to mine, I already know what he will say before he says it. His body language screams it.*

*"You're a kid, Grace. And I'm not. This isn't going to turn into anything."*

*I keep my smile plastered wide and don't say anything. If I even try to nod, the tears brimming will definitely give away the fact that those words, no matter how logical they probably are, just devastated me.*

*After a minute, I decide I don't like it. "I'm eighteen."*

*"And I'm not."*

*"Thirty isn't that much older. And we have fun. What would be so wrong if..."*

*But before I can elaborate or embarrass myself even more, he tilts my chin up. "I want you to hear this, Kid, okay? You're too young for me. Too sweet. And I think you're incredible, but we can only ever be friends."*

*The memory of where we started versus where we are now feels like a lifetime ago. I stop curling my lashes and wave at*

her. “We’re not talking about Michael.” I haven’t answered any of his texts. I do want to apologize for my freakout at the gym. He doesn’t deserve to feel like he did anything wrong because, the truth is, he didn’t. I think I just need a moment for myself.

“You’re not wearing jeans tonight. No matter how sexy your top might be. So I vote for the pink dress. I know, I know. It’s out of your comfort zone, but it looks amazing.”

“It’s not too tight? Like in the waist area?”

“Shut your face right now. It’s bodycon, so it’s meant to be tight. Own it.”

I turn to the side and really look at myself in the mirror. I’ve been working out hard for the past year and the consistency is showing in my arms and legs. Maybe I need to upgrade a few things. My hair, clothes...

“River, what would you say if I just went all in with your hot-as-fuck summer vibe? Maybe color my hair, and you help me pick out a few new gym outfits, clothes that’ll be date-worthy and not my typical athleisure?”

“This is rhetorical, because you are asking yourself if you’re okay with it. Obviously, I’m on board with you doing this. But you need to, like, *really* go for it. Maybe go blonde or red! Let’s never allow you to wear black stretch pants again. You know, a real change.”

Before I can respond to her pep talk, my phone beeps.

“Go! Answer it. I gotta go anyway. I told Benny I’d meet him after his shift. But listen to me. You’re fucking hot. Everyone knows it. You need to start believing it. Do the smokey eye and the nude lip. And have fun.” She wiggles her brows as she closes my door.

When I hit the Accept button, two big brown eyes and a tiny little forehead take over the lower half of the screen. One-half of my two favorite kids on the planet.

“Gracie! Gracie, are you there?” The hushed voice comes through. “Why is this taking so long? Hurry up before Grandpa Ash finds us. Sammy, it’s not picking up...”

“Oh! Gracie.”

I smile wide. “Hi, Miles.”

Without answering me, the camera shakes and drops. I hear a little rustling, and then both faces come into view—two of my favorite humans—Sammy and Miles Riggs.

“Grace, I think Dad’s been kidnapped,” Sammy whisper-shouts as her fingers cover half the camera.

“Lemme talk, Sam. I’m the one that heard him, not you!” Miles, usually the quieter of the pair, shouts back at his sister, making me laugh. They’re both so stinking cute.

“What’s going on, guys?” I sit on the bed and give them my full attention. “Where are you? You know you’re not supposed to be using FaceTime without another grown-up around.”

The camera shakes again, and I see Miles’s big brown eyes and round nose scrunch up to give me the low-down. “We’re having a sleepover at Grandpa’s house tonight. Dad, Uncle Henry, and Uncle Law were supposed to be doing somethin’, but then Dad forgot about a PTA meeting. Then he called Grandpa and said if he wasn’t back by seven to call the police, ’cause he was probably kidnapped!”

Sammy shoves her face into the frame and whisper-shouts, “And then Uncle Law said if Daddy were lucky, they’d tie him up too. But now, it’s seven-thirty, and he’s not back.”

I bark out a laugh because that sounds exactly like what Law Riggs would say. And I wonder if it’s more of a scheme to set Michael up than a nefarious kidnapping. It’s not uncommon for someone in his family to push a date on him. He’s never happy about it, but it doesn’t keep them from trying.

“Okay. Well, your dad is a pretty big and strong guy, so I think if he were kidnapped, he might stand a chance.”

“But, Gracie, what if he likes being kidnapped and marries one of those ladies?” Sammy asks. I don’t realize how much I hate that idea too until I see the face I’m making on screen.

“My friend, Annie’s mom, always asks me if Daddy is dating anyone, and I just tell them he only swipes left.”

“Oh my gosh, Sammy! How do you even know what that means?” *And since when is Michael on a dating app?*

“He told me. Well, he didn’t tell me. He told Uncle Law that everyone looked awful and sounded even more awful. And that he’s only swiping left. So, I put two and two together.”

Okay, maybe he’s not active, but I hate that I didn’t know. Why wouldn’t I know if my best friend used a dating app? I’m annoyed that we’ve kept each other in the dark about this part of our lives.

“Why do you look so pretty?” Miles chimes in, taking over the screen.

Sammy gives me the biggest Cheshire Cat smile. “Are you going on a fancy date? Your hair looks so pretty. You should show Daddy. He always says you have the prettiest hair.”

Now I’m going to obsess about what *that* means.

I’m smiling, and I realize after about a minute, that they’re both still staring at me, waiting for an answer.

“Yes, I have a date with a friend. But let’s get back to why you called me.” I raise my eyebrows in question, and they nod back, eager for my plan to ease their worry. “Why don’t I do this? I’ll text your dad and make sure he’s okay. If I don’t hear back from him, I’ll let your grandpa know, and he can call the sheriff. Okay?”

“I like this plan,” Miles says rather seriously.

Sammy shouts, “Kindergarten graduation is next week. Do you think we can have a water balloon fight at the party?”

“You’re having a graduation party?” I tease. I already know all about the party.

Sammy raises her eyebrows. “Don’t you know us at all? Our last name is Riggs. Of course we’re having a party.”

“You sound like a snot when you say it like that, Sam,” Miles says.

“Ew, and snots don’t sound like anything. They’re just green and goopy.” Sammy laughs, and then looks back down at the screen. “Boys are dumb.”

“Be nice,” I say to her, raising my eyebrows. Miles smiles at her, knowing she just got in trouble with me. A place they never like to be. “You’re going to need to ask your grandpa about the water balloons. If he says yes, then I’ll bring ’em.”

“Sammy! Miles! Where did you guys go?” I hear Asher Riggs yelling in the background for them.

“Don’t hide from your grandpa, and be good, you two.”

“M’kay! Bye, Gracie. Bye,” both voices chime out.

Miles yells, “I want to press the button. Stop, Sammy. Press the red.” Then they’re off the phone, and the chaos that swirls around them so noisily is quiet now. And I miss it. My quiet apartment feels a little empty. I’m still smiling a few minutes later when I send out the promised text.

GRACE

Hi.

MICHAEL

Hi.

GRACE

Needed a minute after the other day.

MICHAEL

I know.

But you never let me answer your question.

I really hadn't planned on doing this over text, but I made the kids a promise. So I glance over what he says and bring it back to the real reason I started texting to begin with.

GRACE

Apparently you only swipe left?

MICHAEL

What?

Jesus Christ. Which one told you that?

GRACE

Sammy. But only after I heard her concerns about you being kidnapped tonight. Are you okay? I promised them I'd check.

MICHAEL

I'm not sure yet.

The knock at my door reminds me that I'm about to have drinks with one of People Magazine's Sexiest Men Alive, a three-time Olympic Gold Medalist, and that I deserve some fun. It's also a reminder that it's not my job to worry about Michael tonight. In fact, tonight's the first night I stop looking at him for a change and focus my attention on a man who might see me the way I'm craving.



## *Michael*

I CAN'T FIND A SINGLE GOOD THING ABOUT THIS SITUATION. Nope, not one. The optimists who make up most of my family always say to "find the good." Well, I'm not seeing it. Unless "the good" is being held slightly against my will by politeness. There's no silver lining. There isn't a damn good thing about the president of the PTA somehow getting me alone in her house for what I'm now discovering is a date I never agreed to be on.

I can't focus. Maybe that's how this happened. The past two days have made me feel out of sorts, setting an off-kilter tone for everything else. I shouldn't be surprised that today is wrapping up the exact same way.

"Isn't that just the most delightful thing? It was such a surprise, but I like to be involved, ya know?"

I focus back on the woman in front of me, yammering on about some bullshit accolade the principal of Strutt's Peak Elementary School managed to award her. For what exactly, I have no clue.

I continue to nod at Beverly. She's just taken two very large sips of rosé. Blinking, I look around the oversized room, finally taking in the rest of my surroundings. Everything is beige.

I need to talk to Grace.

And not just text with her, but really talk through this. The last thing I want to see is her tackling anything on that rant-fueled roster. And then her question of what I see when I look at her? I choked.

When I allow myself to really look at her, it's dangerous. I've forced myself to see her like family. It's the only way to stay in control of it. That's it. I don't let myself focus on the way her hair falls around her shoulders, or how she bites her lower lip when she's nervous. It'll only lead me to think about more. Like how it would feel to wrap her hair around my fist



and pull. I'd wonder what kind of sound she'd make and if she'd like it. I'd start to think about the shape of her breasts and if they'd make me come just by touching them and playing with her nipples. Or how her lower lip might taste if I sucked it. I can't look for too long, because my wants will wander.

I can't say that shit to her. I'm not even supposed to think it. So, how am I supposed to answer her question? If I'm honest with her, if I tell her that she's incredible and about all of the ways I fight myself to not notice the rest of her, then we'd be on an entirely different path than the one we're on now. A path that scares me, because it could destroy the relationship we have. It could lead to her no longer being in my life. I can't allow that.

I grind my molars just thinking about the five steps ahead of the probable disaster my feelings for her could cause.

The suction of the wine stopper pulls my attention to what's in front of me again. Another glass of rosé has been poured. I take a sip of my water. Maybe I should tell Beverly to slow down.

I look down at my watch. It's official, I've been hoodwinked. I was supposed to be here for only forty-five minutes to talk about the kindergarten graduation gift and an end-of-the-year class trip, but now we're moving into an hour and a half, and the rest of the PTA board hasn't shown up.

Grace checked in on me. Even if it was prompted by the kids, at least she's not ignoring me.

The rustling of silverware brings my attention to the kitchen. Bone-colored, but peppered with an outstanding number of phrases that are a variety of living, laughing, and loving. There's one about dancing. And another about eating cake for breakfast. I don't get it. I watch Beverly move around her kitchen and start removing food from the oven.

Pork chops emerge, but I didn't even smell anything cooking. I bite down on my molars again, the dull ache pulls the anxiety away from my mind and into something physical. I refuse to let thoughts about getting out of here, and how I'm

going to fix things with Grace, take over and pull me under. I'll focus on being here in this moment, or else, I'll spiral.

I'm not going to focus on how my best friend thinks I'm on a dating app for random hook-ups, which I'm not. Or the fact that she more or less proclaimed she's going to "explore" what's out there, as far as men are concerned. My therapist would ask me how that makes me feel. And while the obvious answer is that I don't like it, the less obvious is that I probably deserve it. Just like she deserves to find someone who can give her what she wants.

I trace my thumb along the button of my jeans and focus on the rounded metal. The casual way I'm sitting, legs wide, leaning against this very aggressive white furry couch is masking how I really feel.

"What do you think of my new loveseat? It's that bouclé, which is such a great texture, don't you think? Soothing."

I hate myself for smiling, but I don't know what else to do. I know I can't run out of here, but fuck do I want to.

If this happened five or six years ago, I wouldn't be handling it very well. My anxiety is managed now; I know what I need to do to keep it under control. But it's still a part of me, and it's not going to be cured. Which means, in high-stress situations, I still struggle. Like right now. So, instead of letting my unease consume me, I'm going to focus on how much I hate being on the PTA.

If it's for Sammy and Miles, I want to show up. If there's a way to be there for them, be involved in what they're doing, even when I'm at work, then I'll do it. For them, I'll always push through and do what's best. So I volunteer for shit I don't really want to do. Like being selected to come up with the class gift. And then, I was somehow voted in as Vice President of this lively group of mostly moms, who want the same things I want, for their kids to get the most out of school. But the difference is, I don't actually like any of them. Most of the mundane shit we discuss could be planned and decided in an email or group text, but here we are, ninety-seven minutes later, and I'm getting a near deathly dose of fuck-me eyes from

their leader. Or maybe she has something stuck to her eyelashes. I'm not totally sure.

"I hope you like pork?" Beverly asks.

I stare at the platter, pulling my lips inward, trying to mask whatever horrified look I know wants to escape.

I scratch at my jaw, rubbing the scruff that's grown since this morning.

Why is everything the color of bones in this house? It's a fifty-fifty whether or not I might end up caged in the basement. I know that Beverly has been trying to flirt her way to fucking me for the better part of two years now. I have no interest. She's divorced with two kids, and while she seems nice, it's more like politely pushy and slightly condescending. The fact that most people can't tell the difference is annoying as all hell.

A little part of me is impressed that she went ahead and pulled this little stunt. I imagine she'd had a girl's night where they all misguided her to "just go for it." But now I'm running late picking up my kids. And I hate being late. Running out of time and feeling rushed makes me feel anxious. And I refuse to be wound up by a Strutt's Peak Elementary PTA Meeting.

"Beverly, I wasn't planning to be here this long. My kids are expecting me for dinner." Abruptly, I stand and move toward the kitchen. I should be moving toward the door, in all honesty.

"I know you're a little grumpy sometimes, Michael, but I also know that Sammy and Miles are with your dad tonight and, according to your brother, you don't have any plans."

*Law, you fucking traitor.* My youngest brother thinks he's helping me out, but instead, he's just sticking his head into my business, where it doesn't belong.

"You spoke with my brother?" I ask, the question coming out a bit harsher than I intended.

She laughs nervously. "I'm... I'm sorry, I just thought maybe you'd want to share a meal, and then fool around a bit. It's pretty obvious that I'm lonely, and you're lonely. And

quite frankly, you are the only man in this age bracket that looks... well, looks like you..."

Most of the men in this town who are physically fit are a good decade younger than me, then the rest of them are attached to someone. Every other dad I've met at my kids' school is either married or not necessarily something to get a woman excited over. The dating pool is small in our small town, but that doesn't mean I am interested in swimming with any of them. Especially with Beverly Harpson.

She's attractive and takes care of herself, a little too boney for my tastes, but I also haven't forgotten what a beast she was when she was in high school. She was pretty, but maybe no one ever told her how much she sucked. And age didn't improve her personality. I'm not attracted to her. It'd be easy if I were, could maybe take a break from my hand for a change. Pause the only two roles I seem to have: dad and business owner. Get lost in a woman whom I don't care about losing control with for a night. But honestly, it's not something I allow myself to do. I did that once, and it turned my world upside down. I would just end up thinking about the one person I can't have the whole time. But Beverly doesn't know that. Nobody does. And I'm sure as hell not going to say that, especially since the woman in front of me is looking at me like she's either going to strip off her shirt or cry. Maybe both.

"I just wanted to shoot my shot," she says.

*Called it.*

Shit, she's going to cry. Her eyes are all glassy. I don't do crying women very well. Even when my kids cry, my whole body tenses up, and I never know if I should flee or hug them. Right now, I want to flee, but she's coming closer. Oh fuck, I think I'm about to hug this woman. I'm going to kill Law.

Now, Grace's texts make more sense. My kids had every right to be nervous. I've been kidnapped by niceties, a divorcee, and my sudden sense of giving a shit.

"At least stay and have dinner with me. My kids are gone for the night, and you're here already."

I'm not as harsh as I used to be. Probably one of the thousands of things that having two kids who have taken over my entire existence has changed about me. The old me would have left about thirty minutes ago. I'd have waltzed right out the front door without so much as a goodbye or answer to why I had to go. I used to be a pro at the Irish Goodbye. Now I hang back like another round of "let's do this again soon" will really make me want to do any of this again.

"I'll stay for dinner. But, Beverly, I just want to be honest with you." She leans back and looks at me with watering eyes. "I'm not interested in getting involved with anyone right now." She snuffles and nods. Releasing me from her clawed grip on my forearms, she goes back to taking out more food I still can't smell from the microwave and second oven.

*When did she make all this?* I've been here the whole time. I pull out my phone and fire off a text to my younger brother, who is now in knee-deep shit with me.

MICHAEL

You're going to pay for this, asshole.

LAW

Stop being such a baby. Get laid. Just go for a slit dip and stop being such a prude.

MICHAEL

I don't remember asking for your help.

LAW

Sure you did. You informed me how long it's been since you actually slept with another living being and not your flashlight, so I took it as a cry for help. I saw Beverly's tight ass in hot pink leggings at the grocery store and told her to shoot her shot.

MICHAEL

You're dead to me.

LAW

Get out of your head. Do your counting thing and when you get to four, close your eyes, take a breath, and then check out her tits.

Just think with the other head for a minute and let him dive face-first into warm waters.

MICHAEL

I'm blocking you now.

I need to get out of here.

LAW

Maybe if you saw this as normal behavior for adults, then you'd stay.

He sends me a picture message, and even though it's dark and zoomed in, I can see Grace's profile, sipping on what I'm going to assume is a martini because that's her "going out" drink. And she's sitting very close to one of her clients, Bishop Jones. The self-titled Olympic Alpine God, who I've never had a problem with until right this second.

LAW

Just in case you didn't recognize her, Gracie is at The Ledge looking really fucking hot. And cozy, I might add, with Bishop Jones.

See, everybody needs to get some! Even you, big brother.

It shouldn't bother me. Grace is out on a date. Living her life. Hell, that's what she was just ranting about. She's young

and single, she should be dating, but the only problem is...it does bother me.

MICHAEL

You just get there?

And the part that's not fair, that I realize isn't fair to her, is that I've set the boundaries in our relationship. Friendship is the only thing I've allowed. And now, as I stare at her smiling for someone other than me, I'm realizing just how secure she is being "just friends" with me and how much I am not.

LAW

Just ordered my drink. You coming?

"Michael..." Beverly says from the kitchen.

I've reached my limit on this entire day. I can't get out of this PTA ruse fast enough so I can get to that damn bar. I look back at my text chain with Grace, which ended over an hour ago now.

MICHAEL

I'm on my way.

When I look up to tell Beverly that I'll need to leave, I'm met with a smiling PTA president and her bare tits front and center.

*PTA meeting, my ass.*





## *Grace*

“TELL ME SOMETHING, GRACIE,” BISHOP SAYS AS HE LEANS back. He drapes his arm across the back of the velvet couch we’ve been sitting on. The dark, rich colors and dim lighting have a freeing and sultry vibe at The Ledge. My martini is delicious, and I’m totally feeling myself. This dress was the right choice. I’ll need to thank River later.

“Tell you something? Okay, anything specific, or just give you some random facts?”

He laughs. “How about, are you dating anyone?”

I smile over the rim of my rocks glass. “Bishop, I’m not sure what kind of women you take out for drinks, but if I were dating anyone exclusively, I wouldn’t be here alone with you.”

“You’d be surprised. But okay, single.” He takes a sip of his scotch and soda. Running his finger along my bare shoulder ever so lightly, he says, “I probably should have asked you that before I asked you out, but I tend to just go for what I want.”

I like that. He makes it sound so effortless.

“And that was me?”

Smiling, he nods his head yes, slowly. I can’t help but feel the heat of it as he keeps his eyes on mine. “You’re sweet. Incredible with your hands. And looking fine as hell in that dress. Mind if I move closer?” He nods at the space between us.

I give him a smile and nod yes.

As he slides closer, he says, “There’s a place,” brushing his fingers from my shoulder to right beneath my ear. “Right here.” He taps lightly. “I’ve been thinking about what kind of noise you’ll make if I kiss that spot.”

The way he’s speaking to me sets off a little flutter in my stomach, and I’m hoping he’ll go for it so we can both find out.

“You’re so much trouble,” I tease. “But now I’m curious too.”

He moves my hair away from my shoulder and out of his way, and I look out across the restaurant. I’m curious if anyone is watching. A handful of women at the bar with bridal party sashes and barely-there cocktail dresses are pulling people’s attention. The tables around us are peppered with couples and some solo drinkers, but it’s dark enough that everyone pays attention to what’s in front of them. There are minimal glances our way.

When Bishop’s fingers graze my neck, I get nervous. His hands there aren’t the ones I’ve been imagining for so long. So I stupidly interrupt the moment, “Do you see a lot of women? Date, I mean?” I don’t know if I want the answer. I mean, I know the answer. It’s a whopping “*Yes, you idiot.*” The man is too sexy for his own good and in his early thirties. Not to mention, he’s a bit of a celebrity.

“Yes, I do. I’m a believer in following a mood. Trying different people on in search of the right one.”

I know that response screams slutty, but really, when did slutty get such a bad rap?

“I like that,” I hum with another sip of my drink.

A small shiver works its way along my arms and up my neck, leaving goosebumps in its wake. It feels like someone is looking at us. At me. I scan the room again.

Before I can say anything else, I look past his shoulder and toward the front of the room, immediately locking eyes with Michael as he leans against the bar. His full attention on my every move. And for just a second, it sends a current through me, a jolt like I’m being caught doing something I’m not supposed to—which is ridiculous. It’s the *way* he’s looking. Watching. Taking in my proximity to Bishop. The way my date’s hand rests casually across the back of the couch and his fingers caress my opposite shoulder. I brush my hand on Bishop’s thigh and move a little closer. I want to ignore him. But I’m far more turned on now than I was a few minutes ago. I like that he’s watching. Not just seeing me this way with

someone else, that maybe he's jealous. Maybe I've finally pushed him enough to pay attention.

"I like you, Grace," Bishop says, drawing my gaze back to him. He moves in a bit closer. "Have for a long time, but never got the impression you were interested."

*That's because I haven't been.*

"I like you too." I smile. And I do, but I also happen to be preoccupied with the man on the other side of the room.

He takes that as his permission to explore. Leaning in, he brushes his lips over my jawline, just below the spot he touched with his fingers earlier.

My eyes should close, absorbing the feeling of this man's attention, but they don't. Instead, they flit back to Michael. It should feel inappropriate, dirty even, to look at a man I've wanted for most of my life while another moves his mouth so intimately around my neck. But it does the opposite. The entire situation has me so turned on that a low, quiet moan escapes me.

"I have a feeling you're not as sweet as you might appear, Grace," he whispers right before his lips find mine. And he's right. The funniest part is that anyone could have whispered that to me at this moment, and I think my reaction would have been the same. A swirl of arousal. A twinge of anticipation. But not at his lips exploring mine, but for the very lewd fact that Michael is watching it happen. A man who I swore I was done thinking about in this way just a couple of days ago. I decided to make a different choice. And now, here we are. Right back to who I really want.

And I should be mad. Or at least annoyed that he's very clearly crashing my date, but he's never looked at me this way. Not in a situation like this or with the level of intensity that's currently billowing off of him as he so casually sips his drink.

Bishop's lips move around mine with a pattern. A kiss on my bottom lip, a swipe of his tongue a couple of times, and then a nip of my upper lip. Perfectly executed, but I still can't focus, even as my eyes close and I kiss him back.

Does it turn Michael on to see me this way? Is he feeling any jealousy? Or was he just surprised to see me and has moved his focus to something else? The wondering has me opening my eyes. If he isn't looking, then that's it. That's the answer I need. I could go back to enjoying this date and keep my plan to move on from my blind spot for Michael Riggs.

My phone buzzes under my thigh just as Bishop pulls away.

“What do you say we get out of here?” he asks quietly, playfully pecking at my lips. “We could go to another bar. Or, if you're feeling like continuing that kiss, we could go to my place.”

My phone buzzes again. This time, he must feel it too. “Why don't you see who that might be, and I'll go close out our tab. When I come back, we can decide what we do next.”

I give him a smile and say, “Okay.”

Glancing down at my phone, I see there's one text message notification from Michael. When I open the text, it's a picture.

My mouth drops open as I suck in a breath, blinking repeatedly. I feel dizzy as I stare at a grainy zoomed-in image of me, lost in the feeling of being kissed and caressed. I almost don't recognize myself. Bishop's face is buried in my neck, and I look... incredible. My eyes are closed as I bite my lower lip, and my arms and hands are draped along his shoulders. It's me, but I look sexier than how I normally see myself. I wasn't just enjoying Bishop, I was exploring how it felt to be watched by the man I really wanted. I imagined Michael's mouth traveling along my neck and his tongue dipping out to taste my skin. Could he see that? Is that why he took this picture? A rush of confidence rolls through my body.

When I look back up toward the bar, he's gone. Like he was never there to begin with. If it wasn't for the picture displayed on my phone, I might have thought it was all in my imagination. But my phone buzzes again.

MICHAEL

Ask me again what I see.

The words raise goosebumps along my skin, and a swoop of arousal travels through my core that warms me from head to toe. I'm instantly aware of how wet I am, thanks to River's suggestion of going with no undies tonight. I cross my legs.

I want to ask what else he sees. If this picture does for him what it's doing for me. I'm aroused at how I look and even more so at him seeing me like this. The thoughts, the picture, his words, they all blur every line that's ever been drawn between us.

I bite my lip again, but I can't stifle the smile his words bring. *I see you.*

"You have a great smile," Bishop says, interrupting my spinning thoughts. "Where to next, beautiful?"

His hands casually slung in his dress pant pockets, wearing his lazy, sexy smile. It would be so easy to follow him. Ignore Michael and find my way into Bishop's bed. It would end a very long sexual drought and maybe even tick off a few items on my list of things I want to experience with a partner. But that's not what I want. It's not *who* I want.

"I think I'm ready to call it a night."

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I wake up as a cool gush of air billows along my skin. It feels like someone is taking a comb and dragging it lightly, starting somewhere around the back of my neck, tracing my shape, and traveling with a purpose. Tiny synapses are firing off and jumping along the fine hairs along my limbs. I know this feeling. I'm never sure what will follow. I don't remember the dream I've just had, but I feel I'm being told to pay attention.

After the cool air and the awareness it brings, what comes next is never the same, but I've learned that it's always important. A replay. It could be an object, and sometimes, it

comes with a specific scent or memorable words, or even a song. It's something that hasn't happened yet. Not in real life, at least, but I've likely seen it more clearly in a dream. A dream that's maybe too important to forget. And these "recaps" are the CliffsNotes instead.

It's not something I talk about with anyone. My mom is the only one who knows, but we don't discuss it often. It sounds too spiritual or even slightly crazy to say out loud. It's definitely not logical, so I keep it tucked away as my own private quirk. Sometimes I'll remember the dream and all of its finite details, but more often, I don't. So I get these elements that could be retained and followed or ignored. They feel like a well-lit fork in the road. A sneak peek at where my paths split.

I close my eyes tight, waiting to see what might come. This time, it's blurry photographs of a man and a woman being swiped on a phone, and I can hear wind chimes somewhere in the background. I think the windchimes must be large because they're deep, alto and baritone sounds. Not like the high-pitched tinny sound of small chimes. As deep as an organ riff, but more melodic than curt. It happens for just a moment, less than ten seconds, but I need to remember it.

The morning after my sixteenth birthday was the first time. I didn't think anything of it. It wasn't something to overanalyze. A vivid dream that made me feel good. And then, I woke up with a traveling tickle along the edges of my skin. It felt like someone had brushed against my body, leaving a chill in its wake. Ants marching along the perimeter of my limbs.

And then I saw him.

It was a flash of a smile from a man. Not someone my age. Someone older, with features that didn't come yet from the boys in my grade. A prominent jawline covered with a shadow of scruff. I took notice of a small dimple in his chin, and pretty eyes, but a color I didn't remember. And then he disappeared. Seconds later, I saw a black hair elastic, like the ones I wore on my wrist, just in case I ever needed to pull my hair up off my neck. That was it. I thought maybe I had just started falling

back asleep. But it was my first sneak peek. A hazy morning glimpse of what would come later that day.

Strutt's Peak is a small town, but it has a massive number of things that people from all over come to enjoy. The San Juan Mountains are our playground. Every summit, valley, and trail are sought after and explored throughout the year—whether that be through snow or warmer weathered months. Our after-school programs weren't four square tournaments or crafting. Nope, we had bigger options. It was the perk of being here. We climbed, hiked, skied, boarded, heck, there was even a year where we ice climbed. But when it got too dark, or the weather didn't cooperate, the newly remodeled Riggs Outdoor Climbing Center was our stomping ground.

That same day, after school, as I stepped up to my assigned partner, my belayer, the vision from that morning came to life right in front of me.

*The man in front of me feels familiar. I wonder if I can sit this one out. Climbing was never something I was eager to do. I bet if I ask, he'll let me out of it. I watch as he knots a figure eight, loops it into my harness, and clips it to the carabiner he's holding. Ugh, I should have said something before he knotted my harness. I don't want to do this. I'd rather sit on the other side of the room and read until I get picked up. I look up at the man less than a foot in front of me and try to place him.*

*His chin dimple peeks out as he asks, "Can I use your hair elastic if you're not planning to?" nodding to my wrist.*

*His dark brown hair reaches his chin. The ends a little lighter in color than the rest, just at the bottom, where it curls.*

*I nod yes, not finding words fast enough. My nerves kick in as I hand him the hair tie. When my fingers swipe the tips of his, it feels like I saw this coming. I watch him flip his head down and pull his hair into a messy knot on top of his head. My stomach bottoms out. He's the man I pictured in my mind this morning.*

When he smiled and bumped my fist in thanks, I realized two things would never be the same again. First, I saw this

happening. In my dream and then in the flashed images after I woke up. For the better part of that year, I thought I was just like Teen Witch, or someone equally as exciting. And second, I was going to be madly in love with my belayer. A crush that would never really disappear. I knew on my way down the wall who he was. It was almost laughable I didn't recognize him at first. Everyone in Strutt's knew Michael Riggs. He ran anything having to do with climbing on our mountains.

*He doesn't say much that I remember after that, but I'll never forget the way he watched me as I looked for my beta up the wall.*

*"You can rainbow. You don't have to stick to one color on this part of the wall. It's probably a little harder than where everyone else is set up." He gives slack to the rope and says, "But you've got me here, so let's see what you're made of, Kid."*

*"Challenge accepted," I say, smiling to myself.*

Then I stuck to the purple beta, listed on the wall at a 5.11. It was the hardest route in the section of wall where we stood. He'd assumed that I'd use what I could to make it to the top, but I was already subscribed to the notion that healthy competition was necessary and that playing with the boys, beating them at whatever they thought I couldn't do like them, meant instant respect. It also wasn't winning me any boyfriends.

I felt invincible that day. I flew up that rock wall with precision. I remember seeing the beta so clearly and my focus was simply on the climb. When my feet finally landed back on the ground, Michael looked at me as if he'd never seen anything like it. He didn't say anything to confirm what I felt, just simply gave me one curt nod of approval. But I loved it. I thrived off of high-fives and "good jobs" for months after that.

That day was the start. The event that sparked the most epic and jilting crush of my life. At sixteen, when feelings are too big to comprehend, that day, combined with what I saw that morning of my birthday, felt like I was being lassoed by fate. I was convinced this was exactly what all the movies and



stories said it felt like. All-consuming attraction. Never-ending excitement. A swarm of butterflies that would be unleashed from my guts to my chest whenever I was in the room with him.

I was a sophomore at Strutt's Central High School, and Michael Riggs was an adult. He was a grown man, which could be considered gross by teenage and societal standards, but to me, he was the most beautiful person I had ever seen.

I told everyone I knew that he was going to be mine someday. It became town knowledge. I cringe now at how careless I was with sharing that feeling with anyone who would listen. But I had also never had a dream like that before or experienced its after-currents. It felt serendipitous. It felt true enough to believe wholeheartedly.

Opening the text chain from Michael, I stare at the picture. And then at his words.

How do I respond?

I scroll up to the messages that came in before he arrived at The Ledge last night. "PTA kidnapping" and "bone-colored nightmare" have me realizing he was absolutely freaking out. It must have been why he was at the bar. To vent and meet his brother.

I feel silly for thinking he went there to see me. That he found a way to seek me out. It still doesn't explain his attention, though. Taking a picture like that, it should feel intrusive, but that's not what I felt. As if my feelings for Michael Riggs aren't already complicated. Now add this, and I'm back to where I was.

This isn't just going to go away.

MICHAEL

Your message is marked as read. So that means you saw it. Have something you want to ask me?

The gossip train seems to think you've bagged an Olympian. But that wasn't exactly how I saw it last night.

How was the rest of your date, Grace?

Oh. My. God. What is happening?

“River!” I yell at the top of my lungs.

She shuffles out of the bathroom and looks as lousy as I feel.

“You don't need to yell. This is a small apartment.”

I don't want to divulge what happened with Michael showing up. I'm not sure I want her opinion; it feels like our little secret. So I settle on, “Who did you tell that I had a date with Bishop?”

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. “Okay, I may have shared with Benny that your dating life is starting to look up when he asked if you were seeing anybody.”

“Seriously?”

“Why? What does it matter? You were at The Ledge with him. I'm sure plenty of people saw you,” she says while moving our empty glasses to the wet bar.

*I know one sure did.*

I shake out my hands. I can do this.

GRACE

Do you really want to know how the rest of my date went?

MICHAEL

Oh! Hi. Good to see that you're alive.

GRACE

Sarcasm. Cool.

And the friendly tone has me instantly relaxing. This is who we are.

GRACE

Did you bone the PTA president?

The thought makes me instantly salty. But I already know he didn't. Beverly Harpson is not one of his favorites. Not to mention, he ended up at The Ledge. It's not his style. He doesn't sleep around, but even if he did, I doubt he'd show up at the bar afterwards.

MICHAEL

We officially talking about our sex lives now?

GRACE

You started it.

MICHAEL

To answer your question, hell no.

Beverly certainly tried.

I exhale.

MICHAEL

Did you go home with him?

I bite the inside of my cheek, swallowing my nerves to say what I really want to.

Something else caught my attention.

My phone starts vibrating. Mom's face takes over the screen. "Hi, Ma," I answer.

"For fuck's sake, Grace. What? You start dating a famous person and you can't call or even text your own mother to tell her." She exaggeratedly exhales and breathes out the word "fuck." As if swearing, even more, will get the point across.

"Stop it. I'm not dating anybody."

"That's not what I'm hearing."

"Jesus."

"Nope, *He's* not here right now, it's your mother instead. Remember her?"

"You haven't missed anything. I'm not dating Bishop Jones. It was one date."

"Well, 'ats a shame. That man is not hard to look at. What's wrong? You sound off."

But before I can get another word out, I hear it. The chiming of loud baritone wind chimes just like the ones I heard this morning.

"Where are you, Mom?"

"Dammit, I can't hear anything. One second," she yells into the phone. And a few seconds later, she says, "I'm one of the tour guides on this healing walk. It was a Tibetan singing bowl that Boon thought would be cleansing. I don't think he's using it correctly. Anyway, Riggs is doing more curated adventures for spring and this one is all Feng Shui or Krav Maga or some shit. I don't know. I've got half a dozen people humming into the wind. That bowl sounds off every ten minutes. They're supposed to be picking echinacea and chamomile for tea, but really, I think they're just picking weeds," she mumbles. "There's a satchel of fish strapped to my back that we caught with hand lines, and my sciatica just

showed up. Quite literally everything is a pain in my ass right now.”

“Mom, Feng Shui and Krav Maga are not even remotely the same thing.”

“I’m not leading the tour, just making sure nobody wanders off on the hike.” She covers the phone, and I hear her yell, “I need a minute, Boon.”

“Those chimes or the bowl sound. I heard it in my dream,” I tell her.

She’s quiet for a minute, and then asks, “What else?”

“Pictures blurred out, but a lot of them. Could have been me in one of them, but I’m not sure.” I close my eyes and rub my forehead. “It’s been a little while since the last time I had one of these.”

I hear yelling on the other line. “What part of ‘stay on the trail’ is so fucking hard?!” Then she says to me, “Honey, I gotta go.”

“Love you,” I tell her.

“Gracie?”

“Yeah?”

“Your sneak peeks, you pay attention. Follow your gut. And just know your life is at a crossroads. That’s always when they seem to show up.”

“I know.” I smile. “Thanks.”

“Tell River I need more of that hand cream she gets for free.” I hear shuffling, and then she yells, “Get back on the trail.” The line goes dead after that.

Tilting my head back on the couch, I close my eyes. *Pay attention.* I exhale a heavy breath. I’ve never been more distracted.



## *Michael*

“YOU GET THE BLUE AND GREEN ONES. LIKE THE MILES DAVIS song, duh. I get the red and purple. Uncle Jack gets the orange,” Sammy explains in a huff, as if dividing up three packets of fruit snacks is the most common-sense thing a person should know how to do.

“Dad, I want the red ones from my pack,” Miles groans. “There’s more red and orange than blue and green, which means I’m getting less, Sam.”

“Listen, Miles, we picked favorite colors this week. You went first, now you have to live with your choices. Blue and green. I don’t make the rules, I just live them,” she says, and it’s taking all of my facial muscles not to laugh.

“You *did* make the rules, Sammy. Choosing favorite colors for the week was your idea! Ugh, you’re the worst,” Miles mutters.

“Nope, none of that.” I point to him.

We’re in the era of constant arguments. A few months ago, they hated everything I suggested or wanted to do. From dinners to weekend plans, but at least they were on the same side. I was always wrong and the constant bad guy. “*Dad, why would we want pepperoni pizza? We only eat bacon pizza.*” It was obviously a crazy idea to have them try something different. But at least the bickering was limited.

Currently, Sammy wants to run the show and Miles is realizing that maybe he doesn’t want to remain the obedient listener. They’re exhausting, but it’s the good kind of tired. The kind that when my head hits the pillow, I’m out cold. The kind that keeps my mind from wandering too far, overanalyzing too much, like it used to. In so many ways, the chaos these two rained down on my life brought in new anxieties—keeping them safe, cared for, and healthy. But they managed to ease some of the bad thoughts. Not all of them. I

have a therapist and medication to assist with all of it. But they keep me focused on what's happening.

“C'mon, Dad, she's ruining this. I want to eat my own Gushers.”

“Daddy, I'm just planning appropriately. You always say, 'plan ahead, it'll make everything smoother.' So that's what we did.” She pops a red gusher into her mouth. “There's one extra red, and he's freaking out about it.”

“You just ate it! Dad, she just went ahead and ate it. How is that fair?”

I ignore them and pop another pistachio into my mouth, chewing right along with Sam, since I don't have an answer.

“We ignore them, right? Like let them figure it out type thing? Or do you have a look or signal that I missed?” Jack asks quietly as he sips his beer.

I nod and try to stifle a laugh.

“I am a bit intimidated by Sam, to be totally honest. She somehow managed to get your sister to go to the store and buy more of those things. I didn't even see it happen. I just got a text from Ev that she was at the store, and she needed to know which flavor: Tropical or Original.”

“Always Original. And oh, I know about Sam. She's just like Ev. She's going to run the world, just like her aunt. I have no doubt about that. When we were kids, she ran us like we were her squad team and she was captain.”

Speaking of my sister, she calls out from behind us, “Okay, I got the big box. And then I bought an extra one for my house for when you guys come over next time, and I have another for Grandpa Ash's house too in the car.”

Sammy squeals, and Miles yells out, “Thank goodness! Dad never buys the big box.”

“You probably don't for a reason, right?” Everly asks.

I lift my shoulder. “You've got 'em for the night tonight, so you'll see.” She looks at Jack nervously.



He leans in and kisses her neck as she sits in front of him on the massive blanket we have spread out on the lawn. I'm not an overly affectionate person, but it makes me happy to see how happy my sister is with my brother-in-law. They may have had a rocky start, but they're damn near perfection now. Something I wouldn't have minded finding for myself at some point, but I'm not the easiest person to live with, I know that. Then when I add the twins and work, it's not something I can really see happening.

"What's the plan for this summer? Are you guys doing camps again, or spending a ton of time at Grandpa Ash's ranch?" Jack asks.

"This summer is looking a little different, actually," I say, as I glance over at the twins.

Miles answers, "We're spending the summer with Molly."

Jack looks back at me, I'm sure ready to ask a roster of questions. The twins' mother, Molly, isn't a constant in their life.

"Yeah, Daddy is going to stay with Grandpa Ash for most of the summer, while Molly stays here with us."

For the majority of the twins' life, it's been just me. Molly never wanted them. She left them with her mother when they were just a few weeks old. Her mother thought she just needed time. That it was a lot to handle two small children on her own. But then, when they hit six months, she suspected that Molly had no interest in coming back. That's when I found out about them. And even though it shocked me to my core, that I was a father and had no clue, it wasn't a question of *if* they were coming to live with me. It was just a matter of when.

After that, Molly resurfaced just long enough to sign over full custody. She flits in and out of their life. A few phone calls here and there, but never any real time spent. She's asked for them to call her Molly instead of Mom. That conversation pissed me off, but I couldn't let that show when they asked if that meant they didn't have a mom. She told them she prefers them to see her as a friend and friends call each other by their first names. No matter how you slice it, it's too complicated to

try to explain something to my kids that even I don't understand. So they call her Molly, and I allow her to be as much a part of their lives as she can handle.

I look back at Jack when the kids are distracted. "Complicated, but..." I shrug, trailing off. That's what it is. When she suggested spending the summer with them, I didn't want to deny them access to her. Even though I had to wonder, why now, all of the sudden? Some real time to get to know each other could only be a good thing. I hope.

"Dad, what is that getting taken out of the trucks?" Miles asks. My curious one. Thankfully changing the topic.

"It's a pulley system so they erect the stage and sound tent properly." I scoot forward so I can point in his line of vision. "All of that white material is going to be used this year to improve the sound and potentially keep at least the musicians dry if it rains."

"Dad, do you think anyone will play songs that we know?" Miles asks.

"I don't know, Miles. Blues tends to skew a bit older than six-year-old tastes," I tell him, while Sammy takes a handful of the sour fruit snacks and shoves them into her mouth.

"I want to play hide and seek with Uncle Jack before it gets too dark. And you have to go so we can start our sleepover." I can't help but laugh. Nothing makes you feel more like an imposter than when your kids decide they want you to leave so they can do their own thing.

A couple of years ago, we sat on my sister's roof deck and watched as Strutt's Peak prepared for the Annual Blues Festival. The view from her ranch is one of the best in this town; you can see the mountains, downtown Strutt's, and the valley right before the hot springs. It's right next door to where we grew up. I still sit back here sometimes and can't believe this is the place we all call home.

Strutt's Peak isn't like any small town you'd stumble upon. You seek it out and it digs its claws into you. I took some time away when I was in college, but there was no other place I

would ever consider home. The night we watched the trucks pull in and unload equipment for the festival was the first time I told the twins more about their mother, where they were born, and how they got their names. It wasn't some big plan, it just ended up happening.

When I tried to explain to them that Baby Shark wouldn't be on the playlist, the music that would be played had me remembering details about Molly. Their mother was someone I never planned on knowing, but the funny thing about plans is they tend to change. At first when found out I had kids, it felt like the world slipped out beneath my feet. I was in a suspended state of vertigo until they arrived. Then I was angry. Mad that I missed seeing them come into the world. Pissed off that Molly didn't want to find me and tell me herself. And I was annoyed about not having a say in their names. Until that night, I hadn't realized part of their names has a small snippet of me in them too.

The night we were together, she told me I reminded her of the unassuming frenzy of jazz and the soulfulness of the blues. I didn't remember all that much about her and the night we spent together making them, but those words stuck with me.

And after a few letters from their grandmother that had come into my possession after time had passed, I knew that Sammy was named after Sam Cooke and Miles for none other than Miles Davis. I'll have to remember to tell Molly that they like to hear about their names. We listen to a little bit from each musician before bedtime.

"When does she come?" Everly asks once the twins are distracted with Jack.

"She hasn't given me a date yet, but I'm guessing next week. She knows when their summer vacation kicks off."

I bite the inside of my cheek, checking my watch. It's almost 7:30 p.m., which means they have an hour until bedtime, and I want to give them some time to play with Jack and Everly. "I'm going to head out. What time do you want me to get them?"

She flicks her eyes up at me when I stand. “You okay?” Everly asks. My sister knows me. She knows when I’m not okay. “I just don’t understand that woman. I’ll never understand how she can walk away. I mean, look at them. They’re so damn perfect.”

“Yeah, well, you know it’s not like we don’t know how it feels to be left, right? At least Molly’s trying. Anything is something.”

“You’re right. Something is better than nothing.”

Our past is ridiculously similar to my kids’ lives.

Everly stands up and wraps her arms around my shoulders, forcing me to hug her. She has a habit of being able to ease my worrying. And while I’ve learned to manage some of the anxieties I have, it’s the reality that I have two little people who depend on me for everything. I couldn’t imagine not being here to make sure they have exactly what they need.

“We do know how ‘nothing’ feels. And having a mother who made choices that didn’t include us. But we also have Daddy. And you’re just like him, the way you love these two. You’re an incredible person, Michael, and an even better father, and the way you love them...” She shakes her head. “Don’t second guess that.”

I nod, because hearing that from her tugs at my emotions.

When she pulls back to look at me, she says, “I know you worry that it’s not enough. But they still have women in their lives to help guide them. Me. Giselle.” I widen my eyes at the mention of Giselle, my over-the-top sister-in-law. “Oh, stop. You love her, and she’s great with them.”

I smile, because at one time, Giselle was not my favorite, but she grew on me. She’s family now. “You’re right.”

“And Gracie,” she adds, giving me a knowing smile. And I try to ignore that I want to smile at her name. It has me thinking about the picture I took. Some of the things I said over text. How good it felt to say what I wanted for once, with no filter when it came to her and me.

“Aunt Everly! You’re it!” Sammy shouts from the far side of the deck.

I give her one more squeeze. Sometimes I need the affirmation that I’m doing it right. It seems stupid that a grown man would need it, but I do. She leans back and squeezes my forearms.

“Heard about the PTA meeting-turned-date nightmare,” she says, changing the subject.

Looking up at the clear night sky, I push out a breath.

She walks backwards, toward the commotion of the kids and Jack. Flicking on her flashlight, she gets ready for tag and yells over her shoulder, “Heard you ran away from a topless PTA president like a scared man-child.”

“That’s not what... You know what? Never mind.” I laugh to myself. But it’s true. I ran out of there so fast. And right to who I really want.



## *Grace*

THE DOOR CHIMES, AND I SMILE AT THE SIGHT IN FRONT OF ME. Of the familiarity of the shop. The black walls splashed with brightly colored tattoos framed all along the sides of the space. The fluffy white mohair rug that feels so cozy to sit on after a busy day.

“Hang on a minute, just need to finish this line.” And before I can say anything in response, the same voice squeals, and then comes barreling toward me. “Holy fucking shit, look at your hair! Gracie, if I wasn’t married, I’d lick you right now,” Giselle says as she rips off a black latex glove and combs her fingers through my freshly dyed locks.

I decided I’m moving forward with doing things that will make me feel good. I’m not about to unpack what’s going on with Michael and how I’m going to respond to his texts, never mind when I see him in person. But still, I want to explore new things. As much as my date didn’t go exactly how I thought it might, I’m still riding on the high of it. That feeling of being wanted. Being seen. So, coloring my hair and buying new clothes for the summer seemed like a good way to keep the momentum.

Smiling at her, I drag my fingers through the ends of my new burgundy-colored tresses. “So, what do you think?”

“What do I think?!” She peels off her other glove and tosses it behind her. The client she had been working on is now long forgotten. “You’re like Jessica Rabbit meets the girl next door. You should have always been a redhead. This color is like... Okay, I’m going to say wine, but there were a lot of places my head just went. Like really dirty, yummy places, where mouths should suck and wander.”

She has a way of making you forget about everything other than the moment you’re in. “I decided I wanted to try new things this summer.”

“Oh, Gracie, honey, I have a list of ideas for you.”

Before I can respond, she moves back to her client and wraps his tattoo. She gives the rundown on aftercare, and then grabs my elbow after she locks the shop door behind her. We walk a few feet down the sidewalk to her loft.

“I hear you’re screwing an Olympic gold medalist?”

“That is *not* what you’re hearing.”

“Not too far off. You know how gossip snowballs here.”

“Seriously, who’s running their mouth?”

When she opens the door, three furry poofs come bouncing up my legs. Egon, Venkman, and Winston are Giselle and Henry’s fur-babies. Each a different shade of caramel, but equally the sweetest pups.

“Leo at the boutique told me this morning. But really, who gives a shit. People thrive off of exciting things happening to other people. This town knows exactly who you are, Gracie. You could fuck your way through the entire Olympic Ski and Snowboarding Team, and televise it, and we’d all still think you were the town sweetheart.”

When she says it, all I can think is, sleeping with Bishop Jones wasn’t even an option after I saw Michael watching me. I feel relieved that the gossip is around Bishop and not the man I can’t stop thinking about.

“You’re a hot topic. And your last name *isn’t* Riggs, so it’s especially pearl-clenching.”

Giselle married into the Riggs family just over six years ago now, but she was a part of their crew long before that as Everly’s best friend. Which means, Michael’s twins are her niece and nephew. I worked for G at her shop, Hideaway Ink, before I graduated high school, and then when I would come home from school during my summer and holiday breaks.

“It was one date.” I lift one of my new burgundy waves.

“Did you at least have fun?”

I think about the question, because I did. But not for the obvious reasons.



She studies my expression. “Olympic-sized ego didn’t match the equipment?”

I bark out a laugh. “What? No. Nothing like that. He was exactly what you’d imagine, but I was distracted. And the distraction ended up being hotter than the man I was on an actual date with.”

“Does this distraction happen to be one of my brothers-in-law?” She wiggles her eyebrows. G pours me a tumbler of club soda, topped with a shot of her famous limoncello, and we sit on the floor of her gorgeous kitchen and cheers one another. Out of everyone in my life, Giselle is the only person who knows how much I’ve crushed on Michael, the only person since I was a teen who I’ve spoken to about it. And the only one who knows both of us separately.

“He showed up,” I say.

Her eyes widen.

“At The Ledge. I was flirting with Bishop. We were having a good time, and that man was *so* smooth. Borderline questionable if he hadn’t used the lines before, but I was eating it up. It’s been way too long since anyone asked me out on an actual date. I don’t think men actually date anymore. It’s all hanging out and swiping.” I take a sip of my drink, because while I hadn’t planned on telling this to anyone, I know that G had spent a long time avoiding her attraction to her husband. If anyone can give me a dose of real advice on how to play this, it’ll be her.

“You know the whole vibe of that place, it’s sexy and dark. Anyway, I just leaned into it. Bishop made a move. Asked if he could hear what noises I’d make if he kissed a spot behind my ear.”

“Giddyup, Bishop.”

I laugh at her comment. “So I let him go for it. And it was hot. Being wanted like that and in a public place.”

“Keep talking,” she encourages as she drains her drink.

“And when I looked out across the room, Michael was there. At the bar. Watching me. Like he was enjoying the

show. He looked more turned on than pissed off, and I'll be honest..." I take a deep breath because, I know once I put this out there, I can't take it back. "It was the hottest thing that's ever happened to me. Him just watching me as another man kissed me. God, I felt so sexy. And desired."

"I'm not speechless, because I could have called this shit years ago, but... wow. Wow, he finally did it. I don't know what's taken him so long." She punches the air, saying, "Get. Your. Riggs. On."

I laugh and shake my head. I should feel embarrassed talking about it, but not with G.

"He texted me a picture. Of me. When I was making out with Bishop. And a text." I pause, thinking about it for a minute. "A few days ago, I got upset." I swat the air in front of me, not wanting to go into detail about it. "And I had asked him what he saw when he looked at me. At the time, he was speechless, but then after his picture text, he followed it up with another that said, 'Ask me again what I see.'"

My stomach flutters and swoops just thinking about it.

"So it's your move now. And you need to just go for it. I should snag some popcorn, because I think there's a whole wide world of sexual discovery you're about to embark on, especially with how that made you feel. And in my very biased opinion, Michael, out of anybody, would be absolutely perfect to explore with. Like X-rated Lewis and Clark or a tawdry Swift-Tuttle."

"Swift-Tuttle, like the comet?"

"Exactly. Like the comet. Two people who see something potentially incredible, but have taken eons to address it. Name it. Explore it."

"Do you think he wants more? I mean, what if we cross this line and it just ends up being trouble?"

"I think you're asking the wrong questions. I think you need to ask yourself what *you* want to happen. And then I need you to take this very long and drawn-out infatuation that you

are both disguising as friendship, and go do very dirty, kinky things to each other.”

The door to the apartment jiggles open, and the dogs, who were sound asleep on our laps, go flying toward it. They’re greeted by Henry’s deep voice. “Hello, my little sirs. Yes, I’m so happy to see you too. Where’s Mommy, and why doesn’t she greet me this way.” A belly laugh sounds just before he peeks around the corner and yells, “Hey, Pixie, you here?” before he sees us on the floor.

“You wanna start calling me Mommy upstairs, I’m down for it, Hankey.” Giselle laughs and gets up, jumping into his arms and wrapping her whole body around him. “I can think of a few ways we can play out that storyline.” They give zero fucks that I’m sitting here and proceed to kiss each other, whispering something just loud enough for the other to hear.

I smile and look away, giving them their moment together.

“Whoa, Grace, your hair,” Henry says as moves his attention away from his wife.

“It’s hot, isn’t it?” Giselle says as she shimmies down from his arms and back to the floor.

“Did she lick you? She did, didn’t she? Or threaten it? I don’t know what it is about redheads. You and Law, babe. You have a fetish.”

I laugh, because she did, in fact, threaten to lick me.

“Both, obviously,” she says as she bites his shoulder.

“Heard you’re dating Bishop Jones. I did a heliskiing thing with him and some of his baseball buddies a few years back. Didn’t peg him as your type.”

“We’re not dating. It was one date.”

He looks over at G. “She giving you good advice, or trying to cause trouble?”

“I give great advice,” she coos. “I give a lot of great things, don’t I, Hankey? And causing trouble is half the fun.”

She winks at me.

“I think Grace needs to start causing a little trouble of her own.”

I send her a knowing smile back.

When Michael didn't say anything to me during my post-climbing freakout, I took it seriously. I was ready to abandon my feelings that always lingered past platonic with him. But now, he's pulled me back in. He opened a door by sending me that picture. Those texts. And now, I'm ready to find out if my best friend might actually want me.



## *Michael*

“WHAT MADE YOU THINK SHE WANTED MORE THAN JUST A friendly meal with you?”

I glare. I hate when she makes me step out of my head mid-freakout and look at the situation as an outsider. It always looks less... intimidating.

“Aside from the fact that she lied to get me there by telling me there was a PTA meeting at her house.” I tick off a list on each finger. “And that I was the only PTA board member present. She also prepared dinner and asked me to stay and eat with her. After that...” I look up at the ceiling and notice the cracks along the edges have now started to move inward. “You need to have your ceiling patched and painted before those cracks start moving farther toward the center.”

“I’ll make sure to tell the landlord,” she responds dryly, uninterested in diverging from our discussion. “After that,” Doc reminds me.

“After that, she poured me a drink that I didn’t drink, obviously.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t drink often, and really, I wanted to have my wits about me. I felt cornered, and I didn’t want scotch to play any part in the night. So, she had a half of a bottle of wine. I had cucumber water. Also, I don’t understand the appeal. Vegetable water.”

“I find it refreshing.”

“I find it unnecessary.” I lean forward again. Elbows on my knees, dragging my fingers from my forehead through my hair to the nape of my neck when I tell Doc, “She took off her shirt. She wasn’t wearing a bra to begin with, a detail I noticed when she opened the door. Just whipped it off over her head and stood there. Waiting. Staring at me.”

“How did that make you feel?”

I cock my head to the side and give Doc my best “are you kidding me?” look.

“Anxious. Angry. I didn’t want to be there. She was so intense. After I had already told her that I wasn’t really interested in her, she still just threw herself at me,” I say, and exhale the breath I had been holding in. Telling my therapist about the time I ran away from a woman who had wanted to fuck me. *Great.*

“The woman has a clingy way about her. Needy.” I cut myself off as I study the way Doc shifts in her chair. I try to read every movement and facial expression she lets sneak through her tough exterior. Like I’ll crack the code if I see her response to what I’m saying before she has a chance to say it, or coat it with psychologist words. “I know I’m making it about her, and you asked how it made me feel.” I huff.

She smiles and waits for me to say more. I don’t want to say much else, because I’m still reeling over the fact that my evening was hijacked, and it messed me up for an entire weekend. She hums before giving me her best assessment.

“Your focus has shifted to being angry at a woman who maybe likes you, finds you attractive, is lonely, and went for it,” she says matter-of-factly.

I breathe out, “Fuuuuck.”

She laughs because we’ve known each other now for a lot of years, and she can only find humor in it because she’s making me recognize that my assessment of Beverly Harpson is maybe misguided and a bit mean. I usually come across that way. Curt. Quiet. To the point. It can be confused for cruel.

“I don’t want you to focus your anger or judgment toward her or your brother, although it might help to tell Law to stay out of your business if it’s going to send you in a spiral. She was more aggressive than other women have been, but Michael, what I want to address is how you handled it. Based on what you told me, it was very mature, and you managed to spare her feelings, which, five years ago, I don’t think would have been the case. Progress, not perfection. I want you to see *that.*”

I sit back in the chair and listen. I'm good at listening. The talking part is what trips me up in therapy. "You're not saying I should have just slept with her, right?"

She shrugs her shoulder. "Honestly, I think two grown adults having consensual sex is a healthy part of life. Sex can be used for a lot of things. Stress relief, connection, discovery. Okay, how you're looking at me in horror makes me think you find that idea appalling. Why?"

I immediately think, *because she's not the one I want.*

"It's not. Sex isn't appalling. But not with the PTA president of my kids' school." I shake my head. "She's a perfectly attractive woman. She's just not... I can't articulate what she isn't, but I don't find her attractive in that way. I don't find many people attractive in that way."

"But you are attracted to people sometimes, yes?"

I nod a yes. Then crack my knuckles. *One person, in particular. The only person.*

The noise draws Doc's attention to my movements, but it doesn't halt her from her next question. "We haven't discussed your sex life in a long time. Would you like to?"

"Not really, Doc." I shift in my chair. "I'm either working too much, or trying to spend time with my kids. I don't have any time for sex. Not to mention..." I shift again because I didn't plan to talk about sex today. I'm also not ready to talk about what happened at The Ledge with Grace. I didn't overthink anything. Just acted. I couldn't look away from *her*.

"You don't have to go any further if you don't want to. We can circle back to that on another day if you'd like."

I give her a curt nod. I don't want to dive into why I haven't had sex in years. That I only ever fuck my own hand. I'm not ready to say that out loud.

I've been rotating between picking at the calloused skin on my palm and dragging my fingers through my hair. Doc recognizes my "tells" that happen as my anxiety starts to take over logical thinking. It's her job to know what makes me uncomfortable and when to push. She's learned what works



for me and what doesn't. I'm comfortable with her. It's one of the many reasons why we work, why I come back every week, no matter what. Why I drive thirty minutes out of the way to meet with her.

I saw a therapist in Strutt's Peak for a long time growing up. Anxiety and the obsessive way I deal with it wasn't something that happened one day. It's always been a part of me, progressing and changing over time. Sometimes under lock and other times running loud because of something unexpected happening. But when my original therapist retired, I decided it made more sense to find a doctor with no ties to my hometown. I didn't need anyone talking about my business or who I saw. I also needed to make sure whoever I chose was vetted properly. Some of the things I needed to discuss were confidential. Beyond doctor-patient confidentiality. Specifically, discussing how I killed a man with my bare hands in an effort to protect my sister-in-law. It's something I'd do again in a second, if it meant protecting someone I care about, but I still have nightmares about it. I was barely dealing with that when the twins came into my life. And then they brought a whole new roster of anxious thoughts. It was another time when I needed to adjust how I could manage it all.

After my therapy sessions, I always need more time to work through whatever we've talked about. It took me a long time to realize that was okay too. To shed a layer of skin that didn't feel good or right anymore and make space for a newer version of myself. That the doctor couldn't "fix" me, but they could help to keep me moving forward.

So, to ease the emotions that surfaced during therapy, I find ways to sweat out whatever lingers. Most of the time that's on a climb—could be on the rock wall or on a hike, but this time of year I belay, lead outdoor climbs at sunrise, and teach my guides when we have down time. I like routine, but I need variety, so when I'm in full swing in the spring and summer, most of my sweat time happens in the gym and away from climbing.

It's not until an hour later, when I'm soaked in sweat and on my last reps working out my calves, that I feel like I've

worked through all the bullshit that was stirred up. She wanted me to talk about my sex life, but I have no interest in remembering the last time I was with a woman. I packed that away a long time ago.

The gravel of DMX on repeat, pushes my mind past running down memory lane. I avoid getting too close to anyone, emotionally or physically. It's not in my nature. I do better without it. Except with Grace, I've allowed her to be close, but in a way I can control.

It's not all that hard to *not* sleep around. Between work, my kids, and my family, it's pretty easy to go without. Despite what people might say about being a Riggs, we're not as slutty as this town might think. *Well, maybe Law is.*

My phone buzzes.

MOLLY

We have to discuss some adjustments I need to make for the summer.

MICHAEL

No.

MOLLY

What do you mean, no?

MICHAEL

No.

I continue through my legs circuit two more times before I feel like I'm not seeing red any longer. Not many people can piss me off the way Molly can, because I know whatever it is she has to say, it's going to end up disappointing my kids.

*Why can't she just show up for them?*

My eyes catch on a flash of dark green as I scan the front of the room. Green-colored legs that struggle to pull a clean

and jerk. Those green leggings cover curves with a sexy mix of muscle and softness. I never look at anyone this long. Maybe just one person.

I drag my eyes from the crease of her ass, where it meets the back of her thighs, my mouth watering. The leggings are so tight, if she was wearing underwear, I'd see the lines. And there's not a single line except the seam along the crack of her ass and dimples that I wouldn't mind rubbing up against. *Fuck, I'm semihard picturing it.*

Nobody ever catches my attention, not like this. I know what I like, what turns me on, but I don't seek it out. I don't like giving into this level of attraction. It's far safer to watch. To have control over the situation. But I'm not a fucking creep, so I dart my eyes away and try to focus on the bass in my ears.

Rarely is there someone in my gym that I don't already know, never mind look at for longer than a passing second. I just told my therapist in a very convincing way that I'm never attracted to anyone, and here I am, with my dick flexing like it's ready for an entirely different kind of workout.

I shift and take a swig of my water, pulling my eyes away from the hunter-green temptation. Everyone assumes that just because I'm lean and work out religiously that I would be turned on by the same body type. Most of the women, here as regularly as I am, have tight, cinched bodies. Lean muscle built out over arms and legs, but it's not the kind of body that does anything for me. *That* body, the one squatting an impressive weight on the other side of the gym, is the kind that I want to watch, stare at, and study. Her red hair pulled into a high ponytail is wavy and moves when she pulls a power clean. This time, the right way, precise and perfect. It's sexy as hell, and I don't normally get twisted up about redheads. Brunettes are my preference.

I pull the towel from my bag and wipe my neck.

The way she moves reminds me of...

"Hitting it hard today, man," Mac interrupts my thoughts as he comes up next to me.

I give him the side-eye. “Don’t ask me about the PTA meeting.”

He laughs. “Nah, just making sure you’re good.”

“I’m good. Just leg day.” I smile at my friend. I can always count on Mac to check in with me. Make sure I’m in a good place. He doesn’t hover, but always lets me know he’s there if he’s needed.

“Grace is looking good.”

My head jerks back his way, pulling my eyes from that green temptation.

He nods and looks back toward the ass that just lit me up.

Mac must see the look of surprise on my face because he laughs like it’s the funniest thing that he just caught me checking out my best friend, unknowingly. “The red hair looks damn good on her.”

I give him a glare, and he holds up his hands, as if saying his hands are off. “That’s not—” But as soon as I say it, she turns sideways, and I see her. A profile I’d recognize anywhere, but apparently, not her ass. I didn’t recognize that one bit.

Before I can overthink it, I pull out my phone and take a picture of her removing her last weights. Hell, ever since she asked what I see when I look at her, I feel compelled to show her. And I can’t remember why I shouldn’t.

I watch her pull her phone from the side pocket of those painted-on pants. Then she smiles to herself and looks around the gym. When she finally sees me back here, she gives me her megawatt smile. One of many types of smiles she has, each of them with the ability to do more to me than she’ll ever know.

GRACE

Stalker.

I don’t think about my next words. I just say what I want.

MICHAEL

Challenge accepted.

After I hit send, I study the message. I've always been really clear about keeping our friendship strictly friendly. But something has changed for me. The idea of not being her person, her "exploring" with someone else, I didn't like it. Which I know is selfish and probably stupid. But then, as soon as I heard she was out on a date, I couldn't help myself. I had no plan for when I got to The Ledge, but I also didn't expect to see her draped all over her date. It wasn't jealousy I felt. Well, maybe a little. I was turned on seeing her like that. I felt like what I was watching, with her eyes on me, was for me. And now here I am again, practically dry humping the air, just looking at her.

GRACE

You must like what you see.

I smile down at her words. I'm doing this.

MICHAEL

I can't stop looking.

I keep my eyes on her as she slings a towel over her shoulder, grabs her water bottle, and walks up to the free-weight benches where I'm perched. Her white t-shirt is ripped at the collar, the sleeves rolled, and the bottom tied back in a knot. It's pulled high enough to show just a sliver of skin above her high-waisted leggings. It's not like I haven't noticed any of this before. It's just that I've worked hard to not pay attention. It's taken a good deal of effort to ignore the way I feel around her—calm, seen, even normal.

"Hey, Mister. Can't stop, huh?"

There was a time when I thought maybe we could blur lines, when I could tell her how she made me feel. When I could take her how I wanted her, but then my life got out of

hand. Complicated in a way that sent me spiraling. Before I could take a full breath, I had two kids take over my life. Now is the first time I'm even thinking of the possibility that I could have more.

I ignore the fact that she's calling me out. My sudden change in direction and what I've done over the past two days has her curious. Cautious and likely brimming with questions. Questions I'm not ready to answer. But she's flirting back. And I'll take it. She called me "Mister." A nickname that seems ridiculous, but hearing it makes me preen like a damn show pony.

*"You know your initials are M.R.?" Grace says over a mouthful of chocolate ice cream.*

*I give her a bored look. Trying to not act thrilled with having to sit here while she babbles on and on about whatever she's thinking.*

*"I don't understand how you're eating ice cream." I nod to the window, at the snow whipping around outside. "You know it's at least negative eight and snowing."*

*"Yes, but the last time I checked, there wasn't a seasonal requirement for when to enjoy ice cream. Want a bite?" She sticks the spoon toward me, and it drips on the table. I stare at the drip, but before I can swipe it with a napkin, she does. "Sorry. Messy, I know, but you need to be distracted and what better way than watching me make a mess and eat."*

*She's not wrong. I haven't thought about the catastrophic change my life is about to take in a couple of weeks. It's the first handful of minutes I haven't thought about what babies need when they sleep, what types of activities they'll want to do, and how much everything I've known up until this point is no longer relevant. That my life is no longer just mine, because I'm a dad. Jesus Christ, how did this happen? I'm not going to do any of it right. How did they assume I'd be capable of raising small babies. Fuck!*

*"You're getting that look. It's the 'I'm freaking out, but I'm trying not to give it away' look. Stop. You're supposed to be thinking about how much I'm making a mess over here."*

*I smile, and when I look up at her, she has chocolate dripping down her chin. Normally, I'd want nothing more than to wipe it clean, but the way she's smiling back at me has me wanting to lick it off instead. I shift in my seat. "How am I not supposed to be thinking about it?"*

*"I want you to have a few minutes, here and there, when you get to just be you. The Michael Riggs I've known for almost my whole life." And that's how she slowly crept into my life, I'm realizing. It's impossible to keep someone at arm's length when their embrace feels so warm. She barks out a laugh. "Back to what I was saying. I can't believe I never noticed that your initials are M.R."*

*I raise my eyebrows. She loses me sometimes, the way her mind just wanders to a new thought without any heads up.*

*"Mister. Your initials are MR. Like Mister. I'm totally going to call you that. We've known each other for long enough now, you need a special nickname."*

*"Mister? That's not a nickname, Kid."*

*"Yup, it is." She stirs her now soupy chocolate ice cream and spoons another bite into her mouth. When she swallows, she mouths, "Mister."*

*I shake my head no, hating nicknames, but hating even more how this particular one just made my dick jolt in my pants, and sent a wave of warmth up my neck to the tips of my ears.*

*"I know you're worrying, but it's going to be okay. One day at a time. You got this. If anyone's got this, it's you. Mister."*

*"Shit, Grace, you look damn good as a redhead." Mac kicks his chin toward her as I watch him canvas her body. The way her hips curve out and then clip inward at her waistline, right above where I'd guess her navel sits. My mind wanders further, thinking about never having seen something as simple and innocent as her belly button. And now I want nothing more than to see what it looks like.*

A growl slips out past my lips, and I try to cover it with a cough, pulling their attention back to me. I ignore the awkwardness, watching as she looks at Mac, and then back to me.

She tilts her head and asks, “You don’t like it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“There’s a lot you’re not saying these days.”

“I feel like there’s a lot that I am.”

Mac smiles, trying to play off the snarky exchange. “I have a private lesson about to start. See you later, man. Grace, come see me this week. I want to get your thoughts on an idea I had.”

She gives him a hug, and I watch closely at where his arm wraps around her waist and squeezes slightly. The feeling that’s starting to run through me is annoyance, borderline anger. I’m pissed off that my two best friends are hugging each other. I need to get a grip.

She looks at me, waiting for more.

“I just want to be on the same page. Are we going to talk about the text messages?”

I rub the back of my neck and let out a small laugh.

“Oh, the look on your face, Mister. You’re going to have to talk to me at some point.” She bites her lip, and all I can think is how I’ve stared at her lips for so long, for so many years, but I’ve never had this much of an urge to bite it the same way she is right now.

“Or deliver on the things I think you’re saying.”

“Come for dinner tonight,” I blurt. “You haven’t been in the pool yet. And—”

“Okay,” she smirks.

“Sam and Miles swim every night after dinner. I have to literally drag them out by their swimsuits. And when that doesn’t work, I’ll be honest, I resort to bribery. I’m not above



it.” She already knows this. I don’t know why I’m even saying it. *Why am I nervous?*

She laughs. Something about making her laugh always feels good.

“What’s the currency lately?”

“Snacks. Always snacks lately. They’re into whatever is sticky or that’ll keep them riding a sugar high long past their bedtimes.”

We make our way through the gym, grabbing our things from the front lockers on the way outside.

“I’m going to stop in to see my mom after this. What time do you want me?”

Even though I know she means dinner, a part of me just wants to tell her “all the time.” But because I’m not a complete disaster, I say, “How’s six?”

“Perfect.”



## *Gracie*

THE SPARE KEY SITS UNDERNEATH THE PINEAPPLE-SHAPED outdoor light perched just to the right of our front door. When I moved to London, my mom decided she didn't want to keep up with the big house any longer. I didn't blame her, it was a lot. Plus, I think she wanted a fresh start too. My dad had passed away a handful of years before that. They were friends, the best of actually, when he died, but they hadn't been a couple for many years before then. So, she sold the house, then bought a townhouse closer to the gondola station in Strutt's that would make her commute to work easier during her busy seasons. It's a gorgeous set-up with tons of amenities on the grounds, including a gym, private hot spring pools, ski-on and off trails.

Her car is parked in her spot, so I know she's home. A driver is one of her many side hustles during peak tourist season, bringing people to and from the airport and around town, but in the summer, when she's running hiking expeditions or fishing excursions for Riggs Outdoor, she'll hop on the gondola to HQ or directly to where her excursions might be departing. It's a perk of our town and her new home.

When I unlock the door, I'm greeted by the monotone cheers and "rahs" of Lady Gaga shouting poetically about her "Bad Romance." I drop a small bag of goodies I plan to bring to dinner at the staircase and move toward the kitchen, where I hear laughing and the clanging of glasses.

"Ma!" I shout. But her response is too late. I'm already walking into the kitchen as she yells my name back at me, followed by an "Oh, fuck" and "Where's my pants."

I take in the chaos in front of me. The kitchen island is peppered with glasses, a Margaritaville Maker spinning a frozen, what I would assume is a mango or orange, margarita. Limes, some whole, some cut. But that's only in my tertiary view now, as a total of six boobs, three sets of breasts, a half a dozen nipples are front and center. One of those sets belonging

to my mother as she bobs and weaves from behind the counter toward me. And it's not in an effort to cover herself or feel any level of embarrassment. Nope, she's coming in for a topless hug. *Awesome.*

"Gracciiiiie! Oh my gosh, my beautiful girl. What are you doing here?!"

"Mom. Jesus," I say as she wraps her arms around my shoulders.

The older of the other two women can at least see the awkwardness of this situation and snags a button-down shirt, covering her very large and very perky boobs. The younger one, I don't know exactly how much younger, but easily a good twenty years younger than my mom, making her closer to my age, just pours another margarita, smiling. Zero interest in the fact that her tatas are on display. I need that kind of confidence, or maybe it's just a level of not giving a shit.

My mom pulls back and looks me up and down. "You look really good. I like this green outfit thing you're wearing. Oh my gosh, your hair! Lana, look at her hair! You're like the Black Widow. Oh, who was that again?"

I've never met Lana. I don't know why she would know that I've colored my hair.

"ScarJo," the young one yells out, now eating a chip that's overflowing with guac.

"Yes! Like Scarlett Johansson. You just need the black leather now. Say something. Why are you being quiet?"

"Mom, I... Jesus. I just wasn't expecting to walk in on a topless happy hour," I say as I smile at the now covered Lana.

"Stop being a prude. You have these too. Calm your tits."

"It's still the afternoon and you're drunk and topless."

"Like you said, it's happy hour. And you should have called. See, I'm always telling you to call me, and you never do. Now maybe you'll start," she says, walking away, and I notice that she is only wearing a thong. *Christ.* I'm not a prude, but this is my mom, and no matter how comfortable I

feel talking to her about almost anything, there's something really fucking difficult to swallow when you're walking in on a parent doing anything sexual.

The younger one comes over with a margarita extended out to me. "Here, Gracie. Your mom loves talking about you. You're so pretty. I'm so happy to meet you." She's so bubbly. Not usually my mom's style.

"I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Grace, don't be rude," my mom says.

"How is that rude?"

"Tone."

"Oh! It's fine. I'm June." My mom leans over and pinches June's nipple.

I raise my eyebrows at my mom, wordlessly asking, "What the actual fuck, Mom?!"

The situation isn't one that's necessarily new. I mean, I've never walked in on a margarita-infused, all-female threesome, or any threesome, for that matter, but I've witnessed my mother flirting, kissing, and I even overheard some dirty talk I was never meant to hear during a bachelorette party a handful of years ago. But this situation far exceeds that. And it absolutely wasn't what I planned on walking in on today.

When my mother married my father, I do believe she truly loved him, but she was never *in love* with him. How could she be when she was always more attracted to women? It took her about ten years of marriage and a kid for her to be able to come out and live the way she was meant to. What felt like her truth and not some kind of example or stifled decision of how it was supposed to look according to other people's skewed reality.

The craziest part about my parents is that they remained married. They were best friends. They just did marriage *differently*. When my father died of a heart attack, my mother mourned him and told me she'd never feel like herself ever again. She always told me that my dad was her soulmate, and I truly believed they would have moved oceans to make the

other happy. I sometimes wonder if she was the loudest talker when the town gossip train started just to keep herself out of the main storyline.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming over. I would have adjusted my plans had I known. But, you’re standing there, surprised that I’m”—she mocks a surprised and distraught face—“having a fucking glorious time with two gorgeous women. IN MY OWN HOME.” She stands with her hands on her hips, full-on Wonder Woman-style, with her tits pointing at me like I’m the asshole.

“Mom!” I push out a breath and look up at the ceiling, trying to gather my sanity, whatever is left of it at this point. “I just wasn’t planning to meet people in a clothing optional situation.”

“I know. And you need to tell me what happened with the Olympian. Don’t think I haven’t heard all about it,” she says coming toward me, arms extended to hug me again.

“It was one date. That’s all.” I rest my head on her shoulder. “I’m sorry I interrupted your happy hour.”

“It’s happy hours. With an ‘s’. Have a drink before you go.”

“You still have no shirt on.”

“Yes, but at least I wasn’t face first in Lana’s lap.”

I lean back and catch Lana smiling at me. A smile that’s a mix between embarrassment and sympathy. I return the same one.

“Good point.” I hadn’t imagined meeting my mom’s girlfriend, or whatever she might be, like this. *Nice to meet you, nice rack. Be good to my mom. Cheers.*

“Hi, Grace. I’ve heard so much about you. I’m Lana,” she says, extending her hand. She’s stunning, with long silver-gray hair. Beautiful eyes. There’s something so calming about her, and I’m realizing she’s not the kind of person who would just be here for a quick romp with my mother. Nope, she screams relationship material, and the kind of woman my mother would normally swoon all over. *Go, Mom!*

“Lana.” I smile. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

My mom looks over to Lana, and then back at me. “The girls are here for the week. I’m taking them for full days of fishing and hiking. Maybe hit the hot springs. They’ve never done Strutt’s Peak in the summer, so we’re going to do ALL the things.”

I clap my hands, grab the shot of tequila that June has enthusiastically held out for me, and ask, “So tell me how you all met?”

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A little over an hour later, I’m walking up the driveway to Michael’s house. The craftsman style layout is homey and inviting, but it doesn’t mask the fact that it’s massive. A lot of space for one adult and two little people, but that’s how the Riggs family rolls. Always big, especially at home. It’s easy to forget that Michael is wealthy. When we spend time together, there’s nothing snobbish or extravagant about it. He doesn’t flaunt it with over-the-top things, but when I come to his house, I’m always reminded that he’s in an entirely different tax bracket than I am.

The Riggs kids didn’t grow up like the rest of us. They were practically royalty in our corner of Colorado. Their name brought in tourists and business with their outdoor sporting brand. It didn’t hurt that they were all young and incredibly good looking too. Even Asher Riggs, the man who started it all, was the man who everyone smiled at and then stared at long after he was done chatting with you. My mother was friendly with Asher. She worked for him too. All of my mother’s friends liked to gossip about the hot single dad whose wife left him with four kids to raise on his own. But, it was his kids that fueled the town gossip train as they grew older. A bustling locomotive that my mother was the conductor for and still is. She wears the moniker proud and loud, just waiting to spew the latest happenings of what could be considered entertaining or even salacious.

I knock twice, but there's no answer. I wait another minute, and then type in the code for the front door and walk inside. "Hello?"

I'm batting a thousand for walking into houses today, so I proceed with caution.

No response. I walk through the hallway and look up the staircase, waiting to hear if they're all upstairs or if I've walked in mid hide and seek, but it's quiet. I look left, and the living room is fairly empty. The oversized sectional is peppered with Barbie dolls and Hot Wheels, but there's nothing hung except for the flat-screen television. Organized and tidy because, well, it's Michael, but more than that, it feels incomplete.

*"I promise you, color will make the entire space feel more like home."*

*"Purple!"*

*"Not in this room, Sam," Michael says immediately. "Maybe in your room."*

*She kicks up her leg and fists the air. "Yesssss!"*

*"What? Why are you looking at me like that?" I laugh as I take in Michael's glare.*

*He smiles, that grin that makes me remember the teeny weenie little crush I still have on him. "Because I know you. I know there's no way you're going to stop at paint. Then it'll be a rug..."*

*"Well, obviously. You can't have this space with hardwood floors and not have a rug. The echo alone will drive you nuts."*

*"See, exactly my point. I didn't want you here just to put you to work."*

*"But I'm here!"*

*Michael stares at me. "You are," he says, and the way he says it, with the way he runs his fingers from his hairline to his neck, it forces a shiver to break out from my upper back and down both arms. "You are always right where I need you."*



A loud shriek from the backyard jolts me out of the memory and back into the beautiful kitchen. When I look outside, I see Miles and Sammy running with their puddle-jumpers from either side of the in-ground pool and cannonballing in. They splash their way back to the side, where Michael sits on the edge, his back to me.

“A little sloppy on the entry, but the splashes are easily a nine-point-five,” Michael shouts as they both surface and paddle their way to the side.

“I’d totally give them a nine-point-eight,” I shout from the gate.

“Gracie! You’re here,” they screech and scream. I can’t decipher who’s talking, but they are both yelling and laughing over each other. “Dad, did you know she was coming? Gracie, come swimming. I made soup!”

“You didn’t make the soup. Dad made the soup!” Miles yells back at her.

These two will always make me smile. Instant bad day fixers. Both of them are growing far too quickly, now coming up to my hips. “Your dad made dinner?!”

“I’m basically the chef now, didn’t I tell you? Guys, you just got Grace soaked.”

“Now you have to come swimming. You’re already wet,” Sammy says with her little raspy voice. “Did you bring your bathing suit? If not, you can borrow one of mine. I have so many. Grandpa Ash got me one for every day of the week.”

I look over to Michael, and he’s smiling. Big and wide. A look that, until these two showed up, I rarely saw. Being a dad looks really good on him. In fact, I’m using every possible ability I can muster *not* to check him out. But when he shifts and pulls his legs out of the water, I lose the battle and canvas his entire body. Keeping track of the angles and dips I haven’t seen in a while.

“Looking for something?”

“What? Pshhh, no. Nope. Just sizing up your swim trunks to see if they might fit me,” I say sarcastically. “I just didn’t

pack a swimsuit.”

“Liar,” he says as he picks up Miles and flips him over his shoulder. “Be a good girl and go get your suit on,” he says with a smirk, in a tone that ripples the air around us.

Why was that so hot?

“Or you’re going in the pool just like that.” I catch how his eyes skim around the parameter of my waist, which makes me shift. Then to my hips and thighs. He ends his survey at my chest and then raises it slightly to my mouth. He did the same thing when I saw him earlier at the gym. All of it takes mere seconds, but it’s long enough for me to feel like I’ve just reached the top floor on an elevator. The entire perusal makes me feel... pretty.

I have decent self-esteem, but there’s something about the way he’s looked at me today. The way we’ve been acting around each other has ignited a curiosity that I don’t know how I can possibly ignore. I want to skip any hesitancy that might still linger and dive into this.

“Gracie, I need more girl power to win the next splash,” Sammy shouts as she runs toward her dad, arms extended. She pushes him and Miles right into the pool, claps her hands together like she’s dusting them off, and says, “Are you sure you don’t want to borrow one of my suits?”

This kid. “I’ve got mine. I was only kidding.” I nod to the pool. “Go warm up, we’re going to toast those boys!”

She salutes me, pulls her purple goggles down from her head, and then runs full speed right to the edge, yelling, “Cannonballllllllll!”



## *Michael*

“GRACIE, WE’RE GETTING A BOUNCY HOUSE FOR OUR graduation party. They’re usually not for grown-ups, but I bet you could go in anyway. Dad, Gracie can come in the bounce house too, right?”

I smile at the level of excitement my kids have for this party. “If she wants, yeah, she can go in. I know I’ll be bouncing in there, so...”

“Here, let me help you, buddy.” Grace gets up from the steps of the pool, and I give her body another glance. She came outside in what I know is meant to be a modest swimsuit. One piece, simple black, but it cuts into a low V in the front, giving her tits just the right amount of attention, and hits high at her hips. My hands flex, just thinking about touching her there. It’s not that I haven’t ever noticed she has a gorgeous body, but I’ve never allowed myself the luxury of looking for too long or thinking about it too hard. I rarely let my mind wander about all the places I’d like to skim my hands and run my tongue.

“I would never say no to a good bounce,” she says, rolling her lips to hide a smirk.

I swallow at the insinuation. *Jesus, I need to get a grip.*

“Will you come swimming with us every day this summer?” Sammy shouts.

“She’s not swimming with you every day,” I yell back and give Grace my best “sorry, I know they’re a lot” face. “But I’m sure she’ll hang out with you guys as much as she’s able to. Your mom is going to be here, too. You won’t be short on attention, guys.”

“Maybe not every day, but I’ll be here as much as I can. I mean, you two are my most favorite people on the planet. How could I not spend a boatload of time with you this summer? Plus, this pool is pretty incredible.” She flashes me a smile, and without overthinking, I give her one right back.

“I’m hungry, Dad!” Miles shouts.

“Why are you guys yelling so much today? We can hear you. Let’s go inside and eat.”

I move around the pool patio and straighten up the puddle-jumpers, returning them to the racks where they belong. Setting the pool noodles in the basket on the side of the cabana, I wipe down the loungers we had been lying on and then take another look around, making sure it’s cleaned up. I won’t be able to focus on dinner if I know it’s a mess out here.

“I’m buttering the bread slices, Miles. That’s MY job, not yours. You’re on table-setting duty tonight. I’m Dad’s susie chef.”

“Sous chef,” I correct her.

“That’s what I said, susie chef.”

Grace laughs and moves around the kitchen to get the plates and glasses out of the high cabinets for Miles. “You’re the maître d’, Miles, which is a really important job. Probably one of the most important in a restaurant. You have to make sure everyone has what they need, so they have a great experience.” She gives me a wink. “It’s a big job. I’m impressed your dad delegated it.”

I watch as Miles puffs out his chest with her description of his “job.” He talks with her about where the glasses are meant to be placed and how to fold the napkins. She’s always been so good with them. Good with me.

“Sammy, put my phone down,” I say as I catch her holding it up and abandoning her sous chef duties.

“Uncle Jack says taking pictures is like capturing moments. I want to make a whole book filled with them this summer,” she says as she moves around the kitchen. “Daddy, smile.”

Grace turns around from pulling the glasses from the cabinet and rests her chin on my shoulder. I look down, smiling at the wide, exaggerated smile she’s giving Sammy. It’s so easy for her. To just go with the moment. How

effortlessly she's able to make me feel lighter isn't anything new, but I always forget how good it feels.

*"You're doing fine. They're not going to be traumatized. I promise."*

*"Miles just peed ON his sister. I don't even understand the physics in this. He's easily three feet away from her," I say as I remove my daughter's onesie.*

*"Come here, you little wizard." She starts laughing, "Like whizzer, get it?"*

*I look at her over my shoulder. I want to laugh, but I'm afraid if I do, I might end up crying too. I'm drowning here with these toddlers. I thought it was hard when they first came home to me. At just over six months, I thought the lack of sleep would kill me, but that was cake compared to the way they drunkenly move around the house, just waiting for the most likely death trap to encourage them to come closer.*

*"Count. Breathe. And then look at it like this: they needed baths anyway. Maybe they'll go to bed earlier if they're all clean and warm afterwards." She takes my pinky finger and squeezes. She doesn't let go until she sees me take that deep breath. I can't remember when exactly it happened, but she knows when I'm getting ready to spiral, the signs right before the anxiety takes hold and panic sets in.*

*She stays to help me give the twins their baths, and then as they finish their before-bed bottles, she lies on the floor with us.*

*"I'm thinking about finally getting my act together to move out. Build a house. A good chunk of land is up for sale in The Dark Sky Community. I think it's time for me to give my dad back his house. We've taken it over. And now that these two are constantly on the move, he's going to find that we don't have enough space anymore."*

*"I think Ash would disagree. This place is massive, but doing something for you and the kids is smart. You'll be able to do this dad thing on your own. You've got your footing now. And having a place that's yours, it'll make you feel more*

*settled,” she says, staring up at the skylights in the ceiling. “It’s so clear out tonight. Polaris is looking pretty bright.”*

*I glance over to where she’s looking and then turn my head to look at her. “It is.”*

*Someone who was never supposed to be in my life like this. She is more than a decade younger than me, with every kind of red flag waving in her wake. Too young, too good to be spending all of her time with me and my complicated life. She’s the girl everyone wants around. I’m the guy who tells everyone to stay away. Most of the time, I prefer my own company. And I’ve never had a problem telling people that too. But even when I try to push her away, she still finds a way to end up right next to me. I’ve grown to love it, so much so, that I’m not sure what my life would look like without her. And I never want to find out.*

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“I guess they’ve been seeing each other for almost six months! If I went more than a few weeks seeing someone, my mom would sniff it out,” she says, trying to make it humorous, but really, I know she’s feeling something else.

“She knew about Bishop Jones?” I smile at her.

“You know Lenny, she always knows. It’s frightening.” She laughs, taking a sip of her wine. “I mean, I wasn’t exactly hiding, but I’m sure plenty of people saw me there.” Her eyes dart up to mine, locking there as we stare at each other wordlessly. She clears her throat, breaking whatever that just was between us. “It probably would have come back to her at some point or another.”

I try to cover my smile by sipping my tea. “And then what about the younger one, June?”

“I have no idea.” Her voice picks up, sarcasm starting to really take over. “They’re just sexually advanced, I guess. Why not just throw a third person into the mix, right? Jesus, the freedom in that!” She tilts her head back, looking up at the ceiling, and instead of saying anything, I give her a minute. I

take in the smooth skin of her neck that leads to her chin and over to her jawline just below her ear. I study the beauty mark that rests in that spot and I want to touch it. Touch her.

But before I can move any closer, the next thing she says has me choking on air.

“Finding a partner, never mind partners, plural, who wants to explore things outside of what would be considered normal sexual activities together... I want that. I’m going to sound insane by saying this, but I think now that the shock of walking in on that whole situation has worn off slightly, I’m...” She takes a second to find the word. “Jealous.”

“Jealous?” I shift in my seat, because maybe this is how we can do this.

“Yes. Jealous. I’d like to have freedom with someone like that. Someone I could trust enough to give over control. Let them explore me. Have fun with the discovery.” She sits up straighter and looks at me. And it’s one of those looks, the kind that tests wills and brings down even the strongest of women and men. A wordless request to be *that* for her.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

How do I tell her I want that too? But then I’ll want more. I know it won’t be enough. I’ll want everything from her. I won’t want to stop there. “Grace, if that’s something you want—”

She bites her thumbnail and cuts me off. “What if—” she starts, but the rest of what she was going to say is cut short, because the front door opens, and my brother comes barreling down the hallway.

“I need to borrow your tool bench for a bit. The one with the vice grips,” Law yells as he walks into the kitchen. “Gracie! I didn’t know you were here.” He looks at me with a smirk, because he knows I only showed up at The Ledge to see her. Even though he hasn’t said anything about it, I’m sure he plans on it. “Holy shit, you look hot as fuck. You know redheads give me instant chub.”



“Are you serious right now? You’re technically her boss. The fuck is wrong with you?”

“Barely. She runs that place. And Dad’s her boss.” He looks at me like I’m the idiot here. “Want to cop a feel,” he says back to Grace with a straight face, wrapping his arms around her middle. “You smell like chlorine. You had a bathing suit on, and I missed it?! Not nice, Gracie.”

She laughs at him, and I’m about one more comment away from smacking him in the back of his head. He has no filter. When he isn’t working, he’s like a loose cannon.

“You’re not touching my tool bench without me hovering over you.” I look at the clock in the kitchen. “What do you need my bench for at nine-thirty at night?”

“I’m going to work on my board bindings, but I want to do a time-lapse video.”

I stare at him.

“What? Don’t look at me like that. I have a decent audience of people who are watching, and it’s a great way to promote our summer deals on winter gear.”

It’s actually a good idea. He’s been filming short videos of himself for the better part of two years now, and his following is pretty massive. However, most of the thirst trap shit he does gets views. People aren’t watching those for outdoor sports equipment.

“What time do you start your tours tomorrow?”

“We hit the trails around five, but I’ll be at the climbing facility around four a.m. to get the team prepped for the day. I’ll need to check the gear packs too.”

“Michael, why didn’t you say anything? I would have left after the twins went to sleep so you could get to bed,” Grace says while pulling out her phone. “Oh shoot, this is your phone. Where’s mine?”

I don’t want her to go. Her “what if” has me on edge. What was she going to say? I’m hoping it was “what if we explored

things together?” But it could have been, “what if we keep things the way they are? Do you know a guy?”

I’ve been so focused on how I can do this, that I didn’t think about the possibility that I really have pushed her too far into the friendzone to entertain anything else. But then, the way she looked at me when she was kissing him. I flex my hands. She can’t leave. I need to finish hearing what she was going to say.

“You’re not leaving,” I interrupt. “Stay. You drank too much to go anywhere.”

“I can just get an Uber.”

She looks down at my phone, and then back up at me. Twice. Like something on the screen has her surprised.

“What? Did Sammy change my lock screen again? The amount of zoomed in selfies I have on that phone is ridiculous.”

As she shakes her head, a small smile twitches across her lips. Closing her eyes, she groans, but it’s mixed with a bit of her laugh. She looks back, her eyes on me, and then takes another sip, finishing off her glass of wine.

“Your daughter took a lot of pictures,” she says, then passes my phone back to me.

When I look down, I swipe through them, and in true Sammy fashion, almost all of them are blurry. Could have been from whatever was on her fingers to smudge the lens, or more likely, it was from moving the phone too quickly while she snapped the shot.

I swipe until I hit one that’s perfectly clear of Grace looking so happy, but her smile isn’t aimed at the camera, because she’s staring right at me. I like seeing it. Her eyes on me only.

Grace lets out an unexpected barking laugh, bringing my attention back to her. She looks up at the ceiling again, shaking her head, then mumbles, “It was me. I was right.”

I look at her curiously.

“I had a dream about these pictures.” She waves it off. “You know what? Never mind. I’ll stay in my room tonight.”

She’s stayed here plenty of times. We call our guest room that sits just off of the kitchen, Grace’s room. I always like when she stays. With us. With me.

Law pushes his way back into the conversation. “Okay, I’m out of here. I’m coming back tomorrow night to use the tool bench. And before you say anything, yes, I’ll put shit back the way I found it. And no, I will not be wearing a shirt while I film.” He rubs his hands along his chest and torso. “Gotta give my audience what they want.” Wiggling his fingers at us, he waves goodbye, then slams the door behind him. “See you later, lovers!”

I look over at Grace, who’s still laughing at him. “I need to borrow your shirt,” she says, looking down at her bathing suit coverup. “No pajamas.” She bites her lip and smiles at me.

*Jesus.*

If she was sober, we’d be finishing that conversation. And if it ended the way I wanted, she’d be in my bed tonight. No pajamas necessary.

When I blow out a breath, she laughs. She knows what she just said got to me. I walk away and stride up the stairs to my room, taking two at a time.

I grab two white t-shirts out of my drawer, change into one, and throw on a pair of sweats, brush my teeth, and drag my hands through my hair. It’s hard to ignore the gray that’s crept into my hairline and along the sides of my temples. Some of it even peppered into my scruff. It’s not too noticeable, but when I look closely, especially with the way my thoughts are running, it’s a reminder that I’m not as young as I used to be. And it reminds me how much older I am than Grace.

Flipping off the light, I head downstairs with the t-shirt for her.

“Got you a shirt. Feel free to use my shower in the morning. Or the tub, I know you’re dying for a...”

She's asleep. Curled up into herself with her feet tucked under her ass and her head resting on her arm. I'm not going to let her sleep on the couch to get woken up by the chaos of mornings in this house.

So instead of covering her with a blanket, I take a minute and look at her. So beautiful. I tuck my arms underneath her and lift. Grace isn't petite by society's standards, but she is to me. I have no problem hoisting her up and carrying her through the kitchen and down the hall to her guest bedroom. She shifts in my arms slightly, making a small noise that has my dick stirring. She nuzzles her cheek into my neck. Feeling her like this, holding her, makes me feel powerful and protective.

"Are you really carrying me?" she whispers sleepily.

"Go back to sleep."

"Okay, Mister. Don't drop me."

God, she's so damn cute. Curled into me with her words dancing so close to my mouth, it's really hard to pretend I don't just like it, I want more of it.

*"I'm not going to beat around the bush here, Riggs." Lenny stands, head cocked to the side, hands on her hips, looking me up and down. "She's eighteen. She's an adult, but you've been one longer. Don't do anything stupid that would force me to shatter your femur or find a way to mess with your equipment that could result in a work-related accident."*

*"Len, that's not necessary. I know my role here. I'll make sure she has fun, but I know she's just a kid, and I'll respect her, and you."*

*And as if the universe wants to really stick it to me, Grace comes down the stairs, and I swallow my words. Practically choke on them like I've just been spoon-fed dust. The girl may have had to bid on me to get my ass here as her date, but I should be the one paying to see her like this. I've always known that Grace would be beautiful when she got older. Her dark brown hair always piled in a mess on her head, but I never looked at her for very long. Never too closely. But right*

*now, she looks... older. Confident. Beautiful is too boring and overused. Whatever it might be, it's going to get me in trouble.*



## *Michael*

I KNEW THIS WAS COMING. I HAD A GUT FEELING, BUT HEARING her say it makes me so damn angry.

“Are you still there? Michael, did you hang up on me?”

“Molly, you’ve got to be fucking kidding me. I’m not telling them. You want to ditch your kids for the summer for a gig, then you’re going to be the one to tell them.”

“You’re making it sound like I wanted this to happen. But I can’t help that I have an incredible opportunity. It’s just unfortunate that it’s happening this summer.”

I pull in a deep breath before I start raising my voice. “You *can* help it. You can make an exception when you promised to spend the summer with your kids. Kids you barely know. You wanted to spend time with them, and what? Now something better came along and you’re just going to ditch them?”

“Don’t make me out to be the bad guy here. I don’t want to disappoint them. This is a huge career move for me. It’s a European tour, Michael.”

I’m so angry that I have nothing left to say to her. “Yup,” I respond. If she doesn’t want to be here, I can’t force it. I’ll never understand it or her.

“I’ll do something special with them at Christmas time. Maybe take them over the break or something.”

“Yup.” I have no interest in hearing about any more possible plans. It’s a constant dance with her moving forward and then canceling. Even phone calls are short and inconsistent. I don’t want to hear anything else from her. Because aside from the disappointment that I’m going to need to play interference on, I’m also going to need to figure out what my kids are doing for the summer.

“Guys, your mom is on the phone.”

“Molly!” Sammy shouts, coating the mirror in toothpaste spit.

“I’ll hold the phone,” Miles says and grabs it from me. I click the call over to FaceTime so they can see her. I want her to see how much this is going to affect them.

I lean against the wall outside of the bathroom as I hear them both excitedly talk about what they had planned on doing next week to kick off summer.

“We need to have a water balloon fight, obviously,” Miles says.

“As long as we clean up the broken balloon pieces. Dad will want us to do that part, but then, since we’ll already be wet, we can go swimming,” Sammy adds.

Miles cuts in, “And then s’mores. Maybe we can set up a tent and go camping in the backyard. What about that, Molly?”

And I close my eyes because I know how this feels. Wanting someone to be in your life so badly, and they can’t show up for you. Whether they don’t want to, or simply can’t, the reasoning doesn’t matter when you’re a kid. Disappointment hurts. As an adult, seeing someone disappoint my kids hurts even more.

“Listen, guys, there’s a little change in plans. I’ve had a really amazing thing happen. Something I’ve been working so hard for. There is a huge event in Europe this summer, with some of the world’s best singers, and they’ve invited me to sing with them,” Molly explains.

Miles must not understand at first because I hear him say, “That’s so cool. So you’re going to be on stage with famous people?”

“I am, Miles.”

“So you’re not coming?” Sammy asks. Her tone tells me she gets it. She knows this “amazing thing” her mom is describing also means she’s not going to follow through with them.

“That’s true. I’m not able to come anymore,” Molly says.



Sammy runs out of the bathroom and past me, slamming her bedroom door.

*Shit.*

“I’m going to talk to your dad, though, and we’ll work something out for Christmas this year. Maybe I can spend the week with you guys then,” she says.

Miles just mumbles, “Sure, Molly. Good luck with your singing.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. I’ll call you guys when I can.”

When I don’t hear any more talking, I come around from the corner and see if they’re still on the phone. But he must have hung up. I’m trying to keep my anger at Molly and my sadness for my crying son in check, but it’s really fucking hard. This part of parenting is the biggest struggle for me—when your kids are hurting and there’s not much you can do to avoid it.

“C’mere,” I say as I turn Miles around and wrap my arms around him. “We’re still going to have an amazing summer. We just need to think about it a little differently now.”

I’m so screwed. Summers are my season. It’s when all of the mountain sports that I’m responsible for happen. Camps for the kids are likely already booked, since you have to secure those months in advance. And while I could ask my dad, he’s still acting CEO of Riggs Outdoor. I’m going to have to figure something out. Maybe a rotating schedule with my family and see if I can pull in a favor or two to get them into a camp last minute.

“I think we need to check on Sammy. She’s really mad,” he says, making me proud to always be looking out for his sister.

“We will.” I pull back to look at him as he wipes his wet cheeks. “Need a couple more minutes first?” He nods, and then moves back into my arms. I hug him and take a deep breath. They don’t need my anger on their behalf; they need their dad to comfort them. To tell them we’ll figure this out.

Together. It's what mine would do. Let me know he was there. No matter what.

"Hey there," Grace says from the bathroom doorway.

I give her a closed-mouth smile. "Hi. How'd you sleep?" Her hair is a mess and piled high on her head. She looks like it was a good rest, with maybe a little hangover lingering. I still see a crease from her pillow lining her cheek. She takes in the situation with Miles, her brow furrowing. I don't know if she heard any of it.

"It looks like you guys need a few minutes together, so I'm going to run out and grab us all some breakfast," she says.

Miles finally turns around and looks at her. He nods and smiles.

"I think that would be really nice." I smile at her. And before she turns, I mouth out the words "thank you." She closes her eyes, smiles, and then heads downstairs. She heard. Likely all of it. And I appreciate that she wants to do something that'll help us all out this morning.

For the next hour, I sit on Sammy's bed and the three of us talk. Miles wears his emotions on his sleeves. He gets it all out, and then once he does, he's ready to move on. Sammy works a little differently. She gets mad first. She was mad at her mom, mad at me for letting Molly cancel, and mad that summer isn't going to be what she thought. She's like me in that way, or maybe I've conditioned it, but we had a plan and now we don't. The lack of a plan is making her mad too.

"How about we go for a swim after breakfast?"

Miles shouts his yes right away. Sammy keeps her scowl intact, but mumbles, "Okay."

"Okay, get your suits on. I bet Grace will be back with breakfast any minute."

And as if on cue, I hear a banging at the front door. When I open it, there Grace is, balancing a tray with two coffees on her forearm, two tied up pink pastry boxes in her right hand, a big bouquet of flowers in her left, and what looks like a box of freeze pops under her left arm.

“Help!” she laughs out. “I didn’t think this through.” I grab the tray of coffees and pink pastry boxes.

“You went all out here.”

I close the door behind us.

“You heard?”

“I did.” When she puts the freeze pops and flowers down on the kitchen island, she watches me for a minute.

“Thanks for the coffee.” I flip the top open and take a sip. Black decaf, my favorite roast. A kick-ass brand from Canada that Brews & Books orders exclusively.

“Are you okay?”

“Ask me later, once I’ve figured out what the hell I’m going to do with them this summer,” I say quietly.

“Gracie, what are those?” Sammy points as she comes into the room.

Grace picks up the pouf of tiny colorful flowers wrapped in brown twine. She has two of them and hands one to each kid. “I heard you got some tough news this morning, and whenever I’m feeling sad or have a bad day, I buy some flowers. And these are my favorites. Vinny told me he just picked them this morning.”

They both smile.

“And, I got freeze pops, because summertime fun starts as soon as you graduate, and you’re going to need to celebrate,” she says with a wiggle of her brows. And then, in a whisper, she cups the side of her mouth in an effort to make it a secret. “But maybe we dip in a bit early and have one after swimming if they’re frozen by then.”

They both look at me, and I didn’t even realize I was smiling. She did that.

“Fine by me,” I tell them.

“Oh, and I had a slight change in my summer plans too,” she says as she takes a bite of her breakfast pastry. Small golden flakes stick to her lips as she chews.

I probably look like I've just been stunned. Eyes wide, my mouth open, because I know what she's about to say, and it's nothing I had thought about asking or would ever expect. But I know her, and she wants to help. She's going to salvage more than just the day with flowers and freeze pops. She's going to rescue our summer.

"How would you like it if I spent the summer with you guys?"

Both kids squeal, like it's even better than their original plans. And in my opinion, it is. Disappointment is long forgotten, and in its place is a storm of ideas tumbling from their mouths. Things they want to do. Places they want to show her. Games they made up and want to play. And while I shouldn't let her do this, change any plans that she might have had in order to help us out, I'd be a liar if I said I didn't want it.

I clear my throat, and they all stop to look at me.

I want her to know this isn't something I'll take lightly. And I want to be sure she really is okay with an entire summer of them. Us.

"If that's okay with you," she says, three sets of pleading eyes waiting for me to respond.

"I think we need to work out some details. I'm going to pay you. This isn't going to be just a massive favor. And I want to be sure you have some time to yourself too. So we're going to need a schedule. But yeah, this would be—" I shake my head, because it's huge. She needs to see how much of a weight she just shifted off of me. "Thank you," I correct.

She leans closer to me and quietly says, "You're welcome."

Brushing past me, she smells like the chocolate pastries she just brought over, and my mouth waters. I look back at the kids and they're elbows deep in croissants and working out pool games for the day. I follow her into the kitchen, and as I lean on the counter, I watch her spread chocolate hazelnut cream into the bottom of a coffee mug, and then pour her

coffee over the top. All I can think is, too sweet for me. Her and that drink.

“Do you remember what you said to me last night?”

Her eyes fly up to meet mine.

I have to know what came after her “what if.” It’s all I could think about last night in bed. I thought about it all morning until Molly called. And now, I don’t think I can wait any longer.

She ignores my question and diverts it to her new nannying gig for the summer. “I’m not going to turn down getting paid, if that’ll make you feel better. But I think we should make a list.”

And the way she says it, insinuating that it’s not a typical shopping list, I ask, “A list?”

She puts the creamer and chocolate spread back in their places. Taking her coffee mug, she lifts it to her lips and sips. I’m starting to bounce my leg anxiously, but instead of letting that carry on, I stand and walk around the kitchen island, closer to where she is. She’s always looked like she belonged here. Right now, she looks like she owns the place. And in a way, she does.

“What’s on this list?” I press, needing her to continue.

Leaning her back against the counter, she crosses her feet at the ankles, and holds the coffee mug with two hands in front of her. I mirror her casual pose. But I feel anything but calm.

She looks over my shoulder at the kids, and then nervously back at me.

I reach over and push the piece of hair that’s fallen from her hair tie back behind her ear. She doesn’t freeze at the gesture. It almost feels like she leans into my hand, so I make a suggestion. “Molly was going to be living here. I was going to stay at my dad’s place because I didn’t want to interfere with her time. Or truthfully, be around her more than I needed to be.”

She looks at me with her big, beautiful eyes.

I clench my fists at my sides to keep from touching her again. “My mornings can be really early and there are plenty of nights I’m pulled into dark sky excursions, so it makes sense for you to be here.” I rub the back of my neck. “Live here for the summer.”

“Obviously.” She smiles and adds, “You’re not leaving me here alone, though. So I’ll only stay here if you’re here too.”

“Obviously.”

“Pay me whatever you think is fair, but I also want to add a rider to it.”

I laugh. “Okay, what’s on the rider?”

“I want to use your beautiful bathroom, not the guest bathroom. I’ve been itching to try out your bathtub since you moved in. So I get full use of your bathroom and a good two hours in your tub at least once a week.”

I shift my legs, widening my stance. The thought of her in my bathroom and naked in my tub is a torturous mind game.

Nodding in agreement, I cross my arms. “And your... list?”

“Our list?”

It’s the way she says it that speeds up my pulse. I swallow. My mouth is dry, as if all of a sudden, I’ve swallowed sand. I know she has more to say, and if I know her as well as I think I do, she’s about to ask for exactly what she wants. I look over to the twins, who are wrapped up in a conversation about some game they’re planning to play in the pool. And when I look back at Grace, I can’t help but stare at her mouth. She licks the sugared glaze that dripped from her drink. When did a simple thing like sipping coffee become so sexy with her.

She smirks, knowing I’m studying her lips. “I just figured out that I like being watched. Having your attention on me while I kissed Bishop was...” She blows out a breath. “It was insanely hot. But, beyond that...” She pauses, and I hold my breath. “I want to find out what else I like. And I trust you. You won’t judge me, because I think you’re just as curious as I

am. I think you liked watching.” I study her expression, mesmerized by her confidence in that simple statement.

“I did.”

She turns to put her coffee mug in the sink, and my eyes travel down to her bare legs.

“So let’s make a list. Then maybe this is a way to keep things from getting too overwhelming for both of us.”

My mind is going thousands of miles a minute in every direction of what the outcome of something like this could look like. Watching her, sending her pictures of what I saw, it was flirtatious. I don’t know if I can so easily cross these lines and keep my feelings away from it.

“You’re freaking out.”

“I think it’s dangerous.”

The flash of hurt that crosses her face is brief, but it guts me. I can’t just ignore all the reasons why this could result in something we’re both possibly going to regret. Despite the reality that I want what she’s offering and so much more. All of it scares the shit out of me. And it’s not because of her. It’s never because of her. It’s me I’m afraid of. What if I allow myself to lose control with her? And she sees the kinds of things that get me off, and decides what I can give her isn’t enough—it’s never enough. I can’t lose what we have now. She’s too important to me and to my family; hell, she practically is a part of my family. Why jeopardize that?

Stepping closer, she invades my personal space, forcing me to get out of my head for a minute. “I’m just going to remind you that you’re the one who crashed *my* date. And I don’t know what that means other than I hit a nerve when I went off about not feeling fulfilled. I was ready to abandon the things I feel when I’m around you.”

“Grace,” I say on an exhale. Even hearing her say that makes me feel like I’m failing. The idea that she’s been holding on to the feelings she’s had for me. The same ones I’ve been so aggressively trying to ignore myself.

She leans in so that I can't take in her whole face any longer. At this distance, I can only study each feature. "But as empowering as that may have felt, to say what I want out loud, and then make the choice to stop waiting for you to see me the way that I've been wanting..." She shakes her head, and then leans even closer. "When I saw you watching me, I've never been more turned on in my whole life."

I can feel the breath of her words just below my jaw, and they make me want to touch her.

"I didn't just like it, Michael. I want *more* of that feeling. So get out of your head. I want this, with *you*. Don't focus on anything other than helping me discover what else I might enjoy."

*Well, FUCK. ME.*

"What are you guys talking about? We want to go in the pool now," Miles interrupts.

I groan, because I'm not done with this and, for a minute, I forgot my kids were mere feet away. Grace's offer still lingers around me, and I can't focus on anyone else.

Sammy chimes in, "Gracie, are you going to stay and swim?"

Pulling back from our crowded bubble, she looks at me one more time. A quiet agreement that says, "this isn't the end of this chat." She glances past me, and then steps away. Is it crazy that I miss her so close to me already?

"How about I come swim with you later? I'm going to stop at my apartment and pack up a few things, because I'm going to be staying here for the summer!"

"Yessssss," Sammy squeals, pumping her fist up and down as if that news is the best in the world. "Oh, and can you help us make cupcakes?"

The question knocks me back and out of my Grace-filled haze. "Wait, why are we making cupcakes?"

"Dad! We are supposed to be bringing cupcakes to the graduation ceremony. It's our job. Chocolate cupcakes with



chocolate frosting. We are on snacks. That's our snack."

I hold up my hands in surrender. "Okay, then we'll figure out cupcakes."

Grace gives me a sympathetic smile. "I'll be back in a little bit. And I can help with the cupcakes."

"You've just saved our summer, you know that, right?"

She slings her bag over her shoulder and pulls her sunglasses on. "I know. And you're going to pay me back, Mister."

I look quickly over at the kids, both of them brushing crumbs on the floor. But I'm too distracted to care. Her words and what they insinuate make me feel eager to repay. Excited to see what's next, which isn't normal for me. Typically, I stress about what's coming, but right now, I can't remember what that feels like.

Even though our conversation was interrupted, it's far from over. And it might be time for me to finally get out of my own way.



## *Grace*

“ALL I’M SAYING IS THAT IT’S LIKE A MOVIE. THE GORGEOUS twenty-something nannies for the kids of her lifelong crush for the summer.” River puts her hands on her hips. As if a power stance would make me hear something I haven’t already obsessed over on the way back home.

I love how it sounds, but that wasn’t why I offered. I knew I could help, so I did. It was painful to overhear their heartbreak. The twins have been talking about spending special time with their mom for weeks.

“I’m calling it now, he’s going to crumble. I mean, all you have to do is wear those pajamas you keep telling me *aren’t* lingerie, and he’ll have some kind of out-of-body experience. And then he’ll pounce. I’m really picking up like a kinky vibe from him.”

“It’s a camisole and shorts. They’re pajamas. So what?”

“They’re satin,” she deadpans.

“I like nice pajamas.”

When she leaves my room, I rush over to my dresser and pluck all of them out and toss them in my small suitcase. They’re what I like, so they’re coming with me. As I rifle through my underwear drawer, I only take the pretty ones. I have no excuse other than the underlying hope that I’ll be able to show them off a bit.

I remember the wave of tingles this morning. Another dream I don’t remember fully, but the follow-up that came as I started to wake up was also accompanied by a rush of warmth and excitement. It traveled across my thighs and down to my toes. It was a delicious feeling. I tasted chocolate on my tongue as if I’d just eaten a spoonful of decadent cake with rich buttercream frosting. The smooth texture hit the roof of my mouth, and as I swallowed, I felt the granulated sugar scrape against my throat. I saw the briefest flash of five rings—one red, yellow, green, black, and blue. Olympic rings. An

image I recognized immediately, because I've spent so much of my career talking about it with athletes.

Most of the men and women I work on have the Olympic podium as their career goal. I think about what it would feel like to travel with them, see them compete for medals, and work with them throughout. The last thing I saw was a ripple of dark blue with little flecks of silvery white, maybe ocean waves or even a satin fabric moving. It could have been a snowy waterfall. It was so fast that I wonder if I missed a detail, something that would help me understand what it means. Or how it'll help me choose the right path. But I don't get that level of detail. Only these small post-dream snapshots that I'll hopefully understand later.

"Did you hear me?" River asks, as she tosses another swimsuit into the pile that's gone out of control on my bed.

"No, what?"

"You're coming out with me later. And we need to schedule adult fun nights so that all of your evenings this summer aren't taken over by cartoons and candy."

I like cartoons and candy, but I appreciate what she's saying.

"There's no way I'm wearing this," I say as I hold up a white bikini. And even though the bottoms are high-waisted, a two-piece necessity in my world, there's no reason I would need this in a backyard pool while judging and likely competing in cannonball contests.

"Just bring it."

I take a look at the top. "These are triangles. My boobs will not be happy."

"Yes, but anyone looking at your boobs will be." She laughs. "Can I say something without you getting mad?"

I shove the bathing suits into the front pocket of my suitcase. When I look up at her, I smile, because I already know what she's going to say. "Go ahead."

“Be in charge. Not just with the kids, but with Michael too. I’ve seen you put him first for a long time.” She holds up her hand as I’m about to tell her she’s right. “I want you to remember what you had planned to do this summer.”

She tilts her chin down and gives me a serious glare.

“Keep going. I need to hear it.”

“You wanted to ‘do you’ and explore your sexuality a bit. Get into some trouble, which I can help with.” She smiles. “But you’re taking care of his kids and living there. If things between the two of you were platonic before, you know how easy it could be to blur lines. I just want you to be sure whatever you do, you’re looking out for you.”

I don’t say anything. Instead, I move toward her and give her a hug. She’s a good friend, and she’s not wrong.

“And he’s a total daddy in the streets, so if he’s a freak in the sheets, you need to tell me. For science.”

I laugh. I’m hoping she’s right. “For science.”

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By the time I got back to Michael’s house, he was ready to head into work for a few hours. It’s not uncommon for him to pull some weekend time at the office or on trails during the summer months. The twins were ready for their afternoon, so we decided to head downtown and enjoy the pretty weather.

“Do you think Sugar Valley is open today?” Miles asks as we ride the gondola down the mountain.

“I hope so.”

My phone buzzes.

MICHAEL

For our list.

Excitement buzzes through me. He’s actually going for it. And then a link for a shared note pops open. When I click it, it

takes me to my Notes app. It's titled: Grace & Michael's Summer Slut-Fest, which makes me giggle. He's already listed out: *Being watched* and marked a check near it. We never even finished our discussion, and he's on board. I can't stifle my smile.

GRACE

Nice title.

MICHAEL

Fill it out. Let's see what you've got.

My stomach flips. This is happening.

"Okay, I really want to wear matching t-shirts for our party," Sammy says to Miles.

He grumbles back to her, "No glitter. And they need to be cool. Like camouflage."

"I'll wear camouflage. Wait, what color is camouflage?"

I smile and pipe in to maybe help out Miles. "It's a cool combination of colors in similar shades. Usually, it's greens, but sometimes it can be blues or browns, even pinks."

"Oh yeah, I like that," Sammy says, looking out the window. "Grace, look at the flowers. They're just like the ones you brought for us."

"Those are my favorite." I smile. "I don't know if you guys remember from last year, but that entire trail"—I point out to the trails along the left side of the gondola below—"it turns into a path of beautiful colors."

I look down at my phone and think about the things I want to try. If I'm going to do this, then I can't be embarrassed about asking for what I want. So below being watched, I add: *Being spanked, Multiple orgasms, Breath play, Tied up, Dirty talk, Anal, Submissive roleplay, Take control.*

MICHAEL

Control of what?

GRACE

Of you.

MICHAEL

Oh, Kid, you have no idea.

My body warms at his words.

GRACE

Is that the only one that makes you nervous?

MICHAEL

It's the only one I haven't pictured happening.

My face and neck heat, the confession he just made almost making me dizzy. He's fantasized about these things? With me?

"What are you going to wear for the party?" Sammy interrupts, her arms folded as she rests her chin, staring out the window.

I clear my throat. "I don't know. I'm sure I have something."

"Can we go to Leo's store so I can help you pick out a pretty dress?"

I've been on a new wardrobe kick. What's another new dress to add to the mix? I give her a little smile and nod yes, then putting my phone away, I focus back on the kids. We're going to be walking around downtown, and as much as I want to obsess over his last text message, it's not a good time to be this distracted.

The gondola station is in the heart of downtown Strutt's Peak. It's not a metropolis, by any stretch, but there are always people walking, shopping, or some kind of event happening.

Two short blocks down and to the right is one of my favorite featured shops in our small town. I remember how incredible it seemed when I was a kid. Sugar Valley is the length of an entire street alley, that's walls opened to show off every type of candy you could ever imagine. For a kid who barely traveled, it felt like every candy in the world. Now, as an adult, it's still damn impressive, but feels so much smaller than what I remember.

"My goodness, is that Gracie McKenna?"

I peer down the wall, halfway where the fudge, truffles, and chocolate bark are displayed in a cooling case, to find the voice I'd recognize anywhere. A sweet, soft tone, laced with a hint of a Boston accent.

"Hi, Wanda." I wave.

"You get more beautiful every time I see you, my darling girl. I wish I knew you were coming to visit. I would have made your favorites had I known."

Sugar Valley and all of its sweet-soaked goodness would only be half as amazing if Wanda wasn't running it. I couldn't begin to guess her age. She's older, somewhat like a Golden Girl, but her true age is deceiving. She looked the same when I was a kid. She wears her gray silver coif like a crown and her velour suits with pride. Today her suit is a shade of lilac that I'm sure has a pair of matching tennis shoes or Crocs to top it off. And her brand of magic is that she can remember everyone's favorite sweets. She never forgets. And that's whether you're a townie or a tourist. If you've been here once, she'll always remember.

I look down the alley and make sure the twins aren't sampling too much. "I'm helping Michael out, which means I get to spend the summer with those two troublemakers."

"Oh." She smiles. "I see." So much more is lurking below those three words.



“I always thought you two would have made a nice match.” *Here we go.* What most folks in this town never let me forget. “You tried, that’s for sure. Maybe one of these days, he’ll get his head out of his rump and see what’s right in front of him.” She laughs at her own words.

I smile, but as always, I set the reality straight, at least the reality that the rest of this town needs to know about. They don’t need to catch wind that we’re already crossing lines, or maybe drawing new ones.

“That was a long time ago, you know that. Michael and I are friends. And I’m just helping.”

Wanda smiles. It’s one of those smiles that people who are older and have lived many versions of themselves give to you. Like she knows something I don’t. All I want to say to her is, “Yeah, girl, I know.”

“Grace, how much can we get?” Miles interrupts.

I raise my eyebrows because I don’t understand how it’s possible for him to have gotten that much candy in such a small bag, but it’s filled to the brim with what looks like every gummy and sour candy ever made.

“I feel like you may have overshot the amount I was thinking.”

Wanda just giggles behind me. “The rainbow swirls are his favorite. How about we split that bag and give half to Grace. She’ll want something sour and tart to break up the truffles I packed for her.”

“Okay, so I searched all the places, and I can’t find the chewy wax juice things,” Sammy says as she hoists a gallon-sized bag onto the counter.

My eyes widen. I left them to it for less than five minutes. “That’s too much, Sam.”

“I brought my own money.”

“That’s not the point. Your dad isn’t going to be okay with this much candy.”

Wanda steps up higher so she can speak over the counter. There must be a stool back there, because she's not a lick taller than five feet. "Why don't I put all of this in a couple of smaller bags. It won't look as much that way." She winks at Sammy, then says, "Plus, I put aside the last five wax juicies just for you."

She moves the bags behind the counter and starts sorting and weighing.

"Saw your mom just yesterday. Said she was doing fondue and needed melting chocolate." Wanda smiles again.

Based on what I walked in on the other night, I could have gone without knowing the details of my mom's recent visit here.

"Here, gave you just about a third of what they picked out." She plops four bags on the counter. "I pulled Michael's favorite too. You can tell him I counted."

"You're amazing, Wanda. Thank you." And she is. Not many people would know that he eats them four at a time, so there needs to be an even amount in the bag. He won't melt down over it, but Law told me once that he came close when he was still in the single digits. It had him riled up and talking about it for a full day, before Asher brought him back to round out the amount he needed. She never forgot. So now she makes sure he has what he likes and the way he likes it. And she does that for everyone.

"How about we visit Leo's shop, and then we can head home, eat some of this haul, and then go swimming."

"Yes!" they both hiss out with fists pumping.

We play "the floor is lava" as we make our way downtown. By the time we get to Leo's boutique, I'm sweating from avoiding stepping on the sidewalk, per the lava rules.

"Gracie, you're so much fun," Miles says as he digs into his candy bag.

"It's only because you both are the coolest, most fun kids I know."

Sammy squints and asks, “Well, how many kids do you know?”

“Thousands, Sammy. And you and Miles are my all-time favorites.”

She smiles as we push our way into Leo’s boutique.

The chime of the door always makes me laugh. This time, I think it’s a riff from Beyonce. Telling us to “cuff it.”

“Grace, can I just sit here and eat some candy?” Miles whines. “This store is boring.”

“Yes. We’ll be quick, I promise.”

Leo sashays toward us in the front of the store. “So, the rumors are true.” He steps back and rakes his eyes from my feet to my face. “Your hair was the smartest decision you’ve ever made. Simply stunning.” Looking over to Sammy, he gives her a once-over as well. “Mmmhmm, Miss Sammy, looking lovely per usual. What are you two looking for, or are we just browsing?”

I give Leo a hug and let Sammy take over. She grabs his outstretched elbow and says, “I’m composting. My brother wants to wear camouflage to our graduation party on Friday, so I’ll need a skirt to match it.” Leo’s eyes dart over to mine, questioning.

“Compromising, Sam,” I correct.

She looks at me over her shoulder. “Yes, that.”

Leo asks, “Are we good to look for a skirt?”

“I have no say here, this is all her. She ordered matching blue camo t-shirts on Amazon.” I glance at her with a look of disapproval, because she’s stealthy. “On my phone when I was talking with Wanda.”

“Okay, I can work with all of that. Blue camo, got it. What else?”

Sammy finishes by saying, “And we need to find a pretty dress for Gracie too.”

They both giggle, and if I didn't know any better, Sammy has a plan. And it looks like she just let Leo in on it. I sit down on the bench next to Miles, making sure he's okay, before I walk around the rest of the shop.

“Gracie, how do you feel about keeping with the theme and going for something blue?” Sammy yells from the back room.

I smile, thinking about the blue from my sneak peek. “Let's go for it.”



## *Grace*

“OKAY, THE CUPCAKES ARE COOLING. YOU ONLY NEED TO frost them and put them in the container.” I grab the towels from the fresh laundry basket perched on the couch. “I couldn’t fold these and do the cupcakes, too, so the rest is all you guys.”

“Dad, we had to go get the cupcake mix and frosting. You didn’t have any here,” Sammy says in a snarky tone.

Michael drops his bags in the mudroom and widens his eyes at me, looking for sympathy from her tiny human wrath. It’s a regular occurrence for Sammy to “remind” her dad about what he may have forgotten. Not to mention, it’s as soon as he walked in the door.

We share a smile, because nothing drops someone down a peg on the inflated ego scale like a kid can. The most incredible part about him is that, for as unprepared as he may have been for these two to enter his life, he’s managed to cultivate some really happy kids. And do a pretty great job at keeping it all together. I feel like such a slacker when I survey what his days look like compared to mine.

“Sammy, give him a break. It was easy for us to pick up,” Miles says to her.

He’s on top of all their after-school things, from dance to jiu-jitsu. He has chore charts, and organized bins for crafts. I even think the clothes hanging in their closets have been ironed, which is really next level. Although, now that I think of it, he probably has a laundry service for that. Regardless, he does the single-parent thing pretty well.

I remember what it was like for him those first few months. It wasn’t easy. The adjustment of two small kids, the guilt of not knowing they even existed, and the transition from caring for himself only, to providing for and being the most important person in two little lives.

*“I’m not the kind of man to walk away from a responsibility.” Michael drags his fingers from the front of his hairline to the nape of his neck. With his head still bowed, he whispers, “But I’m not the guy you just hand kids over to. I’m so many layers of fucked up, Grace. I don’t even know how to unpack it most of the time.”*

*I don’t say anything. I move my fingers along his hairline to try to soothe the storm swirling under his skin. How can I tell him it’s going to be okay? Because it would be a lie. I have no idea what’s going to happen when they show up. So instead, I move closer. Let him know I’m here to listen. When he texted me this morning, I knew he needed to do something that would feel like normal. Ever since Christmas when he found out that he was a dad, his normal was blown to smithereens.*

*We take the gondola out of downtown and walk to the Dark Sky Community a few blocks from the last station stop—miles of land with just a few houses being built, all by people who want to preserve the darkness. Minimize light pollution so the skies can be seen and studied. It’s a collective of people who want to enjoy the beauty of where we live.*

*It’s cold tonight, but it is a clear night, and I packed enough hot cocoa, hand warmers, and blankets that we’d be able to relax for a little while. Selfishly, I needed to take a break, too. My mother has been all over me about moving back from London after I graduate in the spring. I wasn’t ready to talk about why I won’t be taking the job with the rugby team. She wouldn’t understand, but I feel like I’m needed here. And I have some ideas about jobs, but tonight, it’s not about me.*

*“Tell me what you’re thinking. I need a distraction.”*

*He meets my fingers that have been combing along his hairline and pulls them down, covering my hand with both of his. I watch as it happens. It sends a soothing feeling throughout my whole body. Like it’s time for both of us to just be in this moment together. Absorb the support. I can feel him looking at me now, staring and waiting for a response, but I’m too much of a coward to meet his gaze. I wonder if perhaps this just isn’t the right time for us. Before the news of his twins,*

*I thought he might broach the subject of our friendship. Test the waters and dip our toes past those clear lines that he drew all of those years ago. But that didn't happen. And it's impossible not to think about when this connection and chemistry swirls so palpably between us.*

*I clear my throat. It's not about that right now. It's about making my friend feel better. "Can I tell you something that maybe you don't know?"*

*"I feel like you're going to tell me no matter how I answer that question." He laughs.*

*Jackpot. Out of his head and smiling.*

*"A whole bunch of us in high school, middle school too, didn't have the luxury of private coaches for snowboarding. Our parents had to work until well past dinnertime, but they didn't want us left alone. I was old enough to be on my own after school, but Lenny wasn't having it." I laugh, because while that's true, I don't like being alone either. "If you think you don't know how to be a role model or a person who can care for others, then you're forgetting. But I can't. And I know a good handful of others who won't forget about learning the rock wall or how to set a line properly or where to find fresh powder when the mountain got busy." I keep looking at his hands wrapped around mine, and if I'm going to lay it all out for him, then I had better really do it. So, I breathe, and tell this incredible human just how amazing he really is.*

*"I've known you long enough to notice when you're in your head. When you're on the verge of needing to leave a room, but that's not the entirety of who or what you are. You have things you deal with, but you're so much more than the things that worry you most. You're going to be an exceptional dad, and I'm not saying it just because I want to make you feel better."*

*I hear his breathing change, sounding shaky, like he's barely holding back his emotions. I keep my eyes fixed on our hands, because I'm not equipped to see Michael choked up. Especially by my words, but I want him to hear this. He needs to know.*



*“Despite how much you like people to think you don’t like them or that your gruff exterior mimics how you are for real, everyone who’s ignored it and has gotten to know you feels lucky. They feel important, because you let people talk and just be themselves. You see people in a way that makes us feel good. We had to earn your attention. And it’s worth it. With you, it’s always worth it.”*

*Leaning into me, the warmth of his body against the side of mine feels so good. He presses his mouth to my forehead, kissing it and letting it linger. His voice is so quiet, I almost miss hearing him say, “Thank you.”*

I wink at him, and then head down the hall to my room for the summer.

He yells after me, “Are you all moved in, then?”

“Looks like it,” I croon back.

As he cracks open a can of seltzer, he shouts after me, “I ordered a few things for my bathroom that you might find useful.”

I stop and walk back down the hall to ask what exactly. I’m kind of surprised and intrigued to think that he’s ordered things for me.

He leans against the sink, his arms crossed over his chest, and the way it pulls at his shirt is altogether too distracting.

“What kinds of things? Like storage, so I don’t take over the counters,” I joke. “I promise I won’t leave a mess.”

He laughs. “Of course. But I also found some soaps and bath crap that I thought you’d like to try when you’re using the tub. You probably have your own stuff, but I just saw it and thought you’d like it.”

That’s so...thoughtful. While Michael doing something thoughtful isn’t necessarily out of character for him, I’m still caught off guard by it.

“Like, you were walking around and just saw bath crap?”

He smiles, and his face turns a shade of pink. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen Michael Riggs blush before. He waits a beat

before answering. “No, I wasn’t just walking around.”

Taking another sip of his drink, he uncrosses his arms, and walks closer to where I’m leaning on the corner of the wall.

His progression toward me forces my body to stand up straighter. A twitch of nerves and excitement are fighting for what I’m feeling.

He leans against the wall facing me. “I was thinking that I liked the idea of you using my bathtub. I thought about what you would look like in there.” He moves closer so that he can speak more quietly. “And all I could picture was your wet body covered in bubbles. And then I couldn’t stop thinking about what it would smell like. So I looked for what I thought you’d like to smell like, and then I got to thinking about what else you would want if you were in that tub.”

His low, deep tone rolls across my skin, leaving a wake of goosebumps.

I stare up at him. I’m sure the look of surprise is on every feature of my face. I’ve never wanted anyone to watch me take a bath so badly in my entire life.

Shifting back, he breaks the figurative bubble he just created and says, “So I bought some things for you, and a basket to store them. They’ll arrive tomorrow and will be waiting for you whenever you want to use them. As part of your rider.” He smiles, teasingly.

And with that just lingering, he turns and walks into the living room, joining the twins on the couch to play a game of Mario Kart. It was the equivalent of a sexual mic drop. And I’m still stuck in the same spot, thinking about how much I want to take a bath now.

Thirty minutes later, I’m finally happy with my outfit, but my makeup needs tweaking, so I wipe off the dark lipstick I was trying, and instead go with nude glossy lips. Something muted to offset the heavy dark eye makeup I managed to execute flawlessly, thanks to watching a few very talented TikTokers. I give myself one more look in the mirror and smirk. The dark red hair with a smokey eye and my red bottom

black pumps, which were a gift to myself after I finally saved enough, are giving me Lizzo-level swagger.

I turn and look at my back in the mirror. It might be summer, but Strutt's Peak is still a mountain town, which means it can get cold when the sun goes down. Tonight I chose my favorite jeans. The high-waist hits just right, tucking in what it needs to and accentuating my ass and hips.

And apparently, I'm in my ballsy era. Usually, I'd opt for something less sexy for just a night out with friends, but I want Michael's attention before I leave. Let's call it what it is; I need him to put some action where his mouth has been. He's never spoken like that to me before, been so direct, specific. He's left me dripping with a sense of desire that knocks the crush-level feelings so far out of the park that I need a new way to describe how I feel about my best friend. I simply need *more*.

When I'm out of my room and down the hall, I hear, "Grown-ups like to go out. Most of us, at least."

I didn't realize River was already here.

"But Dad's a grown-up, and he doesn't go out," Miles says.

"Your dad is old. And it's bedtime for him, likely before we've even eaten dinner, so..." She flaps her arms at her sides.

I come into the living room as he flips her off and says, "Fuck off, River."

"Dad! Bad word," Miles says as he shoves a fistful of popcorn into his mouth.

"Sorry, bud," he mumbles, and then sends River a glare instead.

"What?" She laughs. "It's true. You know it's true. I'd probably want to stay home too if I was pushing forty. Organize my AARP coupons. Maybe take in an extra episode of *Murder She Wrote* that's been saved on an old VHS."

"I'll be watching a marathon of *Real Housewives* when these two go to bed as I fold a mountain of laundry. Like any

single parent on a weeknight.”

She barks out a shocked laugh. “But you’re loaded. I would have thought you had a laundry service.”

“I am. And we do. But do you know how much laundry two six-year olds-make?”

“Wait, are you Orange County or New York?”

I’m not shocked when I hear him say, “New Jersey and Beverly Hills.”

“I hear you guys have a big day tomorrow. Graduation?” Benny cuts in.

I didn’t realize he’d be going out with us, but it seems like Benny isn’t far behind wherever River goes lately.

I smile at him in greeting, and notice red creeping up his neck and cheeks. His lingering stare catches everyone’s attention, and they all turn around from their spots on the couch.

“You look incredible. Damn, woman!” River says, and then backhands Benny in the stomach. “Benny, stop drooling.”

“Gracie, you look so beautiful. Daddy, doesn’t Gracie look beautiful?”

Michael shifts in his seat and rubs the back of his neck. He doesn’t say a word.

“I want to wear makeup like that too when I get older,” Sammy says.

Michael keeps his eyes moving across my face, and then turns to Sammy. “When you’re older, I’m sure Grace will show you how.”

There’s something about the way he says my name. Not Kid, not Gracie. I like it.

I lean over the back of the couch and kiss Sammy and Miles on their heads. “Thank you, my little favorites. I’ll see you both at breakfast in the morning.”

Michael still doesn't say anything. He just watches as I move toward the door. I'd like to think he watches the whole way, admiring how great my ass looks in these jeans and the sexiness of a bare back. Benny slings his arm around my shoulder and leans into my ear.

"If you want to really make him jealous, giggle and pretend whatever I'm whispering in your ear is really fucking funny."

So, I do it. I giggle and look over my shoulder, finding Michael's attention still on me. His eyes wander down my body purposefully, and then shift back to Benny. If I blinked, I would have missed the tiny smirk quirking his lips. And now that I've seen it, I have a funny feeling I'll see him much sooner than breakfast tomorrow morning.



## *Grace*

THE BLIND PIG IS A CIGAR BAR AT THE BASE OF THE mountains of Strutt's Peak, not too far from downtown, at the beginning of Strutt's gondola system. It's the best spot to end the evening because it's an easy ride on the gondola, and then a few blocks to home. My home for the summer, at least.

We started the night where River wanted: a vibe to match her demand for champagne-topped martinis. Then we went dancing, which meant tequila shots chased with club soda. And now, it feels appropriate to sip on a Paloma as I watch River flirt with Benny mercilessly at the bar.

The sugared grapefruit piece garnishing my drink isn't cutting it for me. I'm still hungry, and I think I'm ready for home. I looked around the bar, and while I did my best to flirt my way through the night, the truth is, nobody I talked to or even danced with kept me interested for more than a few minutes. It felt wrong. I feel like I've already promised my time this summer to someone else.

There are fewer tourists this time of year, which also means us locals are amplified. And while I love my town, I could do without some of the people I grew up with: case in point, River's ex and his dipshit buddies.

I instantly regret sitting by myself. "Grace, you're looking good these days. Shit."

"Taylor. Looking..." I give him a full body scan. And because I'm definitely drunk, I have no interest in filtering my words or my disgust. "Like you peaked in high school."

His friend, who I don't remember by name, starts laughing. *Another douche.*

"Still going to give me shit, Gracie? Riv and I broke up like a decade ago," he says as he sips on his Jack and Coke.

I still don't understand what she was doing with him for so long. Taylor and River ended up staying together when she went away to school. She never thought they would get

married, or so she told me later. But they had been together for almost all of high school. She gave him an out when she decided to go to school in London, but he wanted to stay together. It wasn't until the Christmas break of our senior year that she came home and found out he'd been sleeping around.

"Wasn't a decade ago, idiot. But I have no interest in talking to you." I get up and find River and Benny at the end of the bar. They are completely unaware of anyone around them as they laugh about something. River leans in on her forearms as Benny cuffs a piece of hair behind her ear.

"Hey, Douche Mc'Dougall is here."

River looks around and sees him, lifting her drink in the air to greet his watchful gaze. "Hey, fuckwad. Still looking like your mom picks out your clothes. Reeeal nice."

"Don't provoke her, Grace." Benny laughs.

I hold up my hands and laugh.

"You ready to go?" he asks.

"Yes, but you two stay. I can get the gondola back. No big deal."

"You sure? I don't mind."

A loud echo of laughter grabs our attention from the other side of the room. A group of women, some whom I recognize from the gym and another from the PTA squad that Michael is always trying to dodge, are laughing at something Law Riggs is saying. His animated gestures are always what captivate people. When he tells a story, it's impossible not to pay attention. I watch him laugh and flirt with the women around him, and he catches me watching. Smiling, I realize there isn't a woman out there who can turn him away. There's something about those Riggs men. They were all blessed with insanely good looks. Top that off with the fact that he's fun to be around, smart, and running one of the most successful companies in this town. He has a way about him, effortless, light-hearted. Easy.

I follow as his gaze moves toward the door. My whole body warms, knowing who I'm about to see. It's not the



tequila anymore, but the electricity that lingers in the air and around *his* impossibly handsome face.

Michael leans against the wall, away from the boozed-up crowd. Giving a total of zero fucks that the woman to his left is trying her hardest to gain his attention. Because his eyes are on me. He licks his lips and just watches me, and a shiver runs through me, thinking about how long he's been watching.

It's his attention I crave. My body is so turned on by it.

"Looks like the old man's getting in the game after all," River says in my ear, and I smile.

"I think my ride is here," I say back, still watching him as he crosses his arms over his chest. He's waiting for me.

"Fuck yeah, it is. You better go ride that!"

I snort out a laugh and hope nobody other than Benny heard that. The gossips are here in abundance. It must be the liquid courage, because my eye contact game is on point. I haven't been able to look away from his dark green eyes since I felt them on me. I take in what he's wearing: dark jeans, a fitted black t-shirt. Casual, but a very obvious upgrade from the gym shorts and Riggs Outdoor t-shirt he was wearing when I left the house.

I stop a few feet in front of him and sling a hand on my hip. "Did Law drag you out?"

"Opposite, actually."

*He couldn't stay away.*

"Decided not to be such an old man, after all?"

"Decided I wasn't done looking at you."

*Oh, hell yes.* I couldn't hold back my smile if I tried.

"So we're doing this?" I ask, because let's put this out there. Tequila doesn't care. She fuels the "I don't give a fuck" energy. "We're just saying sexy things and being all"—I point at him and move my finger up and down in front of him—"Michael Riggs about it."

He places his hand across my lower back, leans into me, lips hovering right over my ear. “Something like that, Grace.” The warmth of his breath tickles my ear, and the way he says my name, I feel it throughout my entire body.

We walk two blocks up to the gondola station, lucking out when a car pulls in right away. Neither one of us says a word. All of my confident swagger that had been at the bar is now introspective and nervous about what’s to come. We sit across from one another in the gondola car. An instrumental version of “The Way You Do The Things You Do” by The Temptations plays over the speakers, and its upbeat croon with metaphors and falsettos is the opposite of how I’m feeling. My mood is all bass guitar, a slow, bluesy saxophone, and dirty words. Michael’s gaze feels intrusive, like if I’m not careful, I may see a version of him I’m not ready for. So I look out the window and watch as the big, bold sky whirls by.

“You’ll be at my house for all of Perseids now,” he states. It causes me to finally look at him and see that he’s also looking out the window and up at the stars. “It’s supposed to be a good visibility year.”

We watch every year together. A meteor shower that happens every summer. For a handful of days, the earth orbits close enough to the debris of a comet that hauls itself around in space. The meteor shower can be seen all over the sky, but they’ll always have a path that tracks back to the Perseus constellation. It’s beautiful. Predictable. Consistent. I think that’s why he likes it so much.

“Beautiful space garbage.”

He laughs. And I remember a long time when it took a great deal of effort to make him laugh, or even smile. He’s more generous with happiness as an emotion and laughter as its result these days.

I smile as I stare at his arm slung along the back of the seat next to him. The casual way he sits with one foot resting on the opposite knee. His wrist rests on the edge of the seat so that his hand hangs freely. I stare at the roughness of his fingers, calloused all along his knuckles from sparring and

rock climbing. There's nothing soft about his hands. There isn't much that's soft about Michael Riggs, come to think of it. At least for anyone on the outside looking in. From the inside, it's a whole different view.

The gondola announces its next stop, and shakes me out of the daze I've found myself in. We reach ours, walking the few blocks to his house.

When we head inside, we're both quiet. Turning the corner, I see Asher asleep on the couch. Michael pulls out his phone and sends a text before waking him. I didn't see his car in the driveway, but I assumed Asher would be here watching the kids.

"Hey, must have nodded off. You two have a good time?"

"Yeah, Dad. Thanks again for coming over."

Asher pulls on his sweatshirt. "I was going to frost those cupcakes for you, but I didn't want to do it and not add sprinkles or whatever else might be required. The last time I forgot sprinkles, Sammy almost shook the house with her meltdown."

"I'll do it. Not a problem," I say.

"Nope, I got it. You can head to bed. You're off the clock, Kid," Michael says, his eyes darting to his dad's.

"I'm gonna need a ride, son. I don't see your brother in tow."

Headlights pull in the driveway as he finishes that sentence. He raises his brows in question. "I asked Cal to swing by on his way home from a shift." Michael shrugs his shoulder like it's no big deal. "Timing worked out."

Asher looks at his son, surprised, almost speechless. A ravine filled with questions just lingers at that move. And then he brings his attention back to me. "Perfect timing, then," is all he says.

It's no secret that Callen and the Riggs family are close, but I always wondered if there was more there. I can spot a crush from a mile away.

Asher gives his son a kiss on the cheek, followed by a back-clapping hug, and then says, “Grace, you look like a damn bombshell with that hair.” He gives me a charming wink and, as he strides to the door, adds, “See you both tomorrow at the graduation. Do me a favor, and bring over more of those fruit snacks with the juice in the middle. I’m a bit obsessed with them now too.”

I walk back to my room to get washed up as Michael sees his dad out.

Once I scrub the makeup from my face, I brush out the loose curls, then put on a tank top and a pair of black joggers. Normally, I’d put on my silky pajamas, but I’m not sure if I’m ready for the night to be over. Plus, I need to snag water and a snack before I can officially go to bed. Maybe I can steal one of the extra cupcakes I put aside too.

When I come back into the kitchen, Michael is setting up to frost the cupcakes. His meticulous planning of a task is in full view. Two cans of chocolate frosting open, and next to them is one flat spatula and one butter knife. Each of them spread out equidistant to the other. He has a folded damp paper towel waiting at the end, as if he’s thought through all of the steps, each planned with the least amount of mess involved.

Michael clears his throat and stirs the first can of chocolate. “Are you and Benny...?”

It takes me a couple of seconds to understand his question. When I do, I decide to play a little. “Are me and Benny...?”

I move around him, pulling out a glass for water and a bag of popcorn to toss into the microwave. I set the time and wait, leaning against the counter and watching him stir the chocolate. He flicks his eyes up to mine. “You know what I’m asking.”

“Would it matter?”

He stops stirring for a second and places the knife and can back down on the counter. Leaning his hands and weight against the edge of the counter, he slowly asks, “Are you exploring with Benny, too?”

My reaction is to smile immediately. He's jealous.

"We're friends."

He picks up the frosting can again, the knife stirring more vigorously this time. "The same way we're friends?"

When he starts to smooth a dollop of frosting on the first cupcake, the smell of chocolate hits me, and I remember my sneak peek. It nudges me to follow my instinct. Or its lead. And do so by answering his question without words.

This is the first time I can remember that Michael doesn't wait for my response and changes the topic to fill the silence. "I don't remember signing up to bring cupcakes. Probably another thing Beverly Harpson decided would be a good idea," he scoffs. "It's why I didn't have the mix and frosting already. I thought I was bringing juice boxes."

My eyes wander around his body. Effortlessly. Consumingly. He's tall and overwhelming. His broad shoulders set the tone for what the rest of him looks like—strong, powerful. They lead to a trim waist and narrow hips. His jeans hug his ass just right. It's biteable. I laugh to myself at the thought. What it'd be like to bite it, soothe the marks with my tongue, and squeeze. Whenever I wanted...

I lick my lips. And just as I do, he looks over his shoulder at me. He sees me do it. Gorging myself on the thoughts of his body. Maybe it's time to stop observing and be a little bolder.

The cupcake he balanced as he frosted, fumbles, but instead of it dropping to the counter or floor, he catches it with the other hand. Frosting side down, his fingers and palm are coated in smears and peaks of the thick dark chocolate.

I don't think anymore. I just react. I lean in fast. Like someone will snatch the courage away. I close my mouth around his pointer and middle finger, my tongue swiping along the pads of his fingers as chocolate coats it. But the taste of sugar and cocoa barely registers. Instead, I taste the want and fire that was ignited by my move.

I look him in the eyes, wordlessly conveying how delicious this tastes and feels. A move that I never thought I'd

be ballsy enough to make. But right now, there's no fear or embarrassment as he looks at me.

He stares at my mouth and where we're connected. I slowly back away, his fingers retreating as I drag the tip of my tongue along for the ride, swirling along the crease of both fingers. I don't think about what I'm doing. Instead, I watch as his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, intent to savor this as completely as I am.

When the tips of his fingers pass my lips, I watch for his reaction. I wait for him to push back and remind me that friends don't lick each other's fingers. That he's too old for me or I'm too young for him. That he doesn't feel "that way" about me, and we can't really do this. That the list is just a fun idea and can't ever happen. But he doesn't say any of those things.

"No, Benny and I are not friends the way you and I are."

His eyes find mine, and the room gets warmer. Heat takes shape, snaking its way from the back of my neck, over my shoulders, and down toward my chest.

"Not even close," I whisper.

"Tell me how that tasted."

The sound of his voice is low, his words raking across gravel. I smile because it's a tone I've only ever heard from him once before. The memory of it does a host of new things I hadn't expected. I don't respond with words. I don't care that we're in new territory; I'm in the mood to play. To follow this feeling.

"Let me try it again," I say, and then I open my mouth. Relaxing my tongue, so it rests on my lower lip, it's an invitation.

I don't wait long for his response.

He flicks his eyes to the crumbly cake and frosting on the butter knife and drags his thumb through it. Raising it to my mouth, he pushes it aching slow from my lower lip to the center of my tongue. I close my lips around it and suck as he pulls it back at the same taunting speed. His eyes concentrate

on my mouth so intently, I don't think he heard the hiss that came out of his own. But I did. The sound of it rushes lust right to my core.

“Dad! Dad! Dad!” Miles shouts from the top of the stairs.

And like a cold bucket of water, everything that just happened is extinguished. We both go rigid and look toward the stairs. Michael grabs the dish towel from the counter and moves with urgency, wiping his hands.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

I hear Michael ask, “What's the matter, buddy?”

Miles sleepily mumbles, “I can't find Mr. Bunny.”

“Let's go find him, then.”





## *Michael*

IF THERE WAS A VISUAL DEFINITION OF THE PHRASE “OVER THE top,” then my father would be front and center. It would be smiling the way he is right now in front of what I could imagine is the largest hybrid grill, decked out in matching outfits with Miles and Sammy.

“Dad, nice pants.”

“Listen, when my people tell me we’re going blue camo, I listen.” He laughs and pulls me in for a hug, kissing my cheek with full force. Affection is never lacking with Asher Riggs. He’ll show and tell everyone exactly who is the most important to him. It’s just how he’s built. I never understood it until I had my kids. Growing up, I needed the physical touch. The reminder that I was wanted and loved by him, but I could never ask for it. It was up to him to read my mind. He did it pretty well. Still does, too.

“Grandpa Ash! The bouncy house looks awesome,” Sammy yells from behind me.

He laughs as they both catapult onto him. “Of course. Is it even a party if there isn’t something to bounce on.”

“That’s not-” I just smile and shake my head. “Different phrasing next time, Dad.”

“I guess I know where your head is at.” He lifts Miles up for a piggy-back ride and casually shoots back, “Grace coming?”

“Later.”

He smirks at me. My Dad has never flat-out asked me about my relationship with Grace, but he knows something is different now. He’s too good at reading a room and people’s body language not to notice. It also could have been my late-night babysitting request, and then coming back with Grace in tow.

I walk back toward the sliding doors and the bustling of servers setting up the outdoor bar, picnic-style tables being decorated with centerpieces of wildflowers and graduation cap balloons. I just shake my head because there was no stopping it. The moment Sammy said “party,” my dad was on the horn, ready to deliver.

If I thought we could keep it small and ending sometime before the sun went down, then we would have hosted it at our house. Although, the idea of so many people at the house, and what I’d need to do to get it prepared, and then clean-up afterwards feels overwhelming even thinking about it. My own anxiety aside, our Dark Sky Community has guidelines, and anything my dad had in mind for a party would absolutely run outside of their rules. Case in point, the eight boxes of fireworks I just walked by.

I take a quick survey of who’s here and, really, I’m only looking for one person. The way things abruptly ended last night left me with more than just a semi-permanent hard-on. It has me ready to show her exactly what she’s been asking for. *More.*

“Daddy Ash!” Giselle yells, as she throws open the sliders.

“G, I told you, you’re not allowed to call him that,” Henry huffs behind her.

And it’s true, I’ve heard him tell her on a few occasions that she can’t do that. But I think it only fuels her to do it even more.

“Hankey, he’s got a funnel cake truck that just pulled into the driveway!” She pats my chest and gives me a squeeze. “I know the day is about them, but that funnel cake truck just secured Daddy Ash as my favorite Riggs.”

“I’m your husband. I should remain in first.”

She shouts over her shoulder, “You were already second. When Michael went Mortal Kombat for me, he knocked Everly out of first. But now, I’m sorry, my love, you’ve been bumped to third.” She cackles.

And while I know she's just pushing Henry's buttons, because, well, that's what she does, what she says makes me feel good. I don't consider her anything other than family now. She's as much a sister to me as Everly. Plus, she has this way about her that makes everyone feel good, Henry especially. She's made him happy. Content, and maybe a little lighter about life.

G tugs my elbow. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have thrown that out so casually."

"Don't be. It's fine, and I'm good," I tell her. She's referring to the Mortal Kombat comment, which was referring to a night that ended in a lot of violence. Her past catching up with her, and I just so happened to be there. The result of which wasn't something I ever thought I'd have to deal with. Having blood on my hands. Killing a man in self-defense and having to deal with the aftermath of how that felt. It wasn't something I thought I'd get past. But I did, and I'd do it all over again if it meant keeping her safe, anyone in my family safe. The following Christmas was when I found out about Sammy and Miles being born. The panic attacks and PTSD flashbacks from what happened that night finally subsided. All new anxieties took hold in their place.

G smiles, waiting another couple of seconds to read if I'm telling her the truth. Making sure I'm okay. And I am.

An hour into the party, and I look around the yard. Sammy and Miles haven't stopped bouncing in the military-themed bouncy house since they got here. They look like blurs of blue as they jump and laugh with Jack and Everly.

"What's with the theme?" Henry asks. "I'm not mad about it, but how on earth did Miles convince Sammy to do a military themed party for graduation?"

"Honestly, I have no idea—" is all I can say as I watch Grace come out onto the patio. Her hands are full with two backpacks and a balloon tied to each. My body winds up as I take her in. The dark blue sundress she's wearing ties behind her neck and cuts low enough that the crease between her gorgeous tits peaks out just enough to kick up my pulse. The

memory of her lips and tongue brushing and sucking on my fingers last night has me shifting my weight to avoid the stirring excitement.

I went back downstairs to find her after Miles was tucked back in, but she was already in her room. I was still reeling from her mouth. But I wasn't going to bust into her space. I know she had enough to drink that she might regret anything else. But now that I see her, I'm questioning why I was so chivalrous. This morning was such a rush to get out the door, we barely had a minute together alone. All I can think about is how I can steal her away.

I drag my eyes down to that teasing crease between her tits and past her hips, but I backtrack to her waist, because there's a hand there that shouldn't be.

Benny walked in next to her, his hand resting on her lower back, as if she needed guidance onto the patio. I stare at that hand, and I find myself getting angrier at it with every step closer. He needs to remove his fucking hand. Right now. When they stop in front of me, I finally pull my attention away as he drops his hand. I'm very aware of the silence I'm giving them.

"Everything... okay?" she asks hesitantly.

When I lift my gaze back up and look at her, then at Benny, I say, "It is now."

I don't give a fuck if that makes anyone around us feel awkward, Benny included, but his hand doesn't belong anywhere near her body. This is the second time now, and if it happens again, I'm going to get rude and won't mince words with a guy I've considered a friend.

"Grace, here, let me take those for you," my dad says from behind me, diffusing the intense air around us.

Seconds later, two panting kids come barreling over, ready to dole out some sort of high-five combination with Grace that I've never witnessed before. It's impossible not to drop the possessive act and smile at them.

"Grace, is the rainbow bag for me?" Sammy asks, eager to rip open one of the bags she came in holding.

“Yes, and this one is for Miles,” she says as she hands over the solar system themed bag. “These are our summer adventure bags. I packed them with tons of stuff we’re going to do this summer.”

“Dad, look, it’s stuff for butterflies and catching fireflies,” Sammy shouts.

“Dad. Dad. It’s red flashlights for stargazing and new star charts,” Miles says as he fingers through the booklets.

It’s not just a gift for the sake of not coming empty-handed. She took real time packing these bags up, filling them with things they both like. “You went over the top with these. I kind of want to use all this stuff.”

“I know, me too.” She smiles. “And I plan to, since they’re my adventure this summer.” My eyes meet hers, and maybe she doesn’t realize the double meaning that has for me. She’s *my* adventure this summer.

My kids pull her to where they’re sitting and looking at each bag’s goodies. They sling their arms around her neck, hugging and thanking her. The sight of them with her always warms a part of me deep inside, the way they love her and the way she makes them feel.

She tells them, “My dad used to make these for me all the time. Usually, more fishing themed than anything, but it always had me looking forward to our summer plans. We’re going to have so much fun, you guys.”

After a few minutes, and once they remember there’s a whole party in their honor in full swing, Miles strolls over to me, asking, “Dad, please, please, please, can you jump with us for a little bit?”

Miles grabs my arm and starts pulling me. “Sure.” I doubt it would have mattered if my answer was no, as he’s on a mission to get everyone in that bounce house. I smile back at Grace and mouth, “thank you.” She smiles back at me, and I watch as she and Benny walk to the outdoor bar for a drink.

“That was a pretty cool gift for you guys,” I say as Sammy and I bounce high. Miles is lying flat on the blown-up ground,

waiting to catch the bounce just right so he can start flying like popcorn popping.

“Gracie is the best,” Sammy says. “She’s our bestie.”

“Mine too, sweetie.” I find myself smiling as I catch her laughing with Law across the yard. “And she is the best.”

“I think we should camp in the backyard when the meteor shower comes,” Miles says.

“Oh yeah?” I laugh because that means they want to camp in the backyard for almost an entire month, since that’s the length of Perseids from beginning to end. “How about we pick the night that’ll have the best visibility and that’s the night we’ll camp?”

“No, I want to camp in the backyard *all* summer,” Miles says.

“Maybe we can earn backyard camping nights?” I negotiate.

“Dad, I was supposed to tell you that the chocolate cupcakes were dead-cadent,” Sammy says as she bounces.

I laugh. “Decadent?”

“That’s what I said. Dead-cadent”

“Who said that? It’s a pretty big word for one of your buddies.”

“It was Maggie’s mom. She said to tell you they were dead-cadent and you can frost her cupcakes anytime.”

*Jesus Christ.*



## *Grace*

“THERE HAVE TO BE AT LEAST TWENTY OF OUR ATHLETES who’ll qualify this year. Between all of the snowboarding events, and then you add in alpine and cross-country. Easily twenty of whom train here and are a part of Grace’s program.”

I smile at the fact that Law considered the Sports Therapy Facility *my* program. I helped them launch it and got things off the ground and rolling, but it’s far from being mine.

“What do you think, if the Olympic team ever needed extra support, would you go?” Asher asks, sipping his drink.

Taking a sip of my margarita, I think about if I’d really consider working the Olympic Games. It was a goal at one point in my career, but goals change, especially when the job you could only dream about, literally and figuratively, ends up becoming real. “I have a really good friend that I went to school with who is a part of the Sports Medicine division for the Olympic and Paralympic Committee. She knows if she ever needed more hands, where to look.”

Jack chimes in, “Ah, but you didn’t say if you would go.”

I smile. “I don’t know. I suppose I would, as long as it didn’t interrupt what we have happening here.” With Jack now being in the Riggs family and on the board of directors for Riggs Outdoor, he knows what the Sports Therapy division is capable of doing for building the brand. “If we maintain the attention, then there’s no reason why Strutt’s couldn’t be as big of a destination for training as Park City or Colorado Springs. So, if me going to the trials or the actual Olympic games would build enough buzz for us, then I’d love the experience. Seems like a win-win.”

“You guys can’t go more than an hour without talking shop?” Sheriff Callen Muldowney says as he walks up to the circle we’re standing in.

“Hey, Sheriff,” Law says. “Need a drink?”

“Sheriff,” I start to say, but he interrupts me.



“Grace, no uniform today. It’s just Cal.”

I smile. “Okay. Cal, I couldn’t help but notice that you have a little limp. Need me to take a look at your knee?”

He smiles, and wow. Callen Muldowney has the rugged sex appeal that most people go wobbly weak for.

“Just a bad call last night. I ended up tweaking it when I was running after someone. It’ll be fine, just need to ice it.”

“I’m going to be at the gym tomorrow. I know you usually spar with Mac around the same time. Let me stretch it out for you before you do. It’ll take just a few minutes.”

“It’s not creepy at all that you know my schedule, Grace. But yeah, that sounds good.”

I look around the group and spot G coming closer. I know she’ll jump on the bandwagon if I start, so I can’t help myself when I jokingly ask, “Cal, you don’t know?”

He looks back at me questioningly.

“There’s an entire Facebook community that keeps track of your off-duty happenings.”

And like I knew she would, G chimes in. “Oh yeah, I think it’s called Callen’s Cuties or something basic like that. But yup it’s like a fan page. You might be able to score some sponsorships. Just talk to this guy.” She nods to Law. “He knows all about it. Right, Captain Thirst Trap?”

“Absolutely, baby.” Law laughs.

The look of horror on Callen’s face is priceless. “She’s kidding,” he says, almost like it’s a statement he’s trying to believe instead of a question. He looks at Asher. “They’re kidding, right?”

Asher just smiles and kisses my cheek. But before he walks away, he says, “Grace, you’ve always fit in just right with this bunch,” making me smile.

The party carries on, and I do my best not to focus my attention too often on where Michael might be. Every time I find him, it’s like he knows, and his eyes find mine. He looks

different today, a little on edge and rigid. The way he stared at Benny's hand on me when we walked in, he might as well have growled at him, it was so obvious. I can't help but smile, because I was living for it. And while I'm usually the furthest thing from a shit-stirrer, seeing a glimpse of jealousy from Michael is my own personal brand of catnip.

Everly and I talk for more than an hour about some new designs she's been trying out that she wants my opinion on. Henry gives me a few ideas for dinners to make with the kids. And I get into a heated discussion with Law about why I'd prefer a Paloma over an Old Fashioned. By the time the funnel cake truck pulls around back, and Henry starts taking orders for frozen drinks, I realize it's nearly eight-thirty.

"Gracie, will you come and jump with us?" Sammy asks, already pulling me closer to the bounce house. How they still want to jump is beyond me. "Grandpa Ash says fireworks can't start until it's very dark. And it's only a little dark."

And she's right, the sun is just setting, but because we're surrounded by mountains, it's a sheen of twilight that's draped around us. I'll never get tired of the way these mountains make me feel like there's always something bigger—that the beauty of them can be equally exciting as it is dangerous. That I'm lucky enough to see the peaks meet the sky anytime I want.

"Polaris is pretty bright tonight," Michael says from just a few feet behind me.

I lean against the inflatable house so I can unbuckle my wedges. When I have the first one off, I look up and, sure enough, the north star is out. Bright and ready.

"She's such an overachiever." I laugh.

He leans down, one knee on the grass, and pulls my foot onto his thigh. The move catches me off-guard, but it swirls the excitement that's settled within me. "Let me help."

Watching him unbuckle the strap, the warmth of his fingers, it's borderline ridiculous how the simple action of looping leather through a buckle affects me. My mind goes

back to last night and the way it felt sucking chocolate from his fingers. It turned me on so fully, that as soon as I shut my door, I couldn't stop from sliding my hand into my panties.

My mouth waters, thinking about doing it all over again. Only this time, with no interruptions. I'm overheated by his hands brushing my ankles. I'm an obsessed mess.

"I can't think of better words than incredible or beautiful. So whatever that might be, that's how you look in this dress."

"You should see what's under it."

His eyes meet mine. I didn't think before I said it. But I don't want to take it back. And I see him suck in a nose-flaring breath in response. Mouth closed, it only opens slightly as his tongue peeks out to wet his bottom lip. I follow the movement so closely, I can almost feel it dragging along my lips instead. His hand lifts to the back of his neck, but instead of rubbing it when he's stressed, he squeezes. The words I just said are left hanging in the air, and I don't think an apology is warranted, but this silence is thick. I can tell he's as shook as I am.

"Dad," Sammy says as she jumps behind us.

He laughs, because if I could guess what he's thinking, it'd be these kids are nothing short of consistent when interrupting these stolen moments lately. I can't believe I'm whispering dirty innuendos during a kindergarten graduation party. *Really classy, Grace.*

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

We turn away from each other and focus on the two kids in the bounce house.

"You have to come in and jump too. I have a BIG surprise."

But before I hoist myself in, Law comes running at full speed right past us and dives into the netted entrance of the bouncy house.

"Let's go, my little firecrackers, let's BOUNCE!" he yells.

"Uncle Law! Yessssss, go go go go!" Miles chants as his uncle mixes jumping with break-dancing.

“How drunk is he?” I lean closer to Michael to ask.

“Hard to tell. You know that he’s like this sober, too, so really, I have no idea. But I’ll thank him later because I don’t know if you noticed, but Sammy’s ‘surprise’ is now all over him.”

Law is covered in what looks like silver glitter from the back of his neck to every part of his body that’s hit the bounce house. He looks like a shimmering disco ball.

“Oh no.” I cover my mouth and laugh.

“C’mon.” Michael grabs my hand and pulls me back toward the main house.

“Wait, I left my shoes...” But the grass is soft, and the patio is clear.

“Shh,” he says, stopping. He crowds me and presses his lips to my forehead. Before he pulls back, he says, “Leave ’em. We have unfinished business. And I can’t wait any longer.” And without really absorbing what he’s saying, he moves us to the house, my hand clasped in his.

It’s not until we’re well past the sliding doors from the patio and into Asher’s immense kitchen that it registers. We’re not talking about work, or the kids.

My cheeks heat immediately.

The kitchen is bustling with servers from the catering company, and we stride past all of them. He pulls me into an oversized pantry, which sits just off the kitchen, closing the pocket doors behind him. My heartbeat feels like it’s working overtime. I can hear the pulse of it. It feels like butterflies ramming full speed inside my chest. My palms are sweaty. Every sense I can pinpoint is on high alert.

Leaning against the closed doors, his stance is wide and confident. It’s exactly how a woman wants to see a man she’s been attracted to for so long. Taking charge with a thick band of dominance radiating from his skin and dripping into the room. Within seconds, he’s turned urgency into a delectable lust. If I could taste and savor everything about this, just to give it another one of my senses, then I would.

His voice drops to a lower tone, one I don't know that I've heard before, but it lights me up. "Show me."

If I could pause and have a freakout, dancing on the ceiling type moment, this would be when it would happen. This isn't the Michael I've known, but I like it. Discovering someone new who may have been lingering just under the surface of our friendship.

His hands are slung into his pockets as his eyes rake down my body. But it's not the type of perusal to make me fidget or feel uncomfortable. No, it's the kind of canvassing that amplifies movements and accentuates every inch he sees. Every part of me, hyper-aware of his focus. It's the type of watchful gaze I've been seeking from him.

I stare back at him, trying to keep the smirk off my face, because this is exactly what I want. His attention.

He licks that bottom lip again, and I can't help but follow the movement. "I said..." He pauses, and my thighs clench with the way he's looking at me. "Show. Me."

I've never been so eager to follow an order.

I keep my eyes fixed on his and move my hands to the first layer of my dress, placing them on my thighs. Grabbing a fistful of the sheer cotton layers, I drag them up slowly until the hem of the fabric skims my hips.

"Are those for me?" he asks, staring at the sheer light blue and lace that's barely covering me.

The muffled sounds of the kitchen just outside of where we are seem irrelevant. I've zoned everything out. Except for him.

"They're for me." Because they are. I bought this for myself. "But I was hoping you'd get a glimpse of them too. Eventually."

He smiles at me. It's a break in the man who just spoke. That smile reminds me that even though we're changing who we are to each other, it doesn't erase the friend I've spent my life learning.

“Turn around.”

And while the demand surprises me, I want nothing more than to obey. I turn slowly, keeping my eyes trained on his until I’m forced to study the shelves of rice and pasta in front of me.

“Take them off.”

Heat rolls in like thunder across my skin, soft and distant at first, but as I move, it gets louder, warmer. My whole body feels flush with arousal at that small request. Nerves rush around me at the idea that, up until this point, it’s only ever been dirty words and filthy ideas. But right now, he’s going to see the most private part of me naked. I’m immune to any hesitation trying to creep in, though. This is what I’ve wanted. His eyes on me. All of me.

I keep the hold on my skirt nice and high with one hand. And with the other, I slide my fingers up, hooking them along the thin strip of material at my waist. I roll it down and shimmy my legs as one side reaches my thigh. Then I repeat the same movement on the other side until it’s stretched just above my knees. I pull the thin material, and bending at the waist, I give him a full view of my pussy from behind.

“Fuck,” he says under his breath, almost as if he was unprepared for what he’s seeing.

Stepping out, I lift them off the ground.

“Show me.”

I dangle my pretty panties on my pointer finger out to the side.

As I turn back around to face him, he takes them from my grasp.

“Does me telling you what to do turn you on, Grace?”

I don’t know what to say, because fuck yeah, it does. I nod.

“Show me.”

*Oh. My. God.*

I think I know what he’s asking.

I suck in a shuddering breath, my body quivering with adrenaline. His direction echoes in my ears as I lift my skirt and widen my stance. His attention, his control, has me under some kind of trance, and I can't look away. I'm hyper aware of the sheen of sweat coating my lower back and my arousal that's dripping for him. And I know he can see it.

“Kiss me,” I pant.

He rips his eyes away from my pussy, and I watch as anxiousness flashes over his face. It's just for a moment, but what I asked threw him off and made him stutter. As quickly as it happened, it's gone, and he moves closer. Crowding me, I tilt my head back to follow him. As soon as I think he's going to brush his lips against mine, he drops to his knees. His mouth covers my bare pussy in one fluid move, making me gasp and shiver against him. Groaning, his hands wrap around my back and grip my ass to pull me farther into his mouth. The movement of his lips mimics a kiss, while his tongue explores. Teasing my clit with one, two, three, four swipes, his teeth drag over it. And then four more swipes have me ready to do whatever he demands next.

A needy moan escapes my throat when he pauses for a second, and I feel him chuckle. I smile in response, the intimacy of it feeling so good. Not just his mouth buried between my legs, but making him smile during a moment like this. Another reminder of the person I know.

He nips at my clit one last time and then dives back for another opened-mouth kiss, pulling my pussy lips and clit into his mouth. But it lasts only for another brief moment before he's backing away and standing. He adjusts the skirt of my dress back down as I stand there, shocked that he's stopped. I'm not ready to have that be the end of it.

Seeing my arousal in a path left around his mouth and on the scruff on his chin shoots a wave of excitement all the way to my toes. Seeing him messy from me. From us. I would have thought that he wouldn't be messy when it came to this.

“Wh-What are you doing?”

He takes my underwear out of his pocket, wipes his mouth, and then returns it back to his pocket. I watch, dazed, at what he just did. The reality of Michael Riggs far exceeds my fantasies. There's not a single man I've dated or hooked up with who's made me feel anything remotely close to whatever that just was. And I don't want it to be over. He couldn't be that cruel to leave me panting and practically pleading for more.

"Next time, Grace," he says, opening the pocket doors behind him. "Be more specific."

Then he smirks, no trace of the anxious man I've known for years anywhere in this space. Instead, a man who oozes a sex appeal I didn't realize he owned.

For the rest of the evening, we work our way around the party. I talk with every Riggs member about one thing or another, the entire time keeping my attention on where he might be. I don't overthink why he wouldn't kiss me when I asked. He knew what I wanted, but something stopped him from doing it. I could make a thousand guesses, but I'll enjoy this feeling. That somewhere along the way, he'd finally given in. And if that's just the start of exploring things together, then I might be in way over my head, because I'm still wet from what happened. I know he's still thinking about it too. Because his hand stays casually slung in his left pocket. And I smile wickedly because I know what's in there.





## *Michael*

IT'S BEEN AN ENTIRE WEEK SINCE I DRAGGED MY BEST FRIEND into a closet, demanded that she give me her panties, and then French kissed her pussy.

*Fucking hell, what am I doing?*

I get semi-hard any time I think about it. Which means, I've been tucking my dick into my boxers for almost seven days straight. The chafing alone should force me to stop, but I can't, because my brain just keeps looping back. She's waiting for me to lead. And I know her; she has an insane level of patience, so unless I keep this moving forward, what happened at that graduation party will just be a memory. And I'm not about to let that be the case.

I had every intention of going home and dive back into her pussy, mouth first, but my kids are massive cock-blocks. They were too high-strung after the fireworks and funnel cakes to get to bed right away. Then the rest of the week just kept moving along. Her basket of bath crap and bubbles that I ordered just sits on my counter, taunting me.

We've had plenty of lingering looks. I can't unsee her gorgeously full ass and the most inviting pussy I've ever had the pleasure of tasting. So living with her like I'm not constantly thinking about it, and then watching her walk around in cut-offs and crop tops, has me questioning my sanity. But, as soon as I think "finish what you've started," the obsessive thoughts about the lines I've crossed take over. I keep thinking that I may have created irreversible damage. We're not weird with one another, but there is this new, secret layer of our relationship that's not being acknowledged. When I watched her baking with Miles and Sammy the other night, all I could think was, *I can't ruin that*. I could never forgive myself if something I did pushed her away and took her from them.

Usually, my routines keep me feeling grounded. Steady. Every morning, weekend or not, I get up early and work out in

some capacity. Most days it's at the gym. Three of those days, my sister joins me. Two days, I usually meet Grace to climb, but then we've had to adjust that so someone is here with the kids. Instead, I'll hit the bag or spar with Mac before he kicks off his first class. But I miss climbing with her. That was our time. I wasn't sharing her with anyone, including Sammy and Miles.

I look at my watch. It's four-thirty in the morning when I step outside, taking a deep breath of the morning air. Cool through my nose and warm as I exhale out of my mouth. I like the darkness. We're all the same when it's dark. When I turn to stretch my back, I notice the lights in my garage are on. Then I hear a slap. *Slap. Slap. Slap.*

I nearly miss two steps as I move toward the noise and the light. "Shit," I mumble to myself as I roll my ankle on the bottom step. When I move closer to the sliding doors along the side, I see her. I hear her. The gasps and slaps of a shin hitting a bag every two seconds. And it twists my insides a bit. *Grace.* Using my heavy bag, a countdown clock for interval training, and wearing that damn green matching set. And all I can think about are the things she added to the list. And now, I'm instantly hard thinking about how much I want to get started on it with her.

I shake my head. *Get a grip.*

Dark Sky Communities have one very giant rule. Limit the light. My run to the ridge is always dark, since the sun doesn't peek over the mountains until after 6 a.m. For the thirty-six minutes that it took to run to the ridge before the sun broke, the only thing I thought about was that fucking green matching gym set. The tight leggings that start from her very last rib and end a few inches above her ankle. The cropped tank, that really is just a bra, hugs the curves that I'm successfully failing to not think about. Her red hair is in a mess on her head and a sweat-soaked face that was fully lost in her movements. *She's so damn beautiful.*

I don't go for a climb when I reach my typical trail, instead I count. I stretch the ankle that was pulsing from being twisted, and I remind myself that, no matter what, she's more than just

a body I've gone stupid over. She's more than just a few fantasies I've had on repeat for longer than is healthy to think about. *I hate being so damn fragile sometimes. Even more than I hate when I'm not in control.* I was all-in for this sexual exploration, and now, I'm overthinking all of it.

So before I walk back into the house, I count. Counting takes my mind away from whatever is making my thoughts unravel. It gets me to focus on something simple. Away from what might be complicated. I can get to four and start again. I can do it however many times I need. I count to four more than one hundred times to make my thoughts blur into a static noise I can ignore. I find my control. I move forward.

“Do you want me to make you something?” Her smile greets me as I untie my shoes and drop them in the mudroom. The way she's just the same Grace, it makes me second guess that the pantry moment even happened. If it weren't for the lacy blue panties I've kept in my side table like a creep, then I might start to think it was all in my head.

I need to know she's seeing me the same way I'm seeing her now, so I take off my shirt as I walk into the kitchen and use it to wipe my face and neck.

She pauses eating, her spoon midway to her mouth as she looks me over. There's satisfaction in watching her eyes rove from my chest down to my stomach. I know she's still watching as I make my way to the refrigerator.

“Why are you limping?”

“Why are you checking me out?”

She laughs. “Put your shirt back on,” she sasses, then sticks her tongue out.

“Tweaked something on my run.” I sit at the counter next to her, surveying the spread she's laid out: thick Greek yogurt, some kind of homemade granola, raspberries, and pomegranate seeds. “This bowl for me?”

“Yes.” She looks down at my ankle. “Put ice on it. If it's not better later, let me stretch it for you. You probably strained a muscle stepping the wrong way. I can try to work it out.”

“It’ll be fine,” I say, and then change the subject quickly. Her hands anywhere on me is not a smart move.

She gives me a leveling glare. “You do know what I do for a living, right? So do yourself a favor, and just listen to me.”

*I don't want to listen to what's right. I want to listen to my gut. I want to touch the little scar on her chin and tilt it toward me. I don't want to tell her that being alone with her isn't right. Even though it feels like it is.*

*“You haven't said anything,” she whispers. The quiet at night is one of the parts of Strutt's Peak that I connect with most. Like the bigness of this place needs the nighttime to mull over the day, reflect on the way it unfolded. But the silence is reminding me that we're alone in the dark. And with Grace, that's a dangerous place to be.*

*She looks down at her hands, and then back up at me. “I think you listen. You only say things when you really mean them. You're not like the guys I know or anyone else in this town. They all just like to hear the sound of their own voice sometimes. Even if what they're saying is idiotic, which a good chunk of the time, it is. You make me feel... I always want to smile around you.”*

*I think about how she livens up wherever she walks into. It's not just because she's pretty or because she's Lenny's daughter. She makes people feel good when she's talking to them. She does that for me too, which is ridiculous if anyone were to look at the age gap between us. How does a teenager, with an obvious crush, make a grown man feel more accepted?*

*Except for tonight, but that wasn't her fault. It was more the circumstance. The night was as awkward as I had thought it would be. A thirty-year-old escorting a kid to prom isn't something the teachers or other seniors had expected to see when they were planning this year's prom. The year the girl bid on a man for a date. And he went.*

*If I tell her now how being around her makes my mind calm, when it's just her, or that her summary of me feels appreciated and seen, I'd be crossing a line. I made her*

*mother a promise, and I'm not about to do anything that would break that. Or worse, lead her on.*

*As I start overthinking, her fingers test the waters of our close proximity and interrupt. They brush my knee and linger there, running a short path back and forth. I grab her wrist gently, pulling it away. She can't touch me, the same way that I can't touch her.*

*"Mid-July to mid-August is my favorite time here. Everyone I know assumes it's because I like hiking and climbing. And I do, I love it, but that's not why."*

*She looks at me, and I mean, really looks at me. Waiting for me to say more. I can get lost in the way this girl looks at me sometimes. I stare down at her wrist and hold it lightly. I want to be smart here, but I want to be kind in doing it.*

*"I like knowing when something is going to happen. If I could get a preview before things did, then I'd feel less anxious all the time." I laugh at the thought.*

*She shifts and clears her throat.*

*"I like when things feel consistent and structured. And no matter what, every year for almost four weeks straight, I can look up at the sky late at night or really early in the morning and see rocks and debris mingling just outside of our atmosphere. That idea should give me anxiety, but it does the opposite. No matter what, they're always falling. It's an expected chaos." I keep a hold of her wrist as I ask, "Did you ever watch?"*

*She shakes her head no, so I continue.*

*"A meteor shower that lasts almost thirty days, because the earth is consistent, and space is slow." I look up, reminding myself how it feels to see it. "I used to have a really hard time." I clear my throat now, trying to counter the nervousness in sharing this piece of me. But maybe she'll understand things a bit more if I do. "Making friends and organizing my feelings—I've always struggled. I'd sit out back on a blanket with my dad and we'd stargaze. It was our time, and when he told me about Perseids—that's the name of the*

*meteor shower—it just felt like even with something so big and endless like the sky, there can also be two very opposite concepts at work: a constant and a chaos.”*

*Leaning down, I stupidly brush my lips along the soft skin of her wrist. I rest my mouth there long enough to feel her pulse race for four beats. When I pull back, we both look at each other, because she’s as surprised as I am by the gesture.*

*“I know what you want this to be. But that’s not something I can give you.” Her eyes instantly turn glassy, threatening to spill over, and I panic. “I can be a constant for you, if you need it or want it. I know how big and chaotic life can feel. And I know that’s not what you want to have happen, but it’s what I can—”*

*But it doesn’t matter, not a single word of it, because she pushes her lips against mine. It knocks me back from the bumper of my jeep and into the trunk farther. Before panic and anger find their place, I’m swept up in the way her plump lips feel against mine. She cradles my lower lip with both of hers and, for the briefest second, I fall into it. I feel my pulse pounding, her hair curtain around us, her body pressed against mine. If it wasn’t for the small sigh that escaped her mouth between the lunge and her first breath, I would have been lost in it for longer.*

*I pull her hands from around me, tilt my head so our lips break apart, and rest my forehead on hers to collect my words.*

*“I needed to try,” she whispers. “I’ve felt this way about you for so long, and I heard what you said. And I want that, a friendship like that—it sounds really nice.”*

*“It’s not the kind of friendship with kissing, Grace.”*

*“I know. That’s why I did it. I needed to know what that felt like. Just once, before the rest of life happens. I didn’t want to miss the chance if this was my only one.”*

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She still hasn't gotten the ceiling painted. I would have thought after a week away, she would have gotten the landlord to at least fix the paint in that one spot.

"You still need to paint," I tell Doc, pointing up.

"You told me last time. How about you tell me how you're feeling today?"

I had no intention of talking about Grace in today's session. I've never opened up about Grace. It feels wrong to talk about her and our situation before I've even talked to her about it.

"I don't really want to discuss her."

Doc rests her arm on the chair, and then her chin on her fist as she looks at me. "So there's a *her*." She smiles.

I roll my eyes.

"This is your time, so that's okay if you'd prefer not to, but might I ask why you don't want to talk about *her*?"

"This is my time. You're right." I stare back up at the ceiling catastrophe.

Doc stays quiet. I'm usually really good in the quiet. I outpace people in silence. *Usually*.

"I feel stuck. I feel like if I talk about her with you, then it's real, but then I'm also ruining her trust, because why wouldn't I talk to her first."

"Why haven't you?"

"I can't figure out if there's just never been the right time, or if I've been avoiding it." I went in like a cocky asshole and now I'm cowering about it like I regret it. And I don't. "I don't want to call attention to what I did. We did. And then make her think that it's not us anymore." Shoving my hand through my hair, I grip the back of my neck.

"So you don't want to explore things, or you're afraid if you do, there's no going back?"

I look up, stare at the discolored ceiling again, and feel the anger start to rise at the sight of it.



“*That* question is exactly why I didn’t want to talk about her here.” I wince at the way I just spoke. I never speak when I’m even remotely close to this feeling. This anger. The sense of helplessness. The questions I can’t answer and the way not knowing something as simple as why makes me feel less. Less of a man. Less important than what someone like Grace would need.

Doc doesn’t say anything. She raises an eyebrow. A look that, if I had a mother who gave any shit about me, would likely have given. That how I just spoke was disrespectful.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“If you’d rather not talk about her here, then I understand. This is a space for you to work through things. If you’re not ready for her to be a topic, then that’s okay with me.”

“Okay—” I squeeze the pressure point between my thumb and pointer finger as hard as I can. I count to four slowly in my head, trying to slow the leg that’s been bouncing since I sat down.

“What types of things are Sammy and Miles doing this summer?” Doc asks.

“The thing is, I want to do more. With her. I want to—be intimate with her.” That’s probably the most G-rated way to put all of the things I want to do with her. “But I—” How do I tell my therapist that I’m afraid of losing her, afraid of destroying one of the few relationships I have with someone who isn’t family. That I’ve felt things for her, however inappropriate as it may have been, since she paid money to spend time with me? *Fuck*.

“Michael, I want you to recognize something good here,” she says, and it earns my attention. “You have never once talked with me about anyone who you actually wanted in this way. Any women we’ve discussed in the past have been Molly or women who have made passes at *trying* to sleep with you. That says something to me. It tells me she’s important enough to you that you’re smart to be careful with it. With her.”

I let that sit for a minute. She's right, but I'm still feeling like I'm on the cusp of ruining things with her, no matter what I do.

"Doc, but what the hell am I supposed to do?" I rake my hands through my hair.

"You're looking at this as an all-or-nothing situation. And I understand why, but maybe you could take it one moment at a time. Maybe you explore each other in this way. If it's something you started, see where it goes. But be honest with her, set her expectations. If you're not willing to label what you are to each other, feel it out. See if she would want that as well."

"Isn't that going to upset her?"

Doc sits up higher in her chair, giving thought to my question. "It's always possible. You can't control her emotions, only your own. You can, however, be open and honest with what you're thinking, set boundaries if you need them, and allow her the respect to respond and react to it."

"But what happens if she doesn't want that? If after all of it, she realizes that *I'm* not what she wants at all?"

"Then you have your answer. You move on from there, and adjust your relationship with her having that knowledge. The thing is, Michael, you're worried about all of the possible bad that could come from evolving your relationship, but I want to remind you that perhaps it might turn out differently."

"But if she leaves, I don't think I'll ever be the same."

"Maybe not, but if you really look at yourself, you'll see that you're already not the same. Whatever lines you've crossed have changed things." Doc leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "But, Michael, change is inevitable. It's up to you to choose how you want it to go."



## *Grace*

“GRACE!” BENNY YELLS FROM BEHIND THE COUNTER.

My mother will only drink her coffee black and she swears that the house blend at Brews & Books is the best. That’s typically how I feel about my iced coffee, but lately I’ve needed something sweet added. I’m lucky I have some pull here to make me off-menu specialty drinks.

“Thanks, Ben.”

“Chocolate cake iced cold brew.” He smiles as he hands it over.

“Perfection,” I tell him after I take a sip. “I’ve been in the mood for anything that tastes like chocolate frosting lately.” I shrug my shoulder and smile back.

“Have you talked to River lately?” The way he asks has me wondering if there’s something wrong.

“Why? What happened?”

“Nothing,” he says quickly, wiping the counter with a cloth. Repeatedly. Something happened. And now, I need to know. “She hasn’t called me back or texted since we all went out. I don’t know.”

“Benny! Give my daughter back,” my mother yells from over my shoulder.

I turn and glare. “Mom, one sec.”

“Go, it’s fine,” he says.

I walk back to our little set-up on the oversized couch. “That was rude, and you know it.”

She shrugs her shoulder. “He’s probably trying to get information about why River is pissed off, and I have it on good authority it’s because he’s been out with that yoga instructor who just moved into town.”

“Do I want to know how you know that?”

She tosses the last bite of her sandwich in her mouth. “Probably not. I know what’s going on with you too, by the way.”

She takes another sip of her coffee, giving me a look that immediately annoys me.

“Nope. Not talking about it. You have a tone.”

“Fine. Just make sure you know what you’re doing, Gracie.”

“See, a tone. I know what I’m doing, Ma.”

She quirks her eyebrow. The left one too, that’s the one that says, “watch it.”

“Don’t need to convince me. I know how long you’ve been in love with that man.” My eyes dart up to meet the nonchalant bomb she just dropped. “You’re not fooling me. Other people, maybe, but not me. You’ve never gotten over your crush. But I feel like I need to remind you that there’s more than just Michael involved now.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I like him, Gracie. I like him for you, I always have, but I want to remind you that there are two little kids who love you very much. They think you’re just about as bright as the sun, so handle it with care. Make sure it’s what you really want and not just fulfilling a teenage fantasy.”

While her comment pisses me off, I know it’s coming from a good place, even if her delivery sucks.

I will. I am handling it with care. Aren’t I? They are what I want. Michael and those kids.

After breakfast with my mom, I curl up on a lounge by the pool, since it’s my day off, and the kids are with Asher on his ranch. I get lost in the pages of an enemies-to-lovers, MMA fighter romance. Between the heat from the sun and steam written on these pages, it feels like I’m wrapped in a warm, coma-inducing blanket. I haven’t felt this relaxed in a while. I love spending time with Sam and Miles, but thank goodness

for grandparent time. I needed to recharge; kids are exhausting.

I don't even realize I've dozed off until I jolt awake. My book's closed on top of me, and I squint at the afternoon sun that sits lower in the sky now. I must have been out for at least an hour, my body feeling heavy and tired. I know I was dreaming about something, but I can't recall what exactly.

A tingle works its way from my neck and down my arms. I take a breath in and then close my eyes again, trying to focus on what might come.

The flash of a fog rolling into a room or closed space. I can't tell where, but it's billowing like steam. I rub my fingers together. It feels damp, like humidity. I feel a tightness around my neck. A pressure wrapping around my pulse points beneath my jawline. It squeezes slightly, and I lose a bit of oxygen, but it doesn't hurt. I feel a little light-headed, but not deprived of air. The fog and the feeling linger only for a minute, but it's enough time that I know whatever that was, it felt good. I've never felt such a rush of arousal from one of these before.

Something's coming. And it's not lost on me that I just made a very naughty list with my best friend. A list that's chock full of choices. And I've never been so eager to see what's next.

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“Jab. Cross. Hook to the head. Hook to the body. Knee. Back leg kick.”

“Mac.” I laugh, out of breath.

“Push. Ten more seconds. Get two more in. Go.”

I'm drenched in sweat, but this is one of my favorite ways to do it. There's something really damn satisfying about hitting pads. I grunt out the last round. When the buzzer beeps, I take in a few deep breaths. Holding for three seconds, and then letting it out to lower my heart rate.

“Nice job, Grace. You’ve got about five more minutes. You want to empty the tank?” I’m exhausted, but I want to push myself. I always feel better once I have. And the steam room will be a nice reward after this.

“Let’s do it.”

On my third circuit, I look up, mid-squat, and catch both Callen and Michael looking at me. And just like that, I may have had a glimpse of what kind of kink I’d like to unlock. If the universe wanted to wake me up and dare me to focus, then it’d be this moment, as I tilt out my ass and lower my legs. I smile, and they both smile back, Callen hitting Michael in the chest with his gloved right hand. They go back to sparring, and my legs continue burning, but the last thirty seconds fly by because my mind is nowhere near this workout anymore. It’s stuck on this town’s two hottest men perusing my body like it’s requested their attention.

I’m still thinking about the unexpected looks as I rinse off the workout in the gym showers. What happened in the pantry just confirmed what I had always hoped, that he wanted me. I liked being told what to do and the anticipation of not knowing what was going to happen. I wanted to obey him and be rewarded for it. But now, I’ve been waiting for him to make the next move. What if he regrets it and wants to just ignore that it ever happened?

The slamming of a door startles me, and I wipe the water from my eyes. The half wall stalls that separate the ten showers are high enough that you can’t see into the next. It offers just enough privacy, which is ideal, considering it’s an all-gender space. The water pressure is perfect after a hard session and hits my body from above and on two sides.

The beauty of The Riggs Sports facility is that it flows. It’s everything athletes could hope for when it comes to training and recovery. The physical therapy training wing connects to Mac’s gym, and the rock-climbing facility is connected to all of it through the spa-level recovery corridor. There’s been plenty of times that I’ll skip the gym and just hit the steam or infrared sauna after a long workday. I typically skip cryotherapy.

Two pairs of sandals sit outside of the steam room. I smile to myself, and stifle down the twinge of excitement.

*It was steam that I saw in my sneak peek, not fog.*

The gym was fairly empty before I hit the showers, so I can assume who might be in there. It might be the ultimate fantasy for just about anyone living in Strutt's Peak, if it's who I think.

I open the door and the steam must have just turned off, because it's thick, wet, and the visibility is minimal. I can't see clearly, but I know there are two men perched on a bench on either side of the room. My eyes adjust enough in the couple of seconds I've been in here to see that they're both bare chested, with only a towel around their waists. Callen sits back, head resting against the slick white tiles, eyes closed as he smiles.

"Gracie. Thought you might end up here."

I tighten my towel. And try to find Michael on the farthest side of the space. I can't tell if he's watching or just listening. "It's my reward after Mac puts me through the paces." I sit closer to Callen and rest my head back, mimicking him. Closing my eyes, I breathe in the warm, damp air. When I exhale, I can feel my shoulders relax and my neck loosen almost immediately.

I ask Callen, "How's that limp from last week? Any better?"

"I thought it was my knee at first, but the pain is a bit higher in my quad. It's probably just strained. I've been using heat." He opens his eyes and meets my eyes to smile at me. "Thanks for asking."

"May I?" I gesture to his thigh.

"I'll be fine," he says, inching himself to sit up higher.

"You will, yes. But you have one of the most sought-after sports therapists in Colorado asking you if she can take a look. And stubborn never looks good, Cal. Even on a man like you."



Michael snorts a laugh at that remark. “She has you there, Cal. If Grace was asking me,” he pauses, and that pause has me looking over to him, “I’d let her put her hands on me.”

I try to stifle the smile that his words bring.

Moving in a bit closer to Callen, I put pressure above his knee. I run the webbing between my thumb and pointer finger from his knee up toward the middle of his quad. He’s a built guy, so his muscled thighs are strong, but I can feel the strain. It’s practically a knot. He winces when I apply additional pressure.

“I have some stretches I can show you. You can also use a foam roller to work it out, but you should use a compression wrap on it while you’re working and moving. And if you’re working out, the heat is great for soothing everything else, but you should use cryotherapy for this issue. It’s here for that. Anyone on my team can get you set up for it. Mac too.”

“It feels better than it did a week ago.”

“That’s good. But you’re not in your twenties anymore, so start treating your body with extra care, especially when you’re injured.” I smile at him, realizing that came out a bit harsher than necessary. It’s the tone I take with my athletes, but it shouldn’t be with my friends.

The steam is thinner now, and I can see Michael more clearly as I look back over to him, checking in on his reaction to this. Hair wet, the humidity curling the longer pieces. It reminds me of the first time I saw him, which also feels like a lifetime ago now. Arms resting on the curve of the wall behind him, lounging with confidence, even as water and sweat drip down his chest. And oh yes, I can’t help but appreciate the way he takes up the space.

“And my guess is that it’s just a strain. If you do the things I mentioned, you probably don’t need an MRI, but if that pain moves or doesn’t dissipate in the next week, I want you to get one.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He laughs. Looking down at my hands as they glide along his outer thigh. “You can keep doing that; I’m

not going to object.” Then he leans in a little closer and whispers, “But if you do, it’s very possible I’m going to be arresting Michael for assaulting an officer.”

I look back to Michael again, and he hasn’t moved. Sitting there like he owns that side of the steam room. His legs are spread enough that a side of his towel shows off his left thigh, just high enough that I’m reminded how little we’re all wearing.

“He’s right,” Michael says, his tone deeper.

I run my hand in the same motion, continuing what I had started. “I’ve never been interested in limiting myself for fear of what someone else *might* do.”

Callen snorts a laugh. Michael flicks his gaze to him. “Now might be a good time for you to leave, Cal.”

My best friend might just punish me for that. *One can only hope.*

I stop my hands and pull them from his thigh, back to resting on the wet bench on either side of where I sit.

Callen gets up. “Grace, be good.”

“Not sure that’s on my list today, Cal.”

I hear Michael make a noise and see his smirk.

Callen smiles and shakes his head as he opens the steam room door. On his way out, he mumbles, “‘Bout damn time.”

The steam pops on and the hiss of it replaces the silence. The excitement and nervousness of being in here with him mixes with the heat of the space, and I feel light-headed.

I try to mimic his casual confidence and stare right back at his handsome face. Watching a drip of water track from his neck down to his chest, I get lost in the bit of hair that’s there. If it followed its same path, it would have run down his abs and directly into the tucked towel that rests on his hips.

When I find his eyes on me, I realize there’s no trace of my friend right now. Just the man who pulled me into that pantry a week ago and stripped me of my underwear. The urge to

misbehave; no, more than that, *the need* pulses through me. We've already crossed lines, and now, I want to roll around in what's on the other side.

So I bite my lip and borrow his words.

“Show me.”



## *Michael*

MY COCK TWITCHES AT HER WORDS. REPEATING WHAT I ASKED of her. One of the many mistakes people make about Grace is assuming that because she's kind, she's also a pushover. She's very much the opposite. She'll tell you how it is, but she does it with tact. That's why I'm not surprised she's asking for what she wants. She always has. I've always been the one to set the tone of stifling what she wanted a long time ago. Now, she's waited long enough.

She licks her rosy lips. They stand out from the white walls, towels, and steam. The thought of them wrapped around me has me so hard that my dick lunges under the towel. Her eyes flare at the movement and she looks back up at me. I undo the tucked towel and widen my legs. I might as well give the girl what she wants. My cock juts out, pointing at exactly what it craves, and then flicks back toward my lower stomach.

“Like what you see?”

As a smile curls her lips, her eyes meet mine for only a few seconds before they move back to my cock. I have my imperfections, but the size of my cock and all of the filthy things I'd like to do to her with it isn't one of them right now. Seeing her turned on by my body makes me feel powerful. It reminds me that I've been worrying over something that I have no control over. This energy between us, the way she pulls me to her, it's owned me for a long time. Now we just get to enjoy another layer of it. And I'm ready for it. Seeing her hands on Cal, no matter how platonic it may have been, I didn't like it. I was ready to haul him out of here the second she rubbed her hands higher than his knee.

“Tell me what you want, Grace.”

She clears her throat. “Touch yourself. I want to see you stroke—”

“My cock.”

She smiles again, her skin red and wet. “Yeah. I want to see how you touch your cock. I want to see what you like.”

I groan at her words. Seeing her in her barely-there towel, asking for what she wants. We’re so fucking far over the lines of friendship, and I can’t think of a single reason to move back and not run forward with her any longer.

So I cup my balls, give them a little tug with my left hand, and then with my right, pull at the tip of my cock. I swipe my thumb through the arousal that so eagerly waits on the slit, and then I drag it around the head. I’m already so damn hard and sensitive that I have to take a deep breath to get a hold of myself.

She pulls her towel down, and her beautiful chest is bare to me. Confidence bellows off of her like the damn steam in this room. And it’s sexy as hell. I’ve spent far too much time fantasizing about her chest. Any type of cleavage or hardened nipples over the past few years, you bet your ass I’ve noticed. But seeing them in full view is making my mouth water. I need to taste them. I want to suck so hard, and then bite each of her pretty rosy nipples. I groan at the thought of holding back anymore.

The curve of each and the way they heave up and down with her breaths make me wonder how much will fit in my mouth. My cock aches as I squeeze, dragging my fist up and down. “Fuck, Grace, those are more incredible than I imagined.”

She plucks and pulls her nipples with each hand and a small moan escapes from her parted lips. I want to hear it again, only this time louder.

“Let me see you tease your pussy.”

She drags her eyes away from my cock and up to my face. Maybe surprised at my tone, or maybe because nobody has ever told her all of the naughty things that she deserves to hear. I’m starved now to hear what she sounds like when she comes. But before that, I want to see how eager she is. How wide she’ll spread for me, how she’ll arch into my mouth when I scrape her tits with my teeth. I want to feel her thighs shake as

she waits for my tongue, then my fingers, and then finally as my cock to sinks into her cunt.

Sitting up, she moves herself closer to the edge of the bench, and like the dirty fucking girl I was hoping she'd be, she lifts one foot off the ground and perches it along the edge of where she sits, opening herself up to me entirely.

I groan as I pump myself harder, faster. "Spread your lips, let me see your clit."

She obeys, and it's so fucking pretty. Pink and already glistening wet.

She sounds out of breath when she demands, "What are you thinking?"

I take all of her in, every inch on display for me.

When I don't answer her question, she says it again, "Tell me what you're thinking, Mister."

And there it is, that damn nickname. My cock weeps, and I feel my orgasm just waiting off stage.

"I want to spit on that beautiful pussy. Get her nice and wet for me, and then sink my fingers inside. I want to feel how deep you can take them before I start to fuck them in and out of you. I want to make you so wet that you soak my palm. And then I want to watch her stretch as I give you a third finger. I want to hear you moan my name as I do it. I need to hear you beg for more. I need to know you can take me how I want you."

And like the good girl she is, she takes my prompt and asks, "How do you want me?"

"Say that again."

She can't help but smile at the request. She knows that what she says is affecting me the same way my words do her. Biting her plump bottom lip, she repeats the question. "How do you want me?"

I squeeze my cock harder and pump myself faster.

“Rough. Hard. But slow, so I can savor how tight your pussy will grip me. I want to punish her so she doesn’t remember anyone before me. I have no interest in being gentle, Grace. I want to see how much you can take. How much I have to hold back.” I pump my fist more slowly now, keeping pace with the way she still plucks her nipple. “Fuck. The things I want to do to your body...”

I lick my upper lip, tasting salty water. A mix of steam and sweat. I’m dripping, and the sight of droplets running down her body is only adding to how sexy this entire exchange has become. I’ve fantasized about her plenty, but never like this. Never as good as this. And I haven’t even touched her yet.

I don’t want to think about how long we’ve been in here. Time, numbers, counting, none of that has a place here. Hell, I don’t want to think about anything other than the way her body is practically calling to me.

But when I see her face flushed a deeper red and her skin soaked, I realize how long we’ve been in here now. I don’t want either one of us passing out before we get our fill of the other.

“I’m not even close to being done with you, but we need to get out of here,” I rasp out. She smiles at me, and it’s then that I realize, she’s definitely overheated. My towel is soaked beneath me, so I move toward the exit for the fresh ones from outside. When I open the door, I quickly grab two, but I also catch sight of three distractions who aren’t going to allow us to ignore them and finish what we’ve started.

I pull her up from the bench. “Arms up.”

She lifts her arms as she stands so I can wrap the towel around her and drape it so it’ll stay closed. She doesn’t move as I wrap my towel around my waist, trying to tuck my dick up so that it’s not so obvious.

“There are two women and my brother out there,” I say.

Her eyes widen. “Which brother?”

“Law.”



I grab her chin lightly with two fingers and tilt her toward me. “We’re not done here. I plan to finish this at home.”

She nods yes, eyes searching for more details. But right now, I’m just reacting. My only plan is to not let this slip away. There’s no going back now, only forward. So I pull her chin closer and brush my lips lightly against hers. I pull away before she can even kiss me back. If I linger and let her lips meet mine, if I taste her tongue, or touch her in any other way, we’ll never leave this space. If I kiss her the way she deserves, then I’d be shoving these towels clean off within seconds, and then fucking her senseless in here, with an audience just a few feet away.

“Let’s go,” I whisper, pulling her behind me. When the cool air hits, it almost hurts to breathe it in. Before the door to the steam room closes behind us, Law is calling me.

He must not see Grace at first, because he says, “Michael, I want you to meet two new friends. They’re in town from—” he cuts himself off. He looks down at my hand that’s still grasping hers and, for whatever reason, one that I don’t understand, I drop it. As if that would erase him noticing. I don’t know why I would care.

“Grace, you went into the steam room without me?” he jokes.

“Your workouts take too long,” she says as she walks past me, looking over her shoulder, back toward me, I hear, “I don’t like to be left waiting.” And I can’t tell if that comment is directed at me or him, but now I feel like shit for being so quick to drop her hand. When she brushes past the girls who stand there witnessing the exchange, she says, “Hi, girls.” Pausing, she looks back at me and then adds, “That tall one is mine. Hands off.”

Law throws his fist in front of his mouth with a laugh. We both watch her walk away and disappear through the double doors to the changing room. “Well, fuck me running. I think little Gracie McKenna just pissed on your leg.”

“There’s something wrong with you.”

The two women laugh.

“There’s glitter behind your ear.” I flick it as I move toward my gym bag.

He swipes at his hair. “Dammit. Everything I own has glitter on it now.”

I smile. Serves his dumbass right.

He levels me with his signature glare of annoyance. “How are you not running after that? Jesus Christ, what I wouldn’t give for someone to claim my ass like that.”

I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Not like—not that like that.” He puts his hands on his hips and tilts his head to the side to really think about it. “Well, maybe. Could be fun, dominated by a woman. Whatever, you fucker. It’s not about me right now,” he shouts. Then he wiggles his brows and says, “Need me to take the kids tonight while you play with their nanny?”

I don’t even acknowledge his joke, because the kids are already going to be staying at my dad’s. There’s only one thing I want, and I’m not going to overthink any of it, because she just called me hers.



## *Grace*

I'VE NEVER CHUGGED SO MUCH WATER IN ALL OF MY LIFE. MY face is still pink when I whip my bag off my shoulder and shed my shirt. I have no idea how I got this sports bra back on so fast with the damp state of my body. I had to get out of there. What had just happened was written all over my face, and I wasn't about to have it be called out by Law.

“Oh my gosh.” I cover my eyes, flustered and so turned on when I replay it all in my mind. I barely remember the drive home. The demands that came out of my mouth. It felt so good to ask for what I wanted and to hear what Michael saw and wanted from me.

And holy hell, his body. I've seen it at least every summer swimming at the hot springs. I've watched him climb thousands of times, but this was different. I've never seen the entire package. I'm going to send up a little salute to the universe because I was not expecting anything remotely close to what I saw. And I knew there was a bulge. It would have been a damn shame if he was on the average-to-small side. A lot can be done with average and even average-small, but nope, genetics or the anatomy lottery was kind to that man. He must have been at the front of the line on sizing day. Why does that pick up my pulse rate? All I keep hearing is that sound clip that just plays “dick, dick, dick, dick, dick” on echo.

I laugh. “Okay, yup. Just a normal freakout about the hottest dirty talk I've ever experienced.” That was my best friend. The guy who just promised to do delicious things to me while he stroked his glorious cock in front of me.

I *need* more. It's no longer just a want. “Fuck it,” I say to myself. I'm not about to overthink anymore.

I catch my reflection in the windows to the backyard, pointing at myself. “You're doing this. Get it together.” I look like a hot mess. And I need to look like, or at least feel like, a goddess in less than fifteen if he's on his way home. Maybe I should stroll out of his bathroom in a towel. He seems to be a

fan of those. But I walk by a pile of folded clothes and have a better idea. “Perfect.” I snag one of Michael’s white tanks.

A shower should set me right. I eye the gorgeous tub in the corner of his master bath. And then see the basket of oils, bubbles, and bombs sitting like the most perfect invitation of relaxation on the vanity. “I will spend time with you soon, you gorgeous thing.” But right now, I need to be quick. I take the fastest shower. I skip washing my hair, but I use body wash in the first round and an exfoliator scrub in the second. Any bits that are going to be licked need to be clean and smooth. I take the last minute to run my razor where I need a smidge of clean-up too.

As I step out of the shower and up to the vanity, I hear the garage close. My stomach does a flip. He’s home. I quickly brush my teeth, then run the comb through my hair, slap on some lotion as fast as possible, and toss on his white tank-style undershirt, sans bra, along with a pair of my jeans. I figure, if he’s re-thought what happened in the steam room, then I’m dressed and ready for a letdown just in case. Or, if he wants to go full steam ahead, like I do, then my tits are very obviously front and center in his undershirt.

*Please, please, let it be full steam ahead.*

I go downstairs and see Michael with a couple of bags piled on the counter next to his gym bag.

“What took you so long?” I ask as I come into the kitchen.

With his back to me, he says, “Miles’s left Mr. Bunny in my car, and I had to drop it off at my dad’s so he’d actually sleep there tonight, and not call me at midnight to pick him up. And then thought I should stop and...get a few things at the store.”

I walk closer to see what he’s unpacking, but when he looks up, he does a double-take and pauses mid-movement. His full attention on me feels so damn incredible. The way he looks at me is better than any kind of high I’ve ever felt. He drags his gaze along my body from the floor to my face, and the look leaves a cool tingle in its wake, like a sinful promise along my skin.

He licks his lips and then looks down at the counter. And it feels like he's just made a decision. So instead of saying anything, he drops the box on the counter and stalks over to me. Fast and with intent, and making my breath catch in my throat. In what has to be five or six strides, he's in my space, crowding me. I move backward, not because I'm scared, but from the momentum. His hand comes forward and cuffs around my neck. The grip feels like a guide, a possessive, alpha move from a man who I've only ever known to be kind. My back hits the wall and his mouth hovers right in front of my lips.

"You're wearing my shirt," he says, leaning into me, so close that his lips brush the shell of my ear.

The gravel of his voice hits me so hard that my back straightens to keep my knees from buckling. Then he pulls back just an inch so that he can focus on my face. "I don't remember giving you permission to do that, Grace."

"You didn't," I say back, almost panting at his proximity. His fingers pulse slightly around my neck, like an involuntary flex, but they don't hurt. They remain fastened there, and I welcome the touch to stay. "I took what I wanted. You planning to do the same?"

He smiles, and a small chuckle escapes. "You better fucking believe it, baby."

Moving quickly, he surprises me by licking my lower lip. A quick swipe that gives him the briefest taste. I watch him battle with himself, because I can feel the adrenaline radiating off of him. He's trying to tell himself that this is okay. That what happens next won't change anything. But we both know that's the biggest lie of all. This is going to change everything.

The one thing he never planned on, or maybe never thought was possible, is that I've never wanted anyone or anything more than him. That perhaps my crush on him faded over all this time. But it evolved and turned infatuation into respect, and want into an aching desire.

"If I hurt you..." He looks in my eyes pleadingly, as if that's at the core of his internal conflict. He looks down my

body, the seriousness of those words faltering for just a second when he takes in the way my nipples are straining against the ribbed cotton of his shirt. The brush of the material is so minor, but with every sense on edge, it feels luxuriously exquisite.

“You won’t,” I reply. His hand around my throat flexes again. The pressure of it feels possessive and the feeling of submitting to it is thrilling. “The same way I won’t hurt you.”

His eyes squeeze shut. Like he’s been waiting for that promise.

When his eyes open, they roam around my body the same way his other hand grazes down to the tips of my breasts, where my nipples are poking through the shirt. He cups one and squeezes, his other hand never leaving my throat. Both of us are panting shared air, knowing this isn’t going to be sweet or sensual. No, this is what happens when you let water simmer for too long, it doesn’t boil over, it evaporates, then the pot overheats and, eventually, it explodes.

Tilting his head down, he bites my nipple through the shirt. The surprise of it, the sting, makes me jump, and forces a small scream to escape.

He looks back at me and smiles, a knowing, devilish smile that just promised me things I can’t wait for.

I wordlessly accept as I mirror that smirk.

He opens his mouth and practically growls as he sucks and pulls my breast into his mouth, soaking the shirt with his tongue and lips. His other hand moves to the waist of my pants. And the urgency of it, like he can’t rid these clothes from my body fast enough, has me under a spell. I comply with every movement, but I don’t help. I want him to tear all of this off of me, watching his muscles flex as he does. His fingers find the button and pops it open, tugging the material down my thighs with one hard jerk. My white sheer thong going with it. He flattens his palm against me, making me shudder at the brief touch of relief, as his middle finger explores between my legs, and he glides so effortlessly through my already slick lips. Pushing through the arousal that

his words, his movements and closeness have done to me. I'm so wet that it's started to drip down my inner thighs.

"I've barely even kissed you and you're already soaked for me." He leans back and removes his hand from my neck, the loss of his grip on me sobering me slightly. I want it back. Lifting his shirt with his now free hand, he tugs it over his head.

I watch as his fingers glide between my legs. "I want to kiss you here again." He looks at me, meeting my eyes.

I lick my lips and nod almost pleadingly.

This sight of him is intoxicating. The way he gazes between my legs, watching as his fingers slide around the edges of my pussy. They never touch exactly where I want. It's a tease, and I'm starting to writhe, needing more.

"Please," I beg breathlessly. And the request makes that smile appear again. But instead of diving into me with his mouth or his fingers, he stands up fast and pushes his body into mine. He frames my face with both hands and presses his thumb across my bottom lip, dragging my arousal along with it. I can't help myself and peek my tongue out to taste. Just for a moment, but the move makes his lips quirk into a devious smirk.

"That's mine to taste," he says as he drags his thumb back again. "Do you like that? Tasting the way I excite you?"

I hum in response. It's all I'm capable of.

His thumb continues to move back and forth slowly across my lower lip.

"The last time I felt these lips... it's all I thought about. For weeks. Months, even."

But I don't think about what he's saying, because a moment later, his lips finally take mine. And that's what they do, they completely steal my breath. Seize me. Everything drops from my mind. Every worry or overthought. He takes my mouth with urgency, like he can't possibly hold back any longer. Tilting my head, his fingers bury in my still wet hair, so he can move me exactly where he wants. His lips brush my



lower lip, capturing it and sucking slightly until he slides his tongue in to find mine. What started as urgent and forceful has evolved into a rhythm that makes my hips roll forward.

God, kissing him isn't some kind of triumph, or win. It's more like validation. The feeling of finally being rewarded for what I've known for my entire life. His body, his lips, the way he moans as his tongue circles mine. I'm lost in it. And if I had to choose, I'd wait this long all over again in order to experience it exactly the same way.

"Dammit, your mouth is so beautiful," he says in a whisper. "Tell me you feel that too, that it's not just me that feels this."

"I feel it too," I whisper. I've always felt it. But never as completely as this.

He lifts me fast. Both hands wrap under my bare thighs and lift. I hook them around his waist as I drape my arms around his neck. He starts moving us toward the stairs, and I kiss right below his ear, where his beard meets soft skin. And because my lips don't feel like enough, and I want more, I nip at the spot. It's something animalistic that's urging me to take as much as I can from him.

"Am I too late?" he asks.

I lean back, because I don't understand the question at first. When we lock eyes again, I realize that the question wasn't flirtatious. It was laced with a bigger feeling. A worry.

"I know you're turned on, and that you want me. Fuck, I can feel how much you want me. But tell me that this is more for you. That I'm not too late for it to be more. That it's bigger than just exploring or stupid friends with benefits."

I bite my lip at the frustration in his last words, like if anyone had called what we have "friends with benefits," he would lay them out. He fills the silence when I don't respond, too enamored by what he's saying. "You can still change your mind, Grace. If you feel like this is all too little, too late. We can try to forget about this, and I'll go back to pretending like I don't want to fuck the friendship right out of you."

Oh, God.

He's all in. And my nerves should be kicking in, but they don't. I would never tell him to stop.

He looks at me with such need that it pulls the playfulness away. He's serious about where we go next, and he wants me to know it. He leans forward, lightly dragging his nose across my chin, nuzzling himself against my skin. The intimacy and vulnerability of it has me staying speechless.

"But you tell me right now, Grace. Because I'm barely holding on as it is, and once I have you, that's it. You're mine after that."

I move my arms and glide my hands along his jawline. Tipping his attention up, away from the nerves whirling around him, I pull his lips back to where they belong. I kiss him with everything I have. My lips and tongue pour my feelings into him, like I'm feeding a starved man the most delicious meal of his life. My arms wrap tighter around his neck and shoulders while his grip winds tighter around my waist and ribs in response. When I lean back and finally find my words, I say, "You haven't been paying attention." His eyebrows furrow slightly, waiting for more. "I've been yours for a long time. And you've been mine. Paid for you, and everything."

He smiles, and I don't miss the way his chest exhales against mine.

Time to play.

"The time it took you to get here doesn't matter anymore."

I lean to the side and lick up the column of his throat. Just a small patch and glide my teeth along the same spot.

He barks out a laugh.

"Now, I need to find out if I'm going to finally get my money's worth, or else I'm asking for a refund—" And I can't say anything else because, in the next second, my ass hits the carpet on the stairs. I can't help but laugh.

If I didn't know him better, I would have assumed that he tripped or stumbled, but Michael lifts pretty decent weight, and I know he'd never drop me.

“The only thing you'll be asking for is for me to make you come again, because once I'm done tasting you, and showing you exactly how men are supposed to take care of their women, you're going to come all over my cock. And I'm going to lick up whatever is left until you're shaking and yelling my name.”

Holy shit. I've never heard anyone talk like that before.

“Tell me more,” I prompt and bite my lip, hoping it's not too much. To be so greedy and just want more of whatever he wants to give me.

He moves down a step and pushes my knees apart. The way he looks between my thighs while he licks his lips? Let's just say, it's now a bookmarked fantasy—the attention, the anticipation of it. It's impossible that I'd ever let myself forget this. “I've been starving for you, Grace.”

I rest my head back on the step above my shoulders. With my ass perched on the edge of another, he leans into me, dragging his face along my thighs and right into my pussy. The scruff from his overgrown facial hair adds to the sensation. The warmth of his breath makes me buck towards him. I moan at the idea that he's just rubbed his nose and mouth along my clit with no other plan than to feel me, smell me, and tease me as a consequence of it. It's fucking primal.

“You better hold on to something, because I'm going to eat this pussy until we're both convinced that it's mine.”

Another small laugh escapes me. It's an awful knee-jerk reaction to everything that's happening. He moves back to look up at me and smiles. “Dirty talk too dirty for you, Grace?”

“No. It's not. Oh god, I laugh when I'm excited. Don't stop. Don't ever—” I say, but he shuts me up when he flattens his tongue and drags it up from my ass to my clit. The man swipes my entire core. Every private part of me and punctuates

it with a growl. Like I'm the most satisfying thing he's ever had on his tongue.

"Michael," I moan his name on an exhale.

His only response is to throw my knees wider, making more space for his broad shoulders to move in closer. He works my clit like he's had lessons in oral foreplay—a slow drawl as if he has all of the patience in the world. I don't pay attention to any more of the details, only the repercussions of his choices—the wetness, the warmth, the pressure. I'm quickly feeling an orgasm building. That luscious flutter that starts to warm my skin.

If he had kept with that same rhythm, it would have gotten me there. It wouldn't have been much longer, but that's not what happens. I scream when I feel and hear: *slap*.

He slaps my pussy, hard, and then drives one finger into me slowly, in and out. Then he slaps it again, this time hitting my clit with unreal precision. It's my undoing. I fall over an edge of pure eroticism, and it overtakes my body. I practically choke on it. With that one punishing slap and the intrusion of a single finger, I pulse around him. The scream that pierces the moment shocks me and bellows lower into a long, drawn-out moan. My thighs twitch and pussy pulses all of their own volition.

"So damn pretty," he says, and then locks his lips around my pussy. Lapping up the cum that he's earned.

I smile drunkenly with my eyes peeking open, watching him. His mouth is still working as his eyes keep hold of mine. My thighs are still randomly shaking with what I assume is an aftershock.

He rears back. "Do I need to carry you to bed?"

"Maybe?" I laugh. "I didn't want to interrupt. You seem really hard at work down there."

"This isn't work. It's mine now. And I take care of what's mine."

*And, I'm done.*

Because I can't figure out what to do with a statement like that, other than stow it away to meticulously replay when I'm alone. I quickly try to break the thickness in the air and look at my thighs. "I'm not sure why my legs are still shaking."

But instead of laughing with me, he stands up. His hard cock straining against the seam of his sweatpants. He takes my hand and helps me stand, but it's only for a second, because he drives his shoulders into my hips and lifts me up.

"Michael! Don't drop me. Oh my God, you're going to throw out your back."

He flicks up the barely-there hem of his shirt and bites my ass. Hard enough that it'll bruise, but I love it. "Oh, please do that again," I moan—this harsh and aggressive part of him does it for me.

"You like when I leave marks on you, baby?"

We move quickly down the hall and into his master bedroom. He guides me down his body so that my feet hit the floor gently.

"I think I'd like anything you do to me," I say honestly.

I see worry flash on his face. "Don't say that."

As I move my hands to the waistband of his pants, he sucks in a quick breath. Leaning in to kiss me again, his hands frame my face and fingers lace into my hair. The way he holds me like this is like a lullaby. Soothing and fluid. His lips brush mine. His tongue, warm and skilled, dances with mine. I get lost in kissing him. Hearing him moan as I draw his tongue into my mouth, it's what gives me the confidence I need to demand more.

"Let me taste you now."

He groans. "Fuck. Grace, I don't know how to be gentle here. I don't want to..."

But I don't listen. I keep my path down to the floor and settle on my knees. "If you only knew how much I've thought of doing this to you. Slow, gentle, hard, punishing, I'll take it."

You won't hurt me. Now take what you want, Michael, because I want it too."

I drag the waist of his pants down with both hands, his gorgeous cock springing free. It's so hard that it hits him in the stomach. His stance widens, and his confidence is a turn-on by itself. He pulls his shirt over his head, and I know he's as eager as I am for this.

"Stick out your tongue," he demands.

Cupping his balls, he tugs with one hand while the other pumps his cock once before he taps it, one, two, three, four times on my tongue. He moans. "Wrap those pretty lips around me."

I close my mouth around him and let him move himself in and out slowly. The way he's watching, it's like he's savoring the sight and sound of everything I do. I can't help but moan around him.

He holds his cock at its base and pushes himself into my mouth deeper, testing how far he can go. I suck and moan again at the taste of him dripping onto my tongue. When he pushes in farther, I gag slightly. The motion breaks his trance, and he pulls out completely, but I'm not fazed.

So I wrap one hand around him at the base and the other on his hip. "Don't pull away from me. I want to see how much of your cock will fit in my mouth and how loudly I can make you moan when you're spilling down my throat."

He groans, whispering, "Fuck," through his clenched teeth.

"Open your mouth, my dirty fucking girl," he says as he gathers my hair in his hand.

And I obey. Overeager and ready, I stick my tongue out and wait to fit him fully in my mouth.

"You look so pretty on your knees for me, Grace," he says while he presses his hip forward. I've never been so eager to make anyone feel good like this, but the sight of him above me, knowing he's going to transfer all of his control to me, it's sexy and empowering. He rubs the underside of his cock along my tongue, pushing it farther.

“You tell me if it’s too much. Any of this. You hear me?”

And I nod, looking up at him, granting permission for him to fuck my mouth. I work the base of him with one hand while I grab his ass with the other, guiding him forward. I want to see him fall apart, and I think I understand how I can make him do that. I wrap my lips around him and greet the thrusting movements that he’s started. I gag again as he hits the back of my throat. My eyes water, but I want more. I let him do it again, only I relax and breathe this time. I work him over so well that his breathing becomes erratic. Anything coherent is a whispered “fuck” or “yes,” with a moan following. The saltiness of him and the way he grips my hair, it’s a sensation that has my pussy pulsing for more.

“Your lips stretched around me like this is making me so hard it hurts. So goddamn perfect,” he whispers. His movements slow, but the intensity of it doubles as he drags his cock out of my mouth, my hand going with it. Then he thrusts it back in with a punch. My eyes water, and I breathe through it, swallowing as he holds himself there. He groans and sucks air in through his teeth. “That’s it, swallow. You can do it. Take all of it.”

Never in my life have I considered sucking a man off as something I’d not only want and practically pant for, but the act alone has pushed me to the cusp of another orgasm. I only need a little more praise and maybe the swipe of his hand to push me over.

“You’re going to come for me again before I do. I’m not going to last much longer in your beautiful mouth. Such a good girl, working me so good.”

He pulls himself out of my mouth, and I smile as I suck in air. Why does it feel so powerful? Almost, eloquent. To deliver that type of pleasure for him and then be praised for it? He pulls me up, wraps his arms around me, and meets my mouth. His tongue dances with mine without caring that his cock was just there. He kisses me with affection, appreciation that warms me.

“Your taste mixed with mine is so fucking good, Grace.”

His words seize me. It's the most lewd I've been with a man before, and I realize I'm a slut for it.

Turning us toward the bed, he smiles at me as I back onto it. Only this smile isn't like the ones that singed my skin from earlier, as he used the words *cock* and *pussy* as easily as *milk* and *cookies*. It's a smile that shows me a glimpse of my friend. The man I've battled with in movie trivia and always destroy, the man I've done countless climbs alongside, the man I've witnessed fall in love with two little strangers who now call him "Dad." *That* man peeks through. That charming warmth that only a few people have ever experienced. It's the briefest peek of the man I know. And as his eyes roam my body while I sprawl onto the bed, that man disappears and this new one, who uses the word *fuck* like a promise and licks pussy like a starved man, is back. Eager and hungry. I'm a fan of this one too.

"Please," I plead, unsure even what I'm so politely asking for.

His fingers find my clit immediately. No fumble or search party, it's rather remarkable. As his thumb draws small circles, two fingers plunge into me with ease. The come-hither motion strokes me to an instant brink.

"Please what? Tell me what you want."

"Please show me how well you can work that huge cock." My breath hitches as his fingers fuck me faster. "I want to feel full of it. I want to come all over it."

He groans, and then captures my lips. Rolling to his back, he brings me with him so I straddle him, his cock trapped between our bodies. I'm so eager for it that I sit up and grab him by the base and rub the head along my pussy, coating it before I let it impale me. Releasing a groan, he watches where our bodies are joining with rapt attention. I gasp as I sink down slowly, my body adjusting to his size, and the stretch reminding me of my lack of sex. Or whatever it was I was doing before this, because this—this feels like what we're promised. This feels like the kind of thing movies, songs, and wars are built on.



“Fuck, you feel so good,” he grits out.

I roll my hips and he meets the movement, his fingers digging into my hips as I grind onto him. It feels so good; I’m almost angry I had to wait this long to feel him this way. His thumb finds my clit, pressing down and circling as I move above him. I can’t stop watching him. The way he moves with me, finds what I need so it feels even better.

“I want your hand back around my throat,” I say, surprising myself.

But he doesn’t think about the request, he just reacts. His hand snakes up my body, stopping briefly at my breast to grab and pluck at my nipple. It makes my body shiver as I keep my movements. As soon as his hand clears my collarbone, I’m being shifted back to the bed.

“What do you want me to do once it’s there?” he asks. His cock’s still inside of me, but he’s stopped moving, and the lack of friction makes me feel deprived and needy.

I lean up and kiss him. “I have no idea, but that’s why I like it. I want you to do what feels right to you, because it feels right to me. I want you to spank me, punish me, and make me feel things that I’ve never felt before.”

It’s as if he’s been granted permission to do everything he’s ever wanted. To me. To anyone. His hand moves to my throat. His thumb and forefinger pressed into my pulse. He squeezes gently, and then pulls his cock out of me slowly. A torturous drag that feels like a punishment. My pussy clenches, pleading for more. And that’s the plan, because he pistons just the tip into me—one, two, three, four times. But on the forth, he doesn’t pull back. Instead, he fucks himself into me. Deep. So hard that my whole body bucks up the bed.

His forehead meets mine, and he groans against my moan. Our shaking breaths dance around each other, lips sharing soft kisses that don’t match the way we’re fucking. And that only makes me wetter.

I wrap my legs tighter around his hips, holding him against me. He squeezes his fingers, only slightly, with just enough

pressure to remind me he's in control. And that reminder, with him fucking me so deeply, is enough to push me over.

“You're going to come for me when I tell you. And you're going to do it soon, because I'm almost there.”

I nod and breathe through my nose, trying to think about how I could possibly hold back what's already started to climb along my edges.

He drags his cock out again, only this time, completely. Holding his length with his free hand, he slaps it against my clit—one, two, three, and on the fourth, he thrusts back into me. The stretch of it and how deep he goes sets off a fury inside of me. A black fuzz that coats my limbs and then snakes its way to my core and erupts every sense. My mouth goes slack. I can't hold this back.

“That's it. Do what you're fucking told, and come for me.”

I suck in a breath and on the exhale, a deep moan escapes as a euphoric level of satisfaction. It billows out of me like a thick smoke around every body part from my clit to my nipples, below the pressure points that are still beneath his fingers, all the way to behind my knee, the one that was hoisted into the crook of his elbow at some point.

“Such a good girl. Listening when I tell her pussy to grip my cock.”

He fucks into me two more times with a jerking force, each thrust hitting some bonus button I never knew I had. It drags out the sensations from my orgasm. I would have thought he already came when I had. I very well could have passed out and had never known, but the deep, loud moan that starts in his throat that he tries to muffle has my eyes opening.

His forehead moves to my shoulder as he pulls out of me, feeling the loss of him instantly. When I look down, he pumps his cock only two more times before he holds his breath, quieting the sound I want so desperately to hear. He paints my stomach with cum, making a mess all over me. Then he's rubbing the tip of his cock where he came, like the sight of his cum on my skin finishes out his orgasm. I revel in it. Someone

who's clean, tidy, and always meticulous by day, has filthy sex, where he rubs his cum into me by night.

We didn't think. We chose us and nobody else. And I'm not ready to ask questions nor want answers yet. I want to stay here, dripping in the result of what we just did, and absorb the warmth of him draped over me. This moment doesn't feel like I'd imagined it would—I'm not fulfilled. I'm not complete or sated. I feel like it's awoken something else in me, something like curiosity that's morphed into a new path of discovery. One that's only just beginning. I don't want to complicate what this could mean for us, so instead I think about the way it made me feel. All I know is, I'm not ready to stop.



## *Michael*

THE DRAG OF HER FINGERS ALONG MY SCALP AND INTO MY hair has calmed every anxious thought that threatens the perimeter of my mind. I must look completely owned. I have one arm draped over her thighs as I lie face down beside her, one eye forced shut by the bed while the other gets an incredible view as I take in the slope of her gorgeous tit. The rest of my body is sprawled, half hanging off the bed. I can't move. I don't want to. We haven't spoken a word in the minutes that have passed since I fucked her and came all over her. I should get up and clean her off, but I'm so content and practically purring as her fingers roam across my scalp. I'll move in a moment.

"I think that we should do that more." Laughing lightly, she corrects her words. "Again. We should do that again, because it was—" She pauses, trying to find the words.

But I fill in the blanks in my head. Incredible, unravelling... fuck. *Everything*.

"Michael, that is the most fun I've ever had."

Okay, so I went a bit overboard. She settled on fun.

I smile and laugh out, "Ever?"

She giggles back, "Yes. Ever."

"More fun than boarding? Or fat biking? Or watching Pump Up the Volume?"

She exhales heavily. "Hell yes."

*How do I do anything other than fall in love with her at this point?*

Leaning over the bed, I swipe my boxers from the floor and then wipe up the mess we've made. I look over her body again in a dazed satisfaction. Her skin's still sticky, but the way she's gazing up at me, it doesn't seem like she cares at all. *So beautiful*. "You seem to like dirty talk."

“I like your version of dirty talk,” she says, smiling sweetly. “Such a filthy mouth, Michael.”

I’ve thought about all the things I could say to her the moment she added *dirty talk* to the list. The truth is, I didn’t hold back. It wasn’t forced. Everything I said, she pulled out of me, and I liked it. It felt freeing to say whatever I wanted and to know it turned her on even more.

I drag my finger from her collarbone to the slope and swerve of her perfect tit. Her skin feels so soft beneath my fingertip, and then her rosy-pink nipple puckers as soon as my touch moves closer. I love that her body does that for me, responds to my attention. And it turns me on instantly. By simply touching her, she’s aroused. Wet. Ready.

“I don’t want this to be a thing we did once. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this comfortable and—” She pauses, then lets out a moan that hits my cock. *Fuck*. “I’ve never felt so good in my own body.” She searches my eyes for some kind of reaction. Saying those things out loud would make her seem like the vulnerable person here, but I think it shows just the opposite. She’s the bold one. The one who doesn’t filter. She wears vulnerable moments like armor. It’s a quality I’ll never have, but absolutely respect.

I move my body closer and pull myself into her. She tangles her legs with mine. Wrapping my arms under her body, I drag my nose along her jawline. Breathing in the cocoa scent that lingers on her skin. I’ve wanted to wrap myself around her like this years ago. I’ve allowed it in small ways, but never like this. Never completely.

*“You’ve been especially tricky to find today, Mister,” she says, out of breath, as powder kicks up my back behind me. I’m relieved, maybe even happy that she found me.*

*The cold snow was finally starting to melt through my snow pants. I’ve been sitting on this short ledge for almost an hour now, watching the specks of people ski and board down the blue trail. My body still aches from what happened, and tired from a day on trails.*

*“Maybe I didn’t want to be found.”*

*She sits next me, and lifts her goggles. "Should've been more creative, then." Taking off her gloves, she starts moving around like she's hunting for something.*

*A clear bag of gummy bears drops onto my lap.*

*"Then I'll let your family know I didn't see you. But can I sit with you for a little bit before I head back down? My legs are sore from the last run. I thought for sure you were on the other side of the mountain. The red trail that follows the gondola line is such a bitch."*

*"Yeah, Kid, you can sit with me," I grumble out. Now that I hear my voice out loud, I realize I haven't spoken to anyone in a couple of days.*

*I'm not in a good place. I can at least recognize that. But I'm not processing what's happened very well.*

*"You're not okay."*

*I stay quiet. Even if I wanted to tell her what happened, I'm not permitted to do it. All of it is classified and meant to remain between only a handful of people.*

*I went to get a tattoo, and ended up leaving with the death of a man on my hands. If it happened all over again, I wouldn't have changed a thing. Well, except knowing that my sister-in-law was in potential danger. It doesn't help knowing that if I hadn't killed him, I would have been killed. Or that he was a piece of shit who murdered countless people and terrorized someone I now call family. I was in the wrong place, or right place at the wrong time. Those are the facts, but the thought of being responsible for someone else no longer living, no longer breathing, it still feels like I should be punished. That I should still feel something. But the only thing I feel is anxious. Empty, even.*

*How does anyone come out on the other side of this without feeling constant guilt, whether it's valid or not?*

*Grace digs her fingers into the bag on my lap and pulls out a small handful. "You're doing some really heavy thinking there, Mister." She runs her finger in between my eyebrows. "I know you'll be okay. You'll always be okay, Michael." Looking*

*out at the view, she pops a red and an orange gummy into her mouth. I want that to be true. But things feel chaotic, unorganized, and out of my control. I feel stuck in it. My mind anchored on what I've done.*

*"I've done something pretty terrible. Justified, but still, the thing is still terrible."*

*She looks back over at me, and I track her movements in my peripheral. She digs her hand into my bag of gummy bears again. It's the most company I've had in days. And while it wasn't invited, it's welcome. She's always welcome.*

*"Polaris is looking very bright tonight." She nudges my arm. "Don't you think?"*

*I look up at the north star. I smile, because I know what she's doing. "It is."*

*"There are three things I can always count on with total and utter certainty."*

*I shift my eyes to the side to see her. "Yeah, what's that?"*

*She lifts her chin up, toward the sky. And lifts one finger in the air. The move is light and fun, just like her. "That gorgeous ball of rocks and fire will always stay in roughly the same place. I can depend on it always being right there. Just like Perseids always showing up." She smiles, reminding me that I used the sky to help her feel better once too. She holds up her second finger. "And you, Michael, are a good man. No matter what, I know that undoubtedly."*

*I exhale slowly, her words making me want to bury my head in her lap and cry. My father isn't one to shy away from emotion; he always told us to let it pour. But the thought of crying over this makes me angry. I need to be the adult here, the one who has his shit together. I don't want her to see the parts of me that feel less than.*

*"What's the third?" I ask.*

*"Not relevant to this discussion. When you tell me about this awful thing, then I'll tell you about my third thing."*



*“Thanks for the gummy bears.” I finally shift and look at her as she stares back at me. The way she looks at me always makes me feel like a greater version of who I am. I can never understand what it is she sees, but I like her looking.*

*She leans into my side and rests her head on my shoulder. We don't say anything else for a while, we just sit. It's the first time I've ever really wanted to feel someone near me who wasn't my family. Someone who makes me feel good without looking for anything in return. I know who I am to her, which is why I can't wrap my arm around her and pull her into me. It's why I can't bury my face in her neck like I want to. I know who I have to be to her. A friend. Uncomplicated. Clear. But what I can't figure out is who she is to me.*

Her fingers drag along the edges of my hairline. It's soothing and comfortable, but it's not something I've had before. With anyone in this way. The aftercare. Giving or receiving.

“You've always been the brave one.”

Her fingers stop moving. Whatever lingering state of calm and sleepiness that started to envelop us, I've managed to push away with my words. But I need to tell her this before we do anything else. Before she puts what we've done into a category of any kind.

“You've always known what you wanted when it came to us. And you never pretended. Even when you fought and argued with people when they would claim there was more than friendship here. You knew it was what I needed, but I know it was never what you wanted. Or maybe never the *only* thing you wanted.”

I lean up on my arms so I can look at her while I tell her this. My heart is beating so fast and the adrenaline that pulsed through me earlier is returning. I draw small circles on her shoulder to calm my nerves. One, two, three, four small circles.

“I hate that you ever thought I didn't want you like this,” I say, biting back the emotions starting to surface. “I thought you would figure out at some point that you'd need more than

what I was able to give. That you'd realize I'm too old for you. That my life is too complicated. And then when you freaked out on me after climbing and told me flat-out what you were missing in your life, I knew." I blow out a breath. "I knew I couldn't let you go like that."

"So you crashed my date." She smiles.

I mirror her smirk. "So I crashed your date. But seeing you with someone else, it didn't just make me jealous as hell, it turned me on to see you that way. The same way it did for you. To see you the way I never allowed myself to."

She leans forward and kisses me. When I pull back from her lips, I can't ignore how much I want her. So I tell her. "I need you to know that whatever this is, however we move forward, I've never wanted anyone the way I want you, Grace."

She looks around my face, studying my expression, maybe even seeing under the layers of those words.

"How do you want me?" she asks, her voice so quiet, almost a whisper.

I cuff her hair behind her ear and run my thumb along her cheek.

"Every fucking way you'll let me."

She studies my mouth. A smile takes shape on her lips and works its way along her cheeks and reaches the outer corners of her eyes. And so slowly, she starts to move her body, rolling it away from me. With our legs still wrapped around each other's, the closeness mixed with her soft skin rubbing against me makes me hard again. That's when I realize she's not moving to leave. She settles on her stomach, and then tilts her ass toward me, peeking over her shoulder.

"How about like this?" I shift my body closer, her ass rubbing against my hard cock. My chest against her back and my face buried in her dark red hair, I run my nose along the back of her neck, brushing my lips along her sensitive skin there.

"And what do you want, like this?"

I want to be able to make love to her, go slow and explore all of the lines and creases that have me so fucking aroused that I already feel like I'm about to come. Her body continues moving softly beneath mine. I know that as soon as I dip my fingers down between her thighs, she'll be wet. I want to let her lead, but I'm not wired like that. It's another reason I've stayed away. I want to be rough. I like rough. I like control. No, I *need* to be in control.

"I want you to wrap my hair around your hand and pull," she says, watching me as her words pour out, making sure it's okay. She wants to play and, fuck, so do I.

Pulling away from her, I kneel, bringing her body to the same position in front of me. I move my mouth closer to her neck while my fingers comb through her long hair, gathering it into a low pony. I wind it around my fist in one fast movement and draw her back to me with a jerk. She inhales a quick breath, not expecting it.

"Like this?"

"Yes," she exhales, shivering against me.

"Tell me what else you want." I bite along her neck and shoulder, barely holding my shit together. Pleading with fate to let her ask for the things I want to do to her.

"I want you to tell me dirty things and then do them."

"Like what?"

I drag my teeth along her shoulder.

"You want to hear that my cock is so fucking hard for you that all I can think about is how much I want to punish this pussy with it?" I slide my hand in between her legs and part the lips of her pussy. Dragging my fingers up and down from her slit to her clit, I spread her arousal. "How I want to make you come and spread it all over you so I can sink my cock into your ass and claim that as mine too?"

"Oh fuck," she whispers.

"Does that turn you on? Telling you I'm going to fuck you so hard that you're going to feel it tomorrow? That I want to

break this ass in so it's ready to take me whenever I want? That the thought of making you hurt like that makes me feral?"

Before I can regret the words I'm letting pour out of my mouth, she answers. "Yes. Yes," she pants as she nods. Wrapping her hair around my fist tighter, I pull her head back so her neck and chest bow in front of her. I can see her pluck at her nipples, edging herself closer as I take what I want. I use the angle of her body in my favor, along with the state of her saturated pussy, and on my knees, I lean my body back, angling my cock right below her. I thrust it up into her hard, her moan spurring me on to do it again. So I pull out completely and the sight of her wetness coating me unleashes me fully. I need more of her. So I thrust up again, but instead of pulling myself back out, I yank her back into me by her hair and bury my cock deeper. I release her hair and hold her body flush against mine. I want to feel her skin pressed against me. I want to feel as much of her as I can.

"Has anyone ever fucked you there before?"

"No." She writhes as she answers.

"Good. Then it's mine to break in."

She moans and breathes out, "Oh God."

"Do you want that? My cock in your cunt and then your ass?"

I band my arm around her chest and play with her breast, rolling her hard nipple between my fingers. I pinch and pull, all while my cock is buried inside of her. Watching as her eyes close, her body moves exactly where I want it to.

She moans every time I add more pressure to her nipple. I move her so that she's on all fours and I'm kneeling behind her and guide her ass to rest on my thighs so she can leverage herself. When I pull my cock out slightly, I swipe our arousal with my thumb and drag it up the crack of her ass and around where I just promised.

As she pants and moans, I hold her still on my cock, rubbing my thumb along her asshole. I won't do anything

there yet, but she wants to explore, and so do I.

I pull my hand away, slapping her ass. She yelps at the unexpected move, and after a soothing rub, I do it again.

Leaning over her, my body drapes over her back. “You’re going to fuck yourself on me now. And you’re going to make yourself come with only my cock.” I lick up her neck when she moans in response.

Giving her pussy a slap next, she squeals for me. “Yes. Fuck, Michael.”

I get lost in the next span of time as she lifts her ass and does exactly as I tell her. The obedience of it shines my ego like rubbing a damn dirty penny. She bounces herself up and down, slowly at first, but the pace increases as she climbs toward her orgasm. Sweat drips down her lower back and between the crack of her cheeks. When the second drip of sweat hits the top of my cock, I decide I need more.

“You don’t come until I tell you. Understand?”

“Yes.” Her breathing is labored by the work she’s been putting in. *Such a good fucking girl.*

I let myself unravel, the knot I’ve tied myself into loosening slightly. Holding her hair again, I pull her against me and fuck her hard and fast. The sound of her ass smacking against my thighs, mixed with my grunts and the noises being fucked out of her, is the dirtiest soundtrack.

“Oh God, Michael,” she cries. “Please.”

I release her hair. I need more leverage. Pulling her arms behind her, I hold them tight as I roll my hips into her, driving moans and whimpers from her lips that I want to hear more of.

“You ready to come for me?”

She screams the word yes, holding on to whatever senses she has left.

“Grace, you wait until I say you can.”

She doesn’t say anything, only mewls. It’s a wordless plea that is going to make me spill along with her. I know I’ve

pushed her as far as I can, but I also know she hasn't allowed herself to come yet, even though her thighs quake in front of me and her pussy grips me tight.

I drag my cock out of her slowly, and then thrust into her hard, deep. "Now."

She screams in response and her pussy flutters around me with her release, pulsing around my cock and sucking the orgasm right from my control. As I spill inside of her. There are no thoughts or words, only the way her body feels wrapped around mine. The moan that erupts from me is guttural and loud. My cock pulses along with her in a sweaty mess that leaves us both panting and shaking. Limbs limp and heavy, neither one of us moves.

When the haze clears, my mind decides it's a good time to start overworking. "Did I hurt you?" I ask. Finally opening my eyes, I can only see her back and ass, cum dribbling out of her and onto the sheets. The sight of it makes me want to puff out my chest, watching the aftermath of what we just did.

"In only the best way possible," she says as she turns over to face me. A lazy smile rests on her face, eyes closed.

"You're going to be sore after that."

"So you promised."

"I didn't think." I pause, trying to figure out how to ask this. The pause has her opening her eyes to look at me.

"I don't want to do that right now," she mumbles.

"What?" I laugh.

"Think."

I run my thumb along her chin. She's always been so beautiful. I hate that I've never told her. Or let myself really see her this way.

"And I don't want you to either. I feel so good. And if you're worried, I'm on birth control, and it's been more than a while since I've been with anyone."

She presses her thumb into the dimple of my chin, her hand cupping my cheek.

“And I don’t want to know how long it’s been for you. Don’t burst my bubble of bliss with real talk.”

There hasn’t been anyone for as long as my kids have been alive, but she doesn’t need to know any of that right now. I’m going to enjoy this. Sitting up, I smile at her as she tracks my movements.

“Where are you going?”

I walk around the bed and lean over her, kissing her puffy lips. Lips that worked my cock so well. The memory of it stirs me. It’s impressive that I’d be able to feel anything in my groin so quickly after that last showing. I’m not in my twenties anymore, but apparently, with her, it doesn’t matter.

“Michael!” she yelps as I scoop her up. “Where are you moving me?”

“Shower. I’m going to clean up the mess I made of you, and then I’m going to lick your pussy better so I can fuck it again later. And then we’re going to figure out what else we can do on that list.”

She hums in my ear. “You may have ruined me for any other man.”

And all I can think is that there’s never going to be another man if I can help it.





## *Grace*

EVERY PART OF ME FEELS LIKE IT'S BEEN WORKED OVER. IS IT possible for a body to vibrate? I feel like I'm vibrating somehow. Tingles dance their way across my body as I stir awake, and just like every other time, I take measure of what comes. I see rings. Only this time, they're blue and green. And then it feels like I'm bound by my feet and hands. The sliding and tightening of rope around my ankles and wrists. And as quickly as it rolls in, the visuals and feeling disappear. When I open my eyes and look down, I expect to see marks. That's how real it feels. But when I kick the comforter away, nothing is there. I wouldn't have remembered any dreams I may have had, because my body was exhausted so, for some reason, one that I couldn't possibly guess, those two things are important.

I crack open one eye at a time. The edges of the bedroom window shades glow, which means it's at least morning if not the afternoon. My body buzzes again, and I realize it's not just me, it's my phone. When I lift it so I can see, I also notice I'm in bed alone. My phone buzzes in my hand, and I see a wall of text messages from River.

RIVER

Heard a rumor this morning.

Think you might want to know what it was...

Grace! Where the heck are you?

Okay, it's almost noon, you've stood me up for our Sunday brunch. Perhaps the rumor about THE NANNY is true then...

GRACE

What rumor?

My stomach sinks. I haven't even processed what the hell we're doing and, already, it's being gossiped about.

RIVER

Just the one where you were seen in barely a towel leaving the steam room with your EMPLOYER and lifelong crush. You better tell me what's going on right now!

GRACE

Tell Benny I said hi.

RIVER

Don't change the subject.

GRACE

Want to tell me why you're upset with him?

RIVER

Please tell me it was worth the wait at least...

I smile at the screen, thinking about how good that man made me feel last night. A shiver rolls through my body.

GRACE

More than worth it.

RIVER

Fuck yes, diva!

I stretch my arms above my head, and it reminds me how out of shape my body is when it comes to all the ways Michael had me. A green tank top and a pair of my pajama shorts are folded in a pile on the chair across the room. I smile. I know I

didn't put those there, which means, Michael did. I don't know why that makes me happy, but the small gesture does.

I'm anxious to see where he is, because if I allow myself to worry about all the ways this morning may play out, I'd probably never leave this room. I'm nervous. What if he pulls back? What if now that he's had me, he decides friends will be easier?

When I open the bedroom door, I walk past the twins' bedrooms. Both beds made and no sign of them home from Asher's house yet. As I step down the bottom flight of stairs and into the great room, I hear music playing. It gets louder as I walk toward the kitchen, realizing it's John Mayer crooning about love and verbs, and the visual that accompanies the velvety sound is my beautifully shirtless best friend cutting strawberries. He doesn't see me at first, instead he mouths the words and concentrates on cutting. He's even more handsome right now. Disheveled. Wild hair. And unrestricted. A morning after seeing him fully and experiencing a level of hunger that feels like we could never satisfy. He's different, but all the parts of him I know so well look the same.

The green eyes I dreamt about, even before I ever saw them, are a color I'm drawn to. It's why blues and greens will forever be my favorite colors. His tall stature and toned arms that, until last night, I hadn't realized would be strong enough to manhandle me. The squareness of his jaw now covered with dark scruff and those little bits of gray. His mouth usually closed in an impassive, firm line that most can't decipher if he's angry or judging. But now, as his lips move to the words, his body relaxes. He looks happy. I think I had something to do with that, and I can't help but smile. I preen at the thought. He looks like mine. I really want him to be mine.

"You done staring at me from over there? I made a decent-ish breakfast for us," he says, still cutting. He smiles at me, and then looks over his shoulder at the clock on the microwave that reads 1:10. "We can call it brunch."

When I walk around the counter, I get a full view of what he's made, and I'm impressed. "Fruit and scrambled eggs," I

say as I lean next to where he's scraping the cut berries into a bowl. The timer on the oven dings.

He pulls out a tin of muffin popovers.

"You made popovers?"

"Called Henry for an assist, but yeah. I know you like these. There's a yogurt drizzle in the fridge for them too.

I can't fight the smile that's taken over my entire face. He sees it when he turns around. Slipping the potholder off his hand, he places the tin down on the counter and smiles back. He steps in front of me and leans in, hovering in front of my mouth. "Morning," he whispers.

"Morning," I say back. My smile never leaving. How could I not be this elated? The man I've been mad for, who I just had the best sex of my life with, is now making me breakfast. *What is this life?!*

He moves in closer to me and kisses my neck. Lingered there, he runs his nose up along behind my ear. "After you eat, I'm going to eat you for dessert." I suck in a breath. "And then we're going to talk about all of the other things I want to do to you. And you're going to tell me if you're going to let me." He leans back, waiting for my response.

"Are we adding to our list?" I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him. It's not heated or leading, but sweet and warms my chest.

He snakes his arms around me and lifts me up off the ground, my legs just hanging a few inches from the floor. Pressing a kiss to my nose, he nods. "Sure. We can add them." When my feet finally meet the cool floor again, I sway slightly. Dizzy from the affection that I didn't realize was more potent than any drink or drug I've tried.

"Can we eat? I'm so hungry."

Pulling me around to the other side of the counter, I sit on a chair and start to make a small plate. He does the same as I pour us both a cup of coffee. When I take a sip of it, I almost purr. It tastes so good. Most days, I would have already had two cups by now.

“How do you feel about personal space right now?”

I laugh at the question. “Why? Is this your way of telling me you need more of it?”

But my laugh turns into a yelp as my chair pushes away from the counter, and with my fork still halfway to my mouth, he picks me up and puts me on his lap. Like I’m some kind of weightless waif. I’m neither of those things, but the man just handled me like it was no big effort, and then removed any bit of personal space from both of us.

“That’s better,” he says, and then bites the strawberry off my fork. “I need you closer. You feel too good to be sitting anywhere but on my lap.”

We’re so disgustingly cute, I’m almost embarrassed. *Almost*. But it doesn’t stop me from adjusting myself sideways on him so I can wrap my arm around his neck. I pierce a strawberry for me, and then feed him a bite of eggs. In between bites, he takes sips of coffee. We don’t talk about anything, we just enjoy the moment, the food, and the closeness of one another. His free hand that’s looped around my back has found its way to lightly brush against the under curve of my breast.

We’re both so wrapped up in each other, we don’t hear anything happening around us. It’s also why I jump out of my skin when I hear, “I fucking knew it! I knew it,” Law shouts, slow clapping. “It’s.” *Clap*. “About.” *Clap*. “Damn.” *Clap*. “Time.” *Clap*.

I try to get up off Michael’s lap, but he grips me tighter, holding me in place. He nods to my fork, and when I move it closer, he bites the strawberry slice off of it. Trying to act unaffected by his brother crashing our intimate party.

“It was the steam room, wasn’t it?” Law asks, smiling and wiggling his eyebrows. “At least I didn’t walk in on you guys having a bedroom rodeo.”

Michael looks at him. “Bedroom rodeo?” he asks, deadpan.

Law wiggles his eyebrows again, really loving this. “You know, the good ol’ testicle tango, the dip and swirl, a thrust and bust.”

Michael throws a strawberry at him to make it stop. He catches it and pops it into his mouth.

“It’s like a rite of passage for me, apparently. I walk in on all of you assholes getting busy.”

“I can’t believe you’re my boss.” I laugh.

He smiles wide. “Nepotism. And technically, Michael’s your boss too.”

“Law, what do you want?” Michael sighs out while keeping the calm pace of his fingertip running up and down along the outer edge of my breast. With the other hand, he lifts his coffee cup and sips it as he listens to his brother. I look at him, wordlessly asking what he thinks he’s doing. But he ignores me. I try to pay attention to what else Law is saying, because as ridiculous as he can be, he really is my boss. And while we’ve known each other for a long time, the man still respects my opinion and I’d like to keep it that way.

“I wasn’t planning on seeing this.” He moves his finger up and down, back and forth, in our direction. “I really just wanted to discuss this interim CEO thing that Dad casually keeps mentioning. I feel like I’ve missed something or a meeting about what he’s talking about.” He points to me. “Grace, earmuffs.”

I look at him quizzically as he keeps talking. Michael just shakes his head slightly as if to say, “ignore him.”

“Do you really think he’s going to bring someone else in? He thinks I can’t do it,” Law says, but that’s the last of it that I hear.

Michael’s hand moves slowly up my thigh. I watch him keep his attention on his brother while his hand moves along my body.

The affection he has for his family is one of the things that makes me want his attention. There’s nothing fake or forced about the way he loves them. There’s nothing fake or forced

about anything regarding Michael. And maybe that's the most jilting thing about this. The part I didn't think much about. That when you've wanted something, or rather someone, as long as I have, you don't think about what it'll feel like if they want you back.

"Okay, time's up."

"Wait, what?" Law asks.

Michael keeps his fingers gliding up and down my thigh, and with each pass, they get closer to the part of me that's already wet just by his soothing touch.

"We can talk about this tomorrow. You're leaving." Michael's hand moves to push my hair away from my neck and kisses the now clear space.

"Grace, are you guys really going to kick me out?" he questions with wide eyes, moving his hand to his hip as he sips a coffee I hadn't realized he poured.

"You have five seconds, and then I'm going to start taking off Grace's clothes," Michael says calmly as my face turns red instantly. "And if you're here, if you see my girl's insanely gorgeous body, then I'm going to beat your ass." When he moves the thin strap of my tank down my shoulder, I let him. He looks at his brother, who looks stunned for a minute, and not by the bluntness. Because that's how he is, zero interest in sugar coating things to make other people more comfortable. No, I imagine Law is hung up on the same words that I am: *my girl*.

When Michael kisses my shoulder and pulls the other strap down, his eyes find mine. Making sure this is okay, willing to see if I'd stop him if Law didn't move fast enough. I turn on his lap to face him, putting my back to Law, because I know he's not bluffing.

"One," he says, looking at the way my nipples are straining against the cotton of the camisole. "Two." I lift my chin slightly, giving him permission to keep going.

"Oh, for fuck's sake. Fine. Fine," Law huffs.

“Three,” Michael says as he drags the front of the top down slowly, moving over the tops of my breasts and over my nipples. The feeling of the material and the brashness of the situation have me practically panting. My lips are parted and I’m eager to see what else he’ll do.

“I see where I stand,” Law shouts as the door slams shut.

I smile and whisper, “Four.”

And it unleashes him as he stands up, taking me with him and dropping my ass on the counter. He buries his head in between my breasts, licking the valley of my cleavage as he lifts and pushes them together. Lifting his hand, he wraps it around my neck as he sucks on each of my nipples with such fervor that I’m panting.

“Did you like that?” Michael rolls my nipple around his tongue and grazes his teeth along it before sucking it back into his mouth. I moan out an incoherent sound.

His fingers pulse once, then twice around my neck.

“Now my brother knows who’s fucking you. Who gets to feel your tight, perfect pussy unravel around his cock?”

“You.”

He turns me around and yanks my shorts down in one fast move. As he steps behind me, he leans close and whispers into my ear, “Put your hands on the counter and don’t move them.”

“Or what?” I challenge.

But he doesn’t answer with words. He drags his cock along my slit, looking for entry and, without any other warning, he drives himself into me. Then he doesn’t move. He just holds himself there, deep inside of me, breathing heavily behind me with clear restraint. I can tell he’s warring with himself about what he wants. So I push.

“Or what? What will you do if I don’t listen?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he pulls back, and then fucks me with four fast and deep thrusts. He seats himself on the last and breathes against my skin, “Ask me that again.”



“What are you going to do—”

*Slap. Slap. Slap. Slap.*

In rapid succession, he spanks me four times in the same spot. I gasp to catch my breath, as he rubs the spot slowly. But I almost want to feel the pain of it. I wanted him to do it; it's why I goaded him. The warmth from the spank surfaces. And he pulls himself out of me. Before I can protest, he's on his knees behind me, spreading me and licking me from my clit all the way to my ass. My eyes flutter closed. The feeling of his mouth from behind feels forbidden, and the sting that those slaps left behind have me on the cusp of a full body orgasm.

I rest my forehead on the cool countertop, my hands still where I was told to put them, my chest resting on the edge. I moan, “Michael. Please make me come.”

He keeps going, only he adds two fingers into my pussy as his tongue continues to work along my backside. The sensation of his tongue there makes me hyper aware of every swipe and pump of his fingers. And as soon as his wrist flips, he must hit somewhere new, because I'm coming so hard that my whole body feels the wave of it. “Fuck, don't stop,” I beg.

And he doesn't. He adds another finger, and the stretch of it makes my orgasm continue, or maybe it's another one. I have no idea at this point, only that every part of me feels so good and my clit throbs in response. When my moaning stops, he finally slows his pumping movements and pulls his fingers from me, replacing them with his tongue and lips. He laps up my release like it's his actual reward for a job well done. And that thought has me lifting my body up. I turn to find him on his knees, chin glistening with my release, and he looks remorseful.

“I hurt you.”

I don't answer him, lowering down where he's still kneeling and capturing his lips instead. My orgasm still fresh on his tongue. I kiss him hard with every feeling I have in me. As I hold his face in my hands, he wraps his arms around my body tightly.

“I wanted that. I wanted you to do that to me. I pushed you, and I wanted to see if you would do it. I told you, Mister. I want you to do everything you want to me. I want to try all of it. I feel safe with you. Always have.”

He searches my eyes for the truth in those statements. He knows I say things sometimes to make people feel better, even if it's not always what I want, but this isn't one of those times. I don't do that with him.

“I've never been able to do this with anyone, to try something that feels dirty and exciting. And the reality I can do it with you. You have to know that you...” I lean my head down so I can be sure he's really seeing what I'm saying. His eyes move to mine. “You're what I want. What I've always wanted. And the icing is that you're so fucking good at playing with my body.”

His mouth kicks up in a hint of a smile at one corner. He grips my chin and kisses me softly.

“Baby, we're just getting started.”



## *Michael*

“WHEN I SAW YOU LAST WEEK, I KNEW THAT SOMETHING seemed different. And I didn’t want to push. This is your time and I want you to use it so that it’ll help keep your week on track.”

“I’m anticipating a but,” I say to her.

“But you’ve been here for almost an hour, and you haven’t said anything about the ceiling paint. And not that I’m complaining, but you’re not focused on things that are frustrating you. We’ve talked about your plans for your winter and how you want that to adjust, but you’re in a good place. And I have to ask, what is good in your life right now?”

I smile at her. It took her longer than I thought it would to notice something was different. I can’t even articulate what it is exactly, but I know who is different and I can assume that’s having an impact of sorts.

“I’m sleeping with my best friend.”

She never falters. I always try to catch a reaction from her, but I always come up short. But right there, the pause of her pen and the way her attention on me changes, I know I’ve surprised her. I don’t know why that satisfies me, but it does.

“Grace?”

“Yes.”

“You’re gloating about it, which I have to assume is because you’re happy that it’s happened,” she says.

“Happening,” I correct.

“Are you in a relationship, then?”

I think about the question, and the reality of it hits me. The answer should be clear, but it’s not. We’ve been sleeping together for almost two weeks now. Our hands are all over each other in every private moment we can find. We’re sleeping in the same bed nightly, but we avoid any affection in

front of the twins. We didn't talk about why, just the wordless assumption that we aren't making it obvious in front of them just yet.

Doc gives me a couple of minutes to think through the answer to that. The fact that I have to think through it is an answer in and of itself. "I don't know how to answer that. We're sleeping with each other. I don't know if we are in a relationship yet in the traditional sense of that word."

She puts her pen down. *Shit.*

"Our time is almost up. But I want to talk about this more with you. I think it's a wonderful thing that you're opening yourself up to someone. She's the only person you've ever mentioned to me outside of family. I was curious if she would turn into more for you."

My phone buzzes. Doc's phone alarm sounds as well. Everly and Henry both texted.

"I need to talk with you before our next session. There're a couple of things," she starts to say before my phone starts ringing. My dad's number popping up.

"Doc, you mind if I take this?"

She waves me off. "Go, go. Call my office before our next session so we can discuss, okay?"

Nodding as I stand, I make my way to the door. I wave at her as I answer the call. "What's up, Dad?"

"I've had an interesting opportunity come to my attention, and I wanted to get your perspective on it. You busy right now?"

"Just leaving therapy. Sure, what's up?"

"Come on over to the house. I just ordered too much sushi for dinner. You think Grace can hang with Miles and Sammy for a bit longer?"

"I'm sure it's fine. Yeah, I'll be over in about thirty minutes."

When I hang up with Dad, I look at the texts I missed from my brother and sister. One is a group text with Henry, Everly, and Law, talking about the time for tonight.

*Shit.* I've been so wrapped up in my own stuff that I forgot that tonight is setback and drinks with them. But instead of answering them, I fire off a text to Grace. I didn't tell her about tonight, and I don't want to assume she didn't have plans.

MICHAEL

I'm supposed to play setback with my brothers and sister tonight. I forgot about it. Any chance you weren't busy and can hang with Miles and Sammy?

GRACE

I got them. You owe me.

MICHAEL

What's the currency?

GRACE

Let me think about it.

I think about what Doc said to me, asking if we're in a relationship. I hate that I don't know the answer. So I do the only thing I can think of to start figuring out that piece.

MICHAEL

How about a date?

GRACE

I'm listening.

I'm smiling at my phone. Like a whipped idiot, and it's the happiest I've been in a long time. It's so effortless to be with

her. Exciting, but mixed with comfort, or maybe it's ease. Like she's got me the same way I've got her. I'm thirty-seven years old, but apparently, today-years-old when I realized how stupid I've been for not being more with her sooner.

MICHAEL

I'll find something fun for us to do and then take you out for your favorite dinner.

GRACE

Still listening...

MICHAEL

I'll kiss you goodnight. And then I'll lick the cum from your fingers after you fuck yourself on them while I watch.

GRACE

In that order?

MICHAEL

Any order you want.

GRACE

What if I want more?

Her question rolls down my back and right to my cock. *What the hell is wrong with me? Why haven't I asked her out sooner?*

MICHAEL

I'll give you exactly what you ask for, Grace. Only this time, be specific.

GRACE

Deal.

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When I pull into the roundabout in my dad's driveway, I see Callen's police cruiser parked on the side. The relationship between him and my father feels important. Complicated. But I'm learning that all the important ones tend to have a layer of complication.

Callen grew up with us. His father has been my dad's best friend and business partner for the majority of my life. Both he and my dad were single parents, raising their families in a small town, and we looked at David as family, the same way Callen looked at my dad and us as the same. Since David moved away to open a series of restaurants in Canada, Callen spends more time around us. Early Sunday morning coffees seem to bleed into other days of the week. It's nothing obvious, or even noticeable to most, but I pay attention. I always have.

Perhaps for the first time ever, I don't walk into the house. I knock loudly on the side door to the mudroom. I wait a moment, and when my dad doesn't answer, I knock again, only this time, instead of my dad answering, Callen opens.

"Shit. Sorry, Michael. I was just leaving," he says in a huff. In full uniform, he looks annoyed, maybe even angry.

"You good?"

He stops his walk to the cruiser and calls over his shoulder, "I will be."

I wait until he pulls away before I go inside. I have a gut feeling my dad might have needed a minute, based on whatever that was.

When I come into the kitchen, my dad is arranging the sushi he ordered onto a platter.



“Hey, Dad.”

He turns and looks over his shoulder. “Michael, good timing. I’m starving. Didn’t get to eat much today after that meeting in Cheyenne. Ended up being shorter than I’d planned, but didn’t eat since... maybe breakfast now that I think about it.”

“No snacks on the flight?”

He shakes his head. “I should probably start packing a protein bar, at least for these quick day trips.”

“That meeting why you wanted to talk to me?” I grab a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

“You want something else? I opened a bottle of white when I got home.”

I shake my head no. “Setback night tonight.”

“Ah, got it. Everyone going to be there?”

“Yep. You want to come?”

“No, that’s time for you kids to spend without your old man hovering. I’ll be good here. I need to run through a few candidates before I present the idea to the board next week.”

I make my way through an entire Dynamite roll before he puts his chopsticks down and looks at me. I knew he’d see it.

“So you finally got out of your own way, I see?” he says, sipping his wine.

I smile without looking at him and snag a few pieces of edamame. “I did.”

“Good. That girl has been choosing you for the majority of her life. It was about time you noticed and did something about it.”

Hearing that hits me in the gut. When she was younger, that was the excuse, but since she’s been home from school and then working for my family, I was always finding reasons to stay away. Reasons to keep her at arm’s length, but I never thought about the one reason why I shouldn’t have.

“You saw Callen on his way out?” Dad asks, shifting just slightly to show me it’s an uncomfortable thought.

I nod and take a sip of my water. My dad has no issue with being vulnerable, but we’ve never talked about his social life. I know he has one. Sees people and enjoys the company of others, but it’s never anything serious enough to bring up, at least to his kids. I can’t figure out exactly what it is, but I have a feeling it looks something similar to what Grace and I have had over the years.

“He won’t tell you what’s going on with him, but he could use a friend. Wouldn’t hurt to include him in a few things with your brothers every now and then. I think he’d like that.”

“That’s easy. I look at Callen as a brother anyway. So do Hen and Law.”

He doesn’t say anything more, and I don’t push. He just gives me a quick nod and claps my shoulder. Then we shift to the reason why I’m here. “Now, I want to talk about what’s going to happen as I transition out of the CEO position. And I want you to understand where my head is at before I fold Law into the discussion.”

“He’s going to be pissed,” I warn. “You’re only fifty-eight, Dad. You really ready to retire?”

“He can be whatever he wants, but he’s not showing me he can handle the role. And as much as I want him to take over for me, he has some things to learn first. Starting with how to handle himself in the public spotlight. His reputation isn’t getting any better, and I don’t expect that it will unless I shake things up.” He tosses back three pieces of salmon sashimi and levels with me. This is a conversation I’ve been expecting for a while now. “I’m tired of the never-ending meetings and managing people. I want to spend more time with Miles and Sammy. I want to actually ski this winter without having to entertain some asshole from L.A. or New York.” He laughs. “I want to put my attention on other things. The company is in a great place, and I won’t be gone completely. I’ll still be on the board and host our big events, but I want to slow down.”

“I get it, Dad. You don’t have to convince me.”

“You don’t want it, do you?”

I smile at my old man, who really looks more like my brother than my dad. Not many people would believe he’s closer to sixty than forty. “Dad, I want nothing to do with running it. I like my piece of the company, and I plan to run it well, but I don’t want it in its entirety. I’m not built for it. That’s all you. And Law.”

He takes a sip of his wine. “I know. Had to make sure. And your brother will take the spot someday, but he’s not ready yet.”

An hour later, and I hadn’t realized I’d feel guilty for knowing something about our family business that none of my siblings do. Granted, Everly and Henry have moved on to their own ventures now, but Law and I are always on the same page. I don’t like keeping things from him, but our dad is right. He’s not ready for the role yet, although I’m not sure what Dad has planned is going to push him in the right direction.

I don’t bother knocking, because the noise that’s coming from behind the door would have drowned it out anyway. Three fluffballs - Winston, Egon, and Venkman - come barreling at me as soon as I walk into the loft.

“There is no way you’re going to skip out of town right before the Annual Tree Lighting. Dad will murder you if you miss it,” Everly says as she pours out limoncello shots.

“I need this, Ev. I feel like I’m going crazy with all of you just coupling up, and I’m giving everyone ample time to plan me being away. I can loop some business into the mix as well. Jack, let me crash at your pied-à-terre.”

“Jack, do you have a fuckpad just waiting for occupancy in London?” Giselle asks.

Everly gives her a glare. “What’s his is mine now, and it’s not a fuckpad. It’s a perfectly beautiful loft. And no, you’re not missing Thanksgiving to go to a sex club, Law.”

Jack and Henry sip on their drinks from across the room and stifle laughs as the entire conversation that I walked into

the middle of unfolds.

Giselle raises her eyebrows. “You’re finally doing it? You’ve been talking about a sex club for almost as long as I’ve known you, Law baby. Finally putting on your big-boy panties and going for it?”

“Don’t encourage him,” Everly says.

“Why? Let him enjoy his life. It’s one holiday, and he’ll be back in time for the Tree Lighting,” Giselle says, shrugging, then winking at Everly to try to loosen her up.

Law gives her a nod.

They all finally realize I’m here, and G’s attention lasers in on me. She tilts her head to the side, and it makes me instantly squirm. “You going with him?” She moves toward the living space and sits on Henry’s lap. “We’ll watch the dynamic duo if you want to join him.”

With all eyes on me, they wait for my response. They all know. They’re just waiting for me to admit what’s been going on between Grace and me. “Unless you’ll still be hosting the nanny then?” She smiles.

And as I look around the room, they all are smiling.

I look at Law. “Looks like you’ve been gossiping.”

He sips his drink. “Well, you threatened if I didn’t leave that you’d basically fuck her in front of me and then beat my ass, so yeah, asshole, I gossiped.” They all break out laughing. And I work really fucking hard not to smile in response.

“I need a drink,” I say to Everly.

She holds up the homemade limoncello bottle.

“No way. I’ll take a beer.” She grabs a Strutt’s Brewery IPA from the refrigerator and cracks it open for me. “Thanks.”

She tries to tame her smile, but I know she’s dying to ask me a million questions. And I’m sure what she doesn’t get through tonight, I’ll be pummeled with when we lift at the gym on Monday morning.

I feed the excitement just a little bit. Sharing with my family about something really good in my life feels better than I thought it could. “She’s—” I’m not sure what to say. What do you tell people about the person you’re suddenly infatuated with? “I don’t know why I waited so long.”

I look around the living room. Jack just smiles and looks to my sister. G kisses Henry on the neck as he rubs her back. And Law kicks up his feet on the table.

Henry says, “Neither do we.”

And because I am who I am, doubt creeps into my mind. If I’ll be enough for her. If this is really what she’ll want after all this time. I start to rub the back of my neck and squeeze the skin between my thumb and pointer finger, pulsing it one, two, three, four times. Sitting around, I listen to my family talk about their lives, but the entire time, I fight with myself to not overthink. To not worry about what will happen when the summer is over and Grace isn’t living in my house any longer. I try not to focus on the way I miss touching her now when I’m not near her. I know I’ll never be the same.



## *Grace*

“CAN WE STOP AT SUGAR VALLEY AFTER THE FESTIVAL?”

“Sammy, we’re going to find some yummy things to snack on there, I promise. And I also promised your dad that we’re going to go easy on the candy today. You both didn’t go to bed until he got home last night, and that was well past midnight.”

“Grace, look! There’s a moose.” Miles points out the gondola window.

“No! He’s eating all the wildflowers. Stop, moose,” Sammy shouts.

I laugh.

“I bet those flowers are like their version of Sugar Valley,” Miles says.

“You’re probably right. And, Sam, I bet there will be some bouquets we can make at one of the vendor tables. And the moose can’t eat all of them. See, there’s so many. They all finally bloomed.”

“Your favorite,” she says. I love how these two pay attention, even if they seem like tornadoes most of the time.

“My favorite,” I affirm. “Most perfect view of Strutt’s in the summer.”

“Daddy would argue that it’s the sky in August.”

“He would.” I smile, because they’re right. And this year, I love the idea that I get to watch the meteor shower as someone entirely different to him.

Strutt’s Peak Summer Festival is a week-long affair that celebrates the summer months and brings local vendors from all over Colorado and Wyoming to buy and sell locally. It’s our way of all supporting each other during what tends to be the slower tourist season. However, this year, Riggs Outdoor has managed to wrangle in waves of people for their summer tours and adventures. The part of the business that Michael is

responsible for growing is thriving, and while it shows in the turn out of people populating the town green, it also means he's been working excessively long hours. Some days, I barely see him, but every night for the past handful of days, I feel him cuddle into me in bed. By the morning, he's already gone, but he leaves small notes around the house for the twins. Today, I had one taped to the bathroom mirror. It read: *You felt so good in my arms last night, I couldn't wake you. I can't promise I won't try tonight.*

“Grace!”

I turn and look around, thinking I've heard my name.

“Can we please get those flowers? The farmer lady said they're edible. EDIBLE, Grace. We need to get them and have them with dinner. Please, please?!” Sammy pleads.

“Yes, let's do it. We can put them in something tonight,” I tell her, and take out ten dollars so she can pay for them herself.

“Grace! I thought that was you over here.”

“Kate, oh my gosh. What are you doing here? Hi.” I hug her and hold out my arms to look at her. She's wearing a sundress, but it's obvious she's pregnant.

“I'm here with my partner. He wanted to do a little babymoon trip before I head out to New Zealand for Olympic Trial training.”

I look down at her little bump. “Congratulations. That's fantastic news.”

She smiles. “You have any yet?”

I shake my head no. “Those two over there—” I pause, because I know that Miles and Sammy aren't mine. I've been around them their whole lives and I've spent so much time with them this summer so far that it feels just natural to call them mine sometimes. “I'm nannying for them this summer while my athletes are where you're headed. But no, none of my own.”



I look around for Miles, since Sammy is still at the flower tent. I have a sinking feeling when I don't see him. I wouldn't have thought that he'd wander off, but now that I don't see him, I'm nervous and barely focused on my friend.

"You know what, I need to make sure I didn't misplace one of them. It was so good to see you, Kate. I hope this year's trials are amazing. I'm so jealous you get to be there."

"Any time you want a change, Grace, you know you can call me. I'll hire you in a minute. My offer from a few years ago still stands." She pulls out one of her cards. The Olympic rings that I've seen twice now in my sneak peeks stare back at me.

"Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

As soon as I step away, I see Miles at the end of the table we were just talking in front of, and I let out a heavy exhale. He's holding on to a small purple gemstone that he rolls around in his palm. A little wave of relief rolls through me that I didn't have to look for him.

I can tell he's thinking about something pretty hard as I move closer. "I didn't see you for a minute. Made me nervous."

"Are you leaving, Grace?"

"You overheard my friend?"

His big brown eyes look up at me pleadingly. As if I could ever really say goodbye to these two. If I didn't already love these two litters, it'd be right now when I fell in love. The look of concern painted all over his face. He worries a lot about things, like his dad. He nods. "Are you going to go work with her somewhere far away?"

"I'm not planning on it. I really like my job with your Grandpa Ash's company. But I won't lie to you, there's always a chance I'd try something new at some point. Doesn't mean it would take me away for too long, though."

I can tell that assurance isn't doing much for him, so instead of focusing on a hypothetical with a six-year-old, I

shift our attention to what he's found. "You want to buy that and maybe add it to your artifact shelf in your room?"

"I like the green one better. Can I get that one?"

I tell him yes and watch as he pays the vendor for his rock. Sammy makes her way back to where we're standing and examines his purchase. I watch as they whisper to each other, and I feel like I've given them something to be concerned about. They still don't know about the way things have shifted with me and their dad. The reality of how much that could impact them hits me hard. The last thing I'd ever want to do is make them as upset as they were when the summer began.

"I didn't realize you had a career change, Grace." Beverly Harpson gives me a full-body scan, trying to intimidate me, but failing to do anything more than look like she's got something in her stink eye. Maybe at one point in my life, I would have thought too much about a judgmental look like that. Her perky size-six body in comparison to my very solid size-twelve this time of year. But now, after the level of attention it's been getting, I want her to look. Maybe she'll be able to see the imprints of the man she couldn't have all over it.

"Beverly. Good to see you." I look next to her and see her daughter, Sammy's friend, Izzy.

"Hi, Sam." She waves.

Sammy waving back, says, "Izzy, we should swim together!"

"Gracie, can Izzy come over to swim? Please, please, please," Sammy begs. "Izzy, our pool is so cool. It has a basketball hoop that floats and lights for when we go in at night."

"Sure, sometime next week would be fun. Beverly, maybe we can set that up?"

I had assumed that Beverly Harpson would have grown out of being rude. She's always been the one to flaunt her wealth like it was a badge of honor, and with that headspace about it, comes insolence. But I've never experienced it directly. "Since

you're not Sammy's parent, I can't confirm that. I don't trust that you'd be able to handle another child in that environment, and I'm not about to spend the day with you. So..." She claps, like here is where we gloss over what she just said and move onward. "I don't want to promise anything to Izzy without talking to Michael first. You know, come to think of it, I actually owe him a phone call anyway."

*Like fuck you do, lady.*

A hand brushes along my back. "Beverly, how are you these days? The last rumor I heard about you had me so curious about the state of your ego, I would have thought the whole thing should have bumped you down a few pegs. But I see you're having no problem fake-flexing it at my daughter." Lenny DeMaio, ladies and gentlemen, coming in at the perfect moment to knock this beaver down a few pegs.

I kiss her on her cheek. "Hi, Ma. Glad you could meet us."

She quirks her eyebrow at Beverly. I can fight my own battles, but it's always nice when she swoops in to lay someone out on my behalf. She's been doing it for a long time. Lenny is a pain in the ass most days and fuels the gossip around here, but she's never one to allow anyone to talk shit to me or shy away from some word sparring. She's my flex.

"Sammy and Miles, I need you to help me pick out the most beautiful pair of earrings for my friend and an absolutely ridiculous piece of artwork for another. C'mon, let's see what we can find. Izzy, you want to help too?"

Izzy follows them as they make their way a few tables down.

"Your mom is lovely, as always. Heard some interesting things about that one," Beverly mumbles out. For the life of me, I can't figure out why I'm still standing here. Women like this, I hope get put in their place so they can grow the fuck up.

"See you around, Beverly," I say as I turn on my heel.

"So you're fucking him, then." She snorts a laugh.

I stop my movement. I know this bitch isn't saying this right here in the middle of a perfectly pretty summer day, at a

festival jam packed with families. The comment pulled a few people's attention to us. She clearly wants to make a scene. My mom was smart enough to take the kids away. The way Beverly squared her boney arms, my mom must have known the woman wasn't done slinging insults.

But Beverly doesn't know that I'm not the town tomboy anymore. I'm also not the sweetheart who's always so nice to everyone. Nice isn't a placated negative quality. Nice girls have sharper claws, because nasty isn't our first choice. But when we choose to unleash it, the person on the other side better watch out.

"How cliché. Sleeping with the twenty-something nanny. Pathetic, really. You've been following him around like a puppy for years. It was only a matter of time before you wore him down, I suppose."

I look around at a few people who are trying so hard not to pay attention to this interaction. Take the high road. Keep it clean, even though she wants to rip off the gloves. Part of me feels sorry for her that her husband cheated and then left her with two kids as a single parent. "This sounds like a *you* problem, Beverly. Because I'm perfectly fine with who I am to Michael. I always have been. And it's none of your business or anyone else's what we are to one another."

"Not surprised he ended up slumming it with you. You'd take anything the Riggs family would give to you. He's the damaged one in that family anyway. Makes sense," she says, just loud enough that I can't allow it to be said without personally shutting her dumb-ass mouth.

I see Leo from the boutique come closer and Benny approach slowly from the other side, flanking me because they might think I'm going to kick her ass. And as much as I want to, as much as I'd love nothing more than to try out one of those right hooks that Mac has worked with me to perfect, I'm much better at slinging words. A trait learned from my mother.

"You can go ahead and shut your fucking mouth," I burst out.

*Oh my God, what am I doing?*

“Excuse me?” Beverly asks as she palms her hand to her chest.

I might as well say what I need to say.

“I’m not about to announce to everyone how you tried so hard to fuck that supposed “damaged” man, that you trapped him into a date and then flung yourself at him.”

Her mouth ticks open, like she’s shocked at this already very public information.

“And he still didn’t want you. And while I feel sorry for you, that you can’t find someone who’s willing to fulfill you the way that you want, you should know he’s taken.”

She scoffs. “Oh please, Grace. We all know how you follow him around. And it’s just sad. It doesn’t mean he’s taken.”

“Oh, Beverly...” I shake my head and smile. I’m practically shaking with anger. She can say shit to me all she wants, but the minute she decides to make Michael seem like less, is the exact moment that every nicety or feeling of sympathy is off the table. “The next time you’re in a PTA meeting with Michael, have a good long lingering look. Because I’m confirming that his cock is as incredible as you might have fantasized, and you’ll never, *ever* come close to feeling how good he fucks with it. Feel sorry for yourself now, Beverly. Because I sure do.”

Benny rushes next to me and wraps his arm around my shoulder, trying his hardest to hold back the hoot and holler I know he wants to belt out. I’m shaking, I’m so amped up. Leo comes up on my other side and they both start laughing hysterically. And we leave a small crowd and Beverly Harpson in the dust.

There’s no way this isn’t enough gossip to fuel Strutt’s for the rest of the summer. But I couldn’t care less. She asked for it, even when I warned her.

Leo leans into me and says, “I’m going to need some details. Preferably about the level of pleasure you so

eloquently told her she'd never experience." I hit him in the stomach, then shake my head at that sobering thought.

"That was a spectacle. I should have never said that." I pinch my fingers along the bridge of my nose.

"Sure was, and she deserved every second of it. Plus, you just confirmed what everyone in this town's been waiting to hear for a damn near decade now."

I smile at both of them and finally let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Leo nudges my hip. "I have to get back to my table, but your mom said she was taking the kids to Sugar Valley."

*Dammit.*



## *Michael*

“WE NEED TO HIRE AT LEAST THREE MORE GUIDES FULL-TIME if we’re going to take these reservations that are coming in. And then they have to be trained.”

Law looks over to our dad, waiting for a reaction from him.

“I have candidates lined up who’ll take the opportunity, but since it’s mid-season, I’m going to need to sweeten the deal to pull them away from whatever they’ve already committed to. Then we’re talking overtime hours to compensate for anyone who’s doing training.”

“I’m waiting for the rest. You’re too stressed for this to only be about new hires and training schedules. I trust you. You need people, then hire them,” he says.

“What else?” Law asks.

“The IFSC has asked—”

They both look at each other, eyebrows raised.

“International Federation of Sport Climbing”

“I know what IFSC is, son. What did they want?”

“They’d like to check out the mountain ledges we’ve been bouldering on. I think they’ve heard a good amount of chatter regarding the difficulty levels we can offer here. You couple that with the training we’ve been able to make happen, then we have a prime opportunity to push it a little further.”

Our dad leans back in his chair and kicks up his feet on his desk. It’s a power move. Whenever he does it, I know he’s already made his decision about what he wants. So anything that follows will be him trying to decide if it aligns with what I want to see happen. “When would they come out?”

“Next month. And then, if they decide it’s what they’re looking for, we might be able to negotiate to make it an official U.S. Olympic training facility. It doesn’t need to be



specific for bouldering. If we can figure out how to properly staff up between now and then, it would allow us to negotiate local folks staying on board instead of them hiring from the outside.”

Law shifts. “What’s the downside?”

I rub the back of my neck and think about the question before answering. I have to remind myself that the downside is as much of a hypothetical as the upside.

“We end up staffing up, spending outside of the budget without a way to make it back this year. They could come in and feel like it’s too amateur to even want to negotiate with us. I don’t think it is, but I’m not them. The downside is that if they don’t think it’s on par, news of that travels and, essentially, negative buzz could impact the higher-level athletes we want coming our way. And I’m not just talking about the summer season.”

“Do you really think it would impact our winter sports?” Law asks.

I lift a shoulder, because I’m not sure. “As I said, it’s a downside if they’re not impressed.”

My father asks, “How do you want to proceed?” I know he’s hoping for some kind of tell from me, but really, I know that he wants my brother to think about it and give an answer. It’s what we’ve been talking about, sans Law knowing if he’s ready to step into my dad’s role as CEO. If he can think smart, big picture, and beyond the marketing side of things.

Law looks between the two of us. “You want me to make this call? I don’t know the sport the same way he does,” he says, lifting his chin to me. “He’ll have a better gut feeling about it.”

Before I can say anything in response, my father interrupts. “I want your recommendation. Based on what you know, where we are this year, and the potential ways this opportunity could impact things. The brand, the town, it’s worth looking at all angles. And I want you to make the call.”

“My gut says no,” he says back. Immediately. Almost as if he didn’t even think about it.

“No?!” I look at my dad. He can’t be serious. “The fuck, Law?”

Law gives me a sympathetic smile. “You should have said something, then. This is a big gamble, and it’s not our peak season sports. We need to reach our growth numbers this year, and there’s no way we will do that if we take this chance and it doesn’t pan out. If we had known earlier in the year, we could have planned better, but now, it’s a bad call.”

That’s bullshit, and my father knows it. How are we supposed to grow without taking chances—*opportunities* like this one? They don’t just happen. This was work, my hard work, to get it. And it took less than three minutes to push it aside.

I don’t stick around to listen any more. *One, two, three, four*, and start over. I don’t need to gather my thoughts and think rationally. I need to calm down.

I’ve been hustling this side of the business for years. To grow the tourist piece, but also to work toward the components I feel strongly about. Climbing has always been what I’ve loved doing, and to have an opportunity where we could host training for higher-level climbers is like reaching its own summit. It’s the goal I hadn’t realized I’d been working toward.

The rest of the day moves at a snail’s pace. Every issue that could have come up, does, and with a vengeance. The summer festival that’s keeping Strutt’s Peak busy this week also brought along several larger groups that wanted to do full-day adventures: hiking, fishing, and ATVing. One of my guides lost two people, who eventually surfaced, but not before I had to call Callen to disperse Search and Rescue.

Our equipment sales have been excellent. But the supply chain hasn’t been able to keep up, which means I had several climbers today who had to share equipment. It’s doable, but not ideal. It’s not a good look when I can’t sell or rent the necessary equipment for the sports we offer.

“Hey, Michael,” Boon says as he leans into my office. “Got what you asked for all set up at the climbing facility. You want me to make sure folks are out by a certain time tonight?”

“I’ll need everyone gone by seven. Everly will be by around then, too, to deliver food, so just be sure you let her in before you lock up.”

“You got it, boss,” he says, lingering a little longer.

“That all?”

“Two things, really.” Boon shifts his weight and shoves his hands in his jeans pockets. “I heard through the grapevine that you’re seeing Gracie McKenna.”

I flick my eyes up to him and drop my pen.

He holds up his hands, as if the information might make me flip my shit. “Just chatter. Gossip, really. It might have been the heated discussion on the green between her and Beverly Harpson yesterday. I don’t know. But all I wanted to say was, if it’s true, and you’re together, then I’m happy for you. I like Gracie.” He shifts again. Awkwardly stammering. “We’ve been friends a long time. I know she’s liked you for a long time too. Well, everyone knows that, really. Turned down Ireland to be here... All I’m saying is, I’m happy for you. Her. You and her. But also, don’t hurt her.”

“You mean London. She was in London. For school,” I correct him.

“Oh, nope, she got that job with the Irish Rugby Team. Lenny told me. Her mom was really pissed at her for a long time about turning it down.”

I lift an eyebrow at that—she never said she’d turned down that job. Only that she didn’t get what she wanted. I’m also interested in knowing what the hell Beverly and Grace could have possibly been talking about so publicly.

I ignore the rest of what Boon carries on about and text Grace instead.

MICHAEL

Heard a rumor today.

GRACE

Oh yeah?

MICHAEL

Something about you and Beverly Harpson?

GRACE

Is Everly coming here to watch the kids, or should I bring them there?

MICHAEL

Jack will be there at 7. She'll meet him there later. And don't change the subject.

GRACE

I can't wait.

Since when do you listen to gossip?

MICHAEL

I always listen, when you're involved.

---

“We’re going to climb?” she asks with a wide smile.

I nod and lean in to plant a kiss on her neck. It’s been a long week, and I’ve barely been able to spend time with her or the kids. But tonight is our first date, and I want it to be special. Mostly, I want us to have fun. A restaurant or bar sounded too public. Staying in seemed too lazy. So I picked

something we both enjoy doing. A thing we share that's as much a part of me as it's been a part of her. But now that we're standing here, I'm realizing that maybe it wouldn't be the kind of date she'd want. Maybe taking her out somewhere nice would have been the better choice.

“Is this okay? I just thought...”

She turns back toward me and tilts her head to the side. She studies what I'm asking. I don't want her to see this part of me anymore. This piece that I can't totally control, that has me worrying that she'll decide once we get through her list of things, and she moves out, that she'll be done with me. How did I go so long trying to push her away? Now, I can't stop worrying about how to keep her.

She grabs my hand and pulls me to her. Brushing my hair away from my forehead, she drags her finger across my temple and down the side of my face. I close my eyes to absorb the feeling of it—the warmth. And before I can open my eyes, she lulls my lips to hers. Softly. Soothing. Somehow knowing that I needed this affirmation that this is okay. That she's not disappointed. I stay present and don't let my anxiety wander any further. She might think this is the only plan. To climb. But at the top of the bouldering wall is an entire set-up that'll hopefully live up to her expectations for a first date with me.

She pulls back, but not before I can snake my arms around her and hold her against me. I breathe her in. Always smelling like something sweet, something welcoming. “This is perfect,” she whispers.

I nuzzle into her neck. “Thank you for showing up. Not just for this, but this week. I'm drowning a bit this season, but it's only manageable knowing that you've got Sam and Miles. I know they can be a lot. You've made it easy on all of us, but mostly on me.”

“I knew what I was getting into.” She leans back in my arms, hers draped around my neck as she lists off all of the things they did. I hear some of it, but really, I just take her in. Absorb the way she smiles when she tells me something about my kids, and then the way her voice kicks up when she's

excited about something else. “And now, we get to have some fun together.”

I kiss her neck.

“As much fun as the Summer Festival?”

She smiles at me, trying to hold back the laugh because she knows she’s going to tell me exactly what happened. “Yes, totally fun. Oh, would you look at that?” She pulls out of my arms and heads straight for the chalk bag hanging on the bouldering wall.

I follow her there, slip on my shoes, clap chalk on my hands and find the path I want. She’s already at least five feet off the ground, which is a good start, considering this isn’t a place where she’s hooked up with ropes and a belayer. Bouldering is about climbing the right line, at the right pace, and then being able to fall properly. She can make it to the top. I’ve seen her do it plenty of times, but that doesn’t mean she couldn’t fall.

It takes only a few moves to pull ahead of her, which is what I wanted. I kick my leg over the top edge and snag a glimpse of what I asked Everly to get all set up for me. The rest of the place is lowly lit, but up here it’s just the right amount of shadow and light.

“You want me up there with you?” she asks, only a few grabs away from the lip of the edge. “Should have told me that a skirt was a bad choice when we were leaving.”

“Not a bad choice for me. I got a nice little show before I moved above you.”

She snorts. “Don’t make me laugh. I’m almost there.”

When she hits the top jug, it’s high enough that I can help pull her up and over. She kneels, out of breath, with a little sweat on her forehead. Her chest rising and falling, small pieces of hair in her face, and I can’t help but stare at the beauty mark on her cheekbone, the fullness of her lower lip. Pretty parts of her I’ve always noticed, that I now get to appreciate out in the open. I have to wonder, despite trying not to think this way, what the hell is she doing with me?

“You did this?” she asks, looking around the spot, which is now covered in floor pillows, the edges highlighted with small white lights, and a low round table in the center. There’s a bottle of wine at the center, and around it, cheese, fruits, and breads. She stands up to take a closer look, and I watch her as she takes it all in. I’m a bit impressed too.

It took me an hour at the grocery store to decide on the cheese and fruits. Another thirty minutes at the bakery to pick the breads and the small chocolate cake. My father gave me two bottles of wine from his cellar, because quite frankly, I don’t know the first thing about what to look for in a good wine. “I did.” I clear my throat. “Had some help from Boon in getting this all up here, and then Everly with the lights and pillows. A few others pitched in too.”

She pulls me by my shirt toward her and kisses me. “Perfect,” she breathes. I think the same thing. I let my lips linger on hers for a few minutes. The way they feel against mine does more than turn me on; I feel so much more when we’re like this. Unmuted. Hyperaware. More confident, but also more scared than I’ve been in a long time.

We both take off our climbing shoes and clap out our chalk-dusted hands, and then walk atop the makeshift island of massive pillows. She pops a few pieces of cheese into her mouth, and the hum that she makes as she tastes them is like a siren’s song directly to my cock. An off-key hum, and I’m ready for her. But I want tonight to be more.

“I should probably just tell you before this turns into a thing, but I may have exchanged some harsh words with Beverly Harpson.”

Opening the bottle of red, I start pouring her a glass. I can tell she’s going to want a sip when she finishes this little confession. She looks nervous, and I can tell by the way her cheeks have turned pink that she’s not looking forward to telling me the details.

“I may have told her to shut her fucking mouth.” She shifts and puts a grape into her mouth, pursing her lips as I let that sink in. She chews it and tries to muffle the rest. “And that the

size of your cock is bigger than in her wildest fantasies, and the way you fuck me with it is superior.”

I pause the glass of wine midway from the table to my mouth.

“You’re mad.” She nods and shifts anxiously.

*She can’t be serious. Or really think that.*

“The kids weren’t around. And I really tried to take the high road, but—” I cut her off right there.

“But?” I try to keep my tone even. I’m nothing more than impressed that she would make a scene. She’s not the type. Typically, she’d cuss them out later with me, but Grace rarely gets angry enough to word-spar with people.

“You didn’t already hear this? It was like four days ago now, and I’m pretty sure there was a decent audience of blabbermouths. Honestly, the only reason I’m telling you is because I want you to know that I wasn’t planning to talk about us like that so publicly. So crudely.”

“Crudely?” I pass her the glass of red wine. She takes a rather large gulp of it, and I can’t hold back the smile I’ve been trying to keep hidden. There’s nothing she could have said to me that would have made me mad at her. Not for putting someone in their place. Beverly Harpson probably needed that more than anyone I know. And if she needed to cut the woman’s ego down a little bit, using the size of my dick or how well I fuck her with it as ammunition, then even better.

My fastest path to her is on my knees. I crawl quickly over to her, but make sure to speak clearly so she can hear every word I say next. I don’t want her to assume anything else.

“I heard all about how *my* girl told off a woman who had no business saying some of the shit that she did.” I move into her, her legs parting, making room for me. I keep moving, forcing her to lean back on her elbows and sprawl out beneath me. “I just wish I could have seen it.”

I lean in, needing to taste her, absorb the smile that’s dancing there now. I wait until she parts her lips just enough to kiss her fully. My tongue collides with hers, languidly, like



we're laying the baseline of something melodic. Her fingers find the nape of my neck and drag up into my hair. It feels so good that it draws a satisfied hum out of me. I never enjoyed kissing anyone like I do with her. Something as simple, I never thought would feel so monumental. I should have known. It tilted me sideways the first time, so why wouldn't it set me right all the times that followed? Her chest presses into mine, rising and falling now with equal measure, as I trail my hand up from her bare knee to her thigh. The soft black material of her skirt moves with me, making a path for my fingers to caress her skin.

"Wait." She laughs briefly. "Something's digging into my back."

When she shifts and grabs what's there, she pulls out a blue nylon rope from beneath the pillows. She looks at it for a beat longer than necessary. She and I know what ropes would be here for; it's not uncommon to have extras thrown around the space. But if she's looking at it the way that I am, then we might be exploring something entirely new together tonight.

"Is this meant to be here, or is it a happy coincidence?"

A mischievous smile overtakes her face. I wish I could take the credit for it, because I'm about to reap the reward.

"You want me to tie you up? Feel the rope around your beautiful body and let me play with you the way I want?"

She thinks about the question, her big, beautiful eyes focused solely on the rope that she holds on to with one hand, feeling the material with the other. I glide my hand up her body and let it settle around her neck, and when my fingers hit the ticking veins on either side of her throat, her body visibly relaxes. Touching her this way, the control of it, the possessiveness soothes her, just as it does me. I pull her in for another kiss, but she's distracted, as her attention stays on the rope in her hands.

"Yes," she says, almost so quietly that she sounds out of breath.

“Do you know how to”—she hesitates to finish the question—“use rope or restraints or whatever?”

I nip again at her lower lip and smile. “I have a decent knowledge of ropes and knots, yes.”

I see her calm slightly. She trusts me. At the core of all of this, what we have, it’s trust. “The thought of being restrained and giving myself over to you like that...” She leans in and bites back at my lip. “I’m wet thinking about it, and I want you to use this on me.”

I pull her into me and thrash my tongue against hers. The taste of the red wine mixed with the palatable lust that’s just washed over both of us is heady, and I can’t get enough. I rip her shirt over her head as she yanks at the collar of mine. “You sure?”

“Yes,” she breathes heavily as I move to unclasp her bra. “Please. Yes.”

Any semblance of control falters, and a darker part of me takes the helm. I want to see her bound at the wrists and ankles, and then gagging on my cock. I want her wrists tied tightly so she can’t touch and only move the way that I’ll allow. The thoughts have me so fucking hard, but I’m not only interested in myself. In fact, there’s a bigger part of me that’s more turned on by what she’ll be feeling. I want to sink my tongue into her pussy and my fingers into her ass and see how many times I can make her come while she’s restrained. I’ve never been able to explore this with anyone else. I don’t trust anyone the way that I trust her.

I flex my hand and take a deep breath. *One, two, three, four—*

“Stop,” she says. And I do immediately, practically flinging my hands away from her body. “I want whatever you’re willing to do with me. This isn’t something I have any shame about. I want to explore these kinks with you. You’re the only person I want this with.” She knew I was anxious, but it wasn’t stemming from negative thoughts. It was eagerness to let this part of me go.

She leans up slightly and licks my lips. “Now tie me up, Mister.”



## *Grace*

I SIT IN FRONT OF HIM, MY CHEST HEAVING. I'M SO EAGER FOR what's coming next. If anyone was going to allow me to feel this level of comfort in asking for what I want, it would always be him. His confidence is all-consuming. It elevates his sexy. And it just confirms that we were always meant to be like this with one another. Intimate. Raw.

I can't think about the way I was so ready to be done and walk away. To have never felt this. He bends my knees and kneels in front of me. The ground beneath is soft, and the skylights give the perfect view of the clear summer sky. Attention to the detail tonight, and the fact that we're here instead of some restaurant or bar packed with people we probably know, it was the perfect choice. And while all of it is swoony and absolutely romantic, our agenda just changed, and romance isn't on it.

He slips two loops that he made in the blue rope around my ankles and pulls it tightly. The zip of the nylon snaps my attention, heightening my senses. He ties it off with a figure-eight knot. A knot that we've both made countless times to belay for the other during climbs—but I never let my mind wander into a fantasy like this one.

“That okay?” It's just the two of us here, alone and private, but the tone of his voice sounds like it's being dragged across gravel. Low and with an edge.

I nod yes in response, and he grabs my chin. “This isn't a time for being quiet, Grace. I'm going to need you to use your words here. In fact, we should probably have a safe word if this becomes overwhelming.”

I smile at the idea of doing something that would even require a safe word. “Have you done this? With other people before?” I ask. I wonder who with, and a pang of jealousy rings through me. Which I know is ridiculous, but I've always considered him mine, even when he wasn't.

“Yes. But you know me, Grace, I don’t like many people. Who I make time for is particular, just like my sexual tastes. I tried things when I was younger, but not everything.”

I laugh, and it has him stopping his movements.

“I’m not laughing at you, Michael. Everything we’ve done up until this point has been so goddamn sexy that if other women only knew...” I shake my head, because he doesn’t see what I see or what the world sees. “They’d be waiting for you with their legs open and willing. If they catch wind, there would be more trying to kidnap you for PTA meetings. They’ll want you more than they already do.”

“I’m not interested in other women.” He bites his lower lip and starts looping the rope again. “Not when the one I want is kneeling in front of me. Eagerly waiting for me to do filthy things to her.”

He pulls the rope, and the nylon tightens more. “Please, don’t stop talking,” I whisper. And shake my head slightly, because I wasn’t ready for what he said.

He kisses my steepled hands and finishes the tie by looping what’s left of the rope between the center of where my ankles and wrists are bound. “Safe word, Grace.”

I think for a moment, but when I look up, the view I catch from the skylights basically answers for me. “How about... Polaris?”

“Perfect,” he says and leans forward, placing a soft kiss on my lips. “Always so perfect.”

When he removes his shirt, ripples of goosebumps hustle up my arms. The path of hair from his firm, broad chest continues down his thickly packed abs and dips right into his low-slung jeans, and I want to drag my nails through it and tug so I can hear that hissing noise he makes when he’s trying to hold back. I don’t want him to hold back anymore. And I know he has been.

The edges of his V-cut protrude and frame out the hard bulge that’s just flexed at me beneath his pants. If I weren’t so eager to see his cock, I’d have probably laughed at the

movement. Hell, it's a dirty promise that I want to collect on as many times as he'll allow tonight.

He flicks the button of his jeans, and as he folds it down, the zipper rolls with it. There's nothing else there, no boxers or briefs, just tanned skin and a tidy patch of hair that looks like an anchor to the beautiful, god-like cock pointing right at me. He shifts from his knees to his feet, now towering above me as I'm bound below. Once he's removed his pants, he wraps his fist around his cock. He tugs on it while watching me. On the fourth flick of his wrist, he says, "Open your mouth and stick out your tongue."

I do my best to sit up taller, but I can only move so much with my wrists and ankles bound so tight to the other. But I do as I'm told and wait patiently for him to tap the crown of his cock along my tongue. When did I become the woman eager to taste what leaks from a man's cock? It feels like a blur. From giving up on my feelings for this man to being submissively wanton, an eager slut for praise and punishment.

"You look so beautiful waiting for me. I could come just looking at you like this and thinking about how warm your mouth is going to feel. How tight your pussy is going to grip me." He moves behind me and slowly rolls me back, toward him. My back meets the pillowed floor first, then my neck and head. He's not rough, but careful with me. He holds my body in place by the tied rope, keeping me exactly where he wants as he taps the tip of his cock on my awaiting tongue. He's so aroused, and I want to feel him glide into my mouth, but just as I start to close my lips, he pulls himself away. "I don't remember telling you to do that yet." And I smile at his teasing tone. I like this feeling of being moved at his will, and him being able to control both mine and his pleasure.

He moves a piece of hair that's fallen into my face and brushes it away. When he focuses back, his eyes meeting mine, I feel so much between us. The trust. How connected we always are with one another, and the way he feels about me. A brief moment of tenderness, because I know he's going to slip into his mask of dominance.

"Are you still okay?"

“Better than okay.”

He gives me a sexy smirk, and then shifts his body down to where my ankles and wrists are bound together. The anticipation of what he’s going to do next has me wet and wanting. Michael keeps a hold on the knot and pushes my knees toward my chest, giving my wrists slack and watching my underwear pull tight against the curve of my ass, the material gathers between my pussy. That rub of it and knowing that he’s watching me in this exposed position forces a small moan to escape my lips.

“Please touch me, Michael,” I beg. My words come out breathless, but I’m anything but. I feel ready. I rock my hips back to feel the pull of the material again. Anything to offset the pulse that’s vibrating below me. I need more—his hands, his fingers, his cock. Something. “Please,” I plead one more time before I feel his finger lightly swipe up and down my panties. From my ass to my slit, his fingers drag up and down in a torturous rhythm that offers a small amount of satisfaction, but not enough.

“Like this?”

Fucking tease.

“No. More. I need more.”

“I want to hear you ask for what you want. Tell me and I’ll do exactly as you say. But remember to be specific. Remember the pantry?” His fingers move with just a tad more pressure, but not enough. And my mind goes right back to that tiny room, where he told me to take off my underwear and then kissed my pussy. The funny part is, that’s exactly where I want his mouth now.

“I want your mouth.” Specific. “Put your lips on my pussy,” I demand. “And then drag your tongue around me until I’m screaming.” I hum at the thought of it, needing him to do exactly as I say. “I want you to take control of my body. Do everything you want to it, and I promise I’ll moan for you. I want to feel you dripping all over me. I want you to lose control and not overthink or apologize. And I want it. Right. Now.”



He pushes my wrists and ankles forward toward me so that my ass tilts up. The rope stings as it rubs. But I couldn't care less because, seconds later, he yanks my panties to the side and swipes his tongue exactly where I've asked. He doesn't stop. Instead, he moans. As if tasting me is as satisfying for him as the feeling is for me.

Dragging his teeth along my ass cheek, he bites down hard. Then, I hear a smack before I feel it in the exact same place. Heat rises on the mark he's just made. But my attention diverts as he thrusts his tongue back along the same path. The pressure of it is drawing out my approaching orgasm, and any minute, it'll roll through me. Between being tied up, the anticipation of what he'll do to me next, and the feeling of him feasting on me, it's all building quickly.

"You taste so fucking good. Sweet and salty on my tongue." And as he says it, two fingers sink into me. He drags them in and out, and it's just enough pressure to make me moan louder. Pleadingly. "That's it. Take what I give. She's so eager for them." His mouth joins his fingers, and the sensation of being finger-fucked combined with the way his tongue has snaked its way toward my clit is exquisite.

I almost miss the signs that I'm about to come. My thighs start quivering, and Michael's fingers pick up speed, fucking me faster. I scream his name as the orgasm barrels through me, and I can't feel anything other than the pull of the rope on my wrists and the pleasure of my body responding to every place he touches.

The loud silence takes over my ears, and the fog from my brain lifts briefly to register that Michael moves me to lie on my side. He positions his body behind me, and he drags his fingers along the back of my thigh. Grabbing it, and then smacking it again. "God, I love this body. This ass begs for me to mark it up. I can't ever decide if I want to slap it, bite it, or squeeze it."

I mumble, "You could do all of them and then fuck it."

He shifts slightly, leaning over from behind me, just enough to bite and suck on my lower lip. "I like that you have

a filthy mouth.” Licking my lip again, he runs his finger around the tight ring of muscle. He pulls the arousal from my slit back to my hole and rubs small circles that force me to not overthink and just relax. “You still want me to take this ass?”

It’s so goddamn hot that I actually mewl.

“Yes.”

He nips at my lips again. “Good. I have something to get it ready for me. Not tonight, but soon,” he whispers. And I almost whine. As if being tied up wasn’t enough to satiate my curiosity tonight.

He shifts my body to where I was before. On my back, knees to my chest and my arms at my sides, wrists tied securely together to my ankles. His smell crowds me—the clean cold air that reminds me of home and the briefest twinge of burning wood. All of it mixed with my arousal that still coats the scruff on his chin. “I’m going to fuck this beautiful pussy now. And I’m going to be quick about it, because you’ve pushed me to my edge. Tell me you’re still okay tied up like this so I can sink into you.”

“Yes. More than okay.”

I’ve barely finished the sentence, and he thrusts his cock into me fast and hard, bottoming out on the first drive.

I suck in a loud gulp of air. I breathe out seconds later, with a moan barely an inch from my lips, as he pulls his cock out of me fast, and then finds his punishing pace. Completely in control. The effortlessness of being bound like this keeps me from having to think, only feel and be an offering for him to take whatever he wants.

He fucks me with measured movements. Every punch of his hips hits a spot inside of me that has me seeing stars. The blurry kind that looks like specs of light. Nothing in focus, only the feeling of pleasure and contentment washing over me like a storm-surfing tide. I could easily get lost in it. But the places his hands grip—my ass with one hand and the other my shoulder—forcing my body to meet his with leverage, and the grunts that mirror each punch, are the only signs that he’s so

close to coming apart at any minute. He's trying to hold himself together just to pull every last drop of ecstasy from my orgasm before he fills me with his. And moments later, my body is dragged under as another wave of weightlessness and pleasure takes hold of me.

"You take everything I give to you," he growls, and then thrusts into me one more time. This time with a moan that's so loud it knocks me from my haze. He hugs the parts of me that he can reach as he drapes his spent body over mine. Chest heaving from the orgasm and sweat dripping from somewhere near his head or chest onto my shins and thighs that are wrapped in his arms.

My eyes water at the gravity of it all. My emotions erupt, and I can't stop tears from pooling and falling. When he lifts his head, his smile falters immediately, and he scrambles to untie my wrists and ankles. "Fuck, Grace. Did I hurt you? Dammit."

"No, I'm okay. I promise."

"Shit." He shifts as he tries to unlock his knots, but it's taking longer than he wants. Leaning over toward the table, I see him pull out a knife. He moves quickly to undo the bindings between my ankles first. It yanks free, and he kisses my hand as he works to remove the binding from my wrists.

"Michael, it's okay. It's not this." I try to find the words to tell him I'm not upset, despite the emotions that are clearly overwhelming me. "I'm okay."

He drags the ropes away from my wrists furiously and pulls me against him. The urgency of it, him wanting to comfort me and the warmth of him wrapping me in his arms, forces more tears to fall. When he pulls back to see if I'm okay, I try to mask the emotions that are forcing their way to my surface.

"Don't hide from me. Tell me what's wrong. I'm so sorry. I just lost it." He wipes the freshly fallen tears away with his thumbs as he cradles my face in his hands. "Tell me what to do."

I try again to form the right thing to say. “I’m just overwhelmed with so many feelings, and this is how it’s coming out.”

He rubs his thumb soothingly back and forth across my cheek.

“You didn’t use your safe word, baby. I would have stopped if this was too much. I’m—” His face twists up, trying to hold back from breaking.

“You didn’t hurt me. You did nothing wrong. I didn’t want you to stop at all. That was everything I could have ever imagined. And I loved every second of it. So much, that my emotions or hormones or whatever don’t know how to process it. But I promise this isn’t a bad cry, this is one of those *holy shit that sex was so good* cries.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Yes, that’s a thing. At least it is right now. Kind of a first for me.” I lean in and kiss him, letting him know this is okay. “I have never felt this good before. In my entire life. The freedom of letting go with you. I’m not embarrassed about anything I want to try or things I want to say. You’ve broken me, but in the best possible way.”

He moves me so that I’m cradled against him, my head resting in the crook of his neck, and his arms wrap tightly around me. Kissing the top of my head, he grips me tighter. I hear his breathing hitch, trying to push back the emotions that I know were teetering on falling. But I have no barriers left. No reasons to hold anything back from him. I’ll be destroyed if this doesn’t work, whether I tell him or not.

He leans his forehead on mine. “You’re so beautiful. You have to know that.” He takes a deep breath. “I can’t look at you sometimes because I’m afraid my obsession with you will show all over my face. How much you’re the only person I want to be around. Being with you like this”—he shakes his head and kisses my lips lightly—“I never saw it coming. I couldn’t allow myself to, but now that I’ve had you, I want to give you everything you could ever want.”

And there it is. It doesn't feel like anything less than inevitable, him and me. I choose this adventure, regardless of my nerves or where my sneak peeks have led me. Though, they seem to always point me right back to him.



## *Michael*

“I’M IN LOVE WITH YOU.”

I pause the light circles I’ve been drawing along her hip as she lies in my arms.

*Always so brave.*

I absorb the words. Leave them unfiltered and listen to what that means. How they make me feel, coming from the woman I’ve been obsessed with since the day she left Strutt’s Peak and I realized I didn’t like my world without her in it all the time. At first, I missed the way she’d ask questions or would so unassumingly tackle whatever sport or obstacle she stood in front of. She was fearless as a kid, magnetic when she found the things she was passionate about, and as a woman, she pushes me forward. Pulls me when I start to drift. She’s bigger than just words to me. Even words that nobody has ever said to me before.

So I take a deep breath and tell her, “I’ve been trying to figure out what I am to you. For years.” She turns so that she can see me now, watching me as I tell her the parts I haven’t even figured out how to say yet. “For a long time, you were just off-limits. Too young for me. Too much of your life needed to be lived without me weighing it down with all of *my* things. And then you didn’t disappear. I pushed, but you never stopped wanting to be around me.” I laugh nervously. “I still don’t know why.”

She searches my face for what I’m trying to say. If I’m going to say what she wants to hear or what she’s so used to getting from me. Push back. Lines drawn. Holding on to whatever control I could have when it came to the one person who leaves me feeling grounded and weightless all at once.

“I think about you.” I study the beauty mark on her cheek. A small stamp of perfection so that the rest of the world knows she’s full of beautiful things. “When I wake up, I’m thinking of you, and then at night, when I’m trying to calm my mind

from the chaos of my day, it's you that I fall asleep thinking about. I've thought about how I hope you're happy with the life you've chosen. Coming back to Strutt's and choosing to work with us. I think about how, at any moment, someone else is going to come along and see all the things I see. And you'll give yourself to them, because they don't have these wandering thoughts that turn into panic. Or they don't need pills or a therapist to maintain any semblance of sanity. Or they don't have children with someone else already."

She takes my hand and turns it, palm facing up, and interlocks her fingers into mine. She presses her thumb into my palm, and rubs with pressure. Massaging the skin in crescent moon shapes that ease the tightness starting to move from my neck to my shoulders.

"When you told me you were going to explore with other men, start dating, I knew if I didn't get out of my own way for once that I'd lose you."

"Can I tell you something?" She doesn't wait for my answer. Instead, she kisses my palm and says, "And nobody except for my mother knows about it, not because I'm ashamed, but because I don't understand it." She looks up at me, but continues moving her thumbs across my palm. "I have these very vivid dreams, or what I think are vivid, but I don't always remember them. I always know I have them because afterwards, I get a quick recap of the important parts. It feels like I'm half awake, half still dreaming when I see them, or feel them." Shifting, she studies my face for a response, but I'm still not entirely sure what she's telling me. "Most of the time, it's images, but I can hear sounds or taste things, pick up on different scents. It's only for a moment, but enough that I've learned to pay attention."

I listen and try to understand. That she has some kind of clairvoyance or can see bits of the future. It's not what I was expecting, but I'm not surprised she has something remarkable and undefinable under her surface.

"Do you remember those books? They were Choose Your Own Adventure. Where you'd have the beginning of a story and then it would come to a point where you could choose a



path. Each choice would be highlighted by a sentence or two, but whichever you'd choose, it'd take you to a different ending. You'd have to make choices along the way to get to your ending."

"I remember. I liked those. It felt easier knowing that if I didn't like the choice, I could go back and change it."

She smiles a full smile that pulls at the corners of her mouth and reaches all the way to her eyes. "Exactly. I'm not sure if that's how mine work. But I've realized that I get a sneak peek of what's coming. It shows me that, regardless of what I choose, the choice will change everything. *That's* what I see—the moment where the choice I make will inevitably impact my life. Set a new course." Lifting my palm to her lips again, she kisses the place she's been soothing. "Everything I've ever chosen, since I met you, has always brought me closer to you. And I don't know what that could mean. Only that I know you're important to me. The same way I'm important to you. You can call it a vibe or something mythically poetic, but I'd like to just call it *us*."

"I like that." I turn her hand over and kiss her wrist, and then kiss her. Only this time, when my lips meet hers, I feel different. Closer to her. That we're choosing to make this bigger than what it was when it began. And maybe it should have been this big all along, but I don't want to look behind, only ahead and focus on this. "Us."

Leaning forward, she kisses me through our smiles. "Us," she whispers. She keeps shifting forward into me, pushing me back onto the pillows. Both of us still naked, the blanket that was in our laps is now tangled underneath us. She settles her body on mine and sits up, straddling my lap. My cock already springs forward at the position we're currently employing. Her tits look so damn sexy, dark pink nipples pulled tight. The curve of her waist that folds into her thick hips makes it an insanely good view. I shift one arm behind my head so I can keep it.

"I'd like to try something," she says sweetly. I know there's nothing sweet about what she's thinking, because she

has slowly started rocking against me, whether she realizes she's doing it or not. "Do you trust me?"

"I do."

"Then don't do anything," she says with a smirk.

I look down at my cock, hard and twitching against my stomach. I smile. "I'm guessing you're going to want me to do something."

She glides two fingers from the base of my shaft, grazing her nails against the sensitive skin, up slowly toward the tip. "Let me be in control right now."

The words shouldn't, but they instantly make me feel a twinge of anxiety. She feels it too. My body going from calm and pliable to a tighter, more rigid version of itself. A state I'm in far more often than the former. "I don't know if--"

She cuts me off, knowing she'll need to handle this with care. And I *hate* that I'm so fucked up that I can't just be okay with the idea of her wanting to lead this. I'll do the best I can. "I didn't use the right words." She leans forward, correcting herself, and then kisses me softly. "I want you to fuck me, but I want to be on top. I've never felt comfortable on top, taking what I want and need from a partner. Will you let me?" Shifting down, she grazes her teeth along my nipple. I hiss at the feeling. I like it. "Will you let me use you like this?"

"Lean forward and let me taste those tits first."

Lifting herself off of me, she drops her chest right where I want it. I slap her right breast and then suck it into my mouth, pulling a gasp and then a low moan from her lips. I want her to sink onto my cock immediately at the sound. I want to see her come undone as I'm buried deep inside of her. "Michael." She sucks air in between her teeth.

"I'm yours, baby. Now sit down on my cock and take me nice and deep, like the good girl I know you are." I pinch her left nipple and then slap her tit again. "And don't you fucking stop until your cum is dripping on me."

She moans at the demand and yelps with the pinch. But like the gorgeously obedient partner that she is, she sits back

and positions my very eager cock where she wants it and sits down slowly. Inch by inch, she stretches over me, and it squeezes me so tightly that I need to pay attention to the way I'm breathing. If I don't focus, then she won't have much time to do as I demanded. So I let myself stay in the moment, but watch all of her intently as she settles on top of me. Her eyes closed and eyebrows lightly pinched as she gets comfortable with my size as deep as she has it. Her shoulders relax when she's fully seated and then starts to roll her hips forward. The movement is sensual and so damn satisfying, between the rocking backwards to pull me out and the motioning forward to push me inside of her the tiniest bit deeper each time.

I move my hands to her hips, guiding her slightly and easing some of the exertion. When her pace picks up, I know she's readying to chase what's been building. And I'm right there too, just waiting for it to crest so I can fall along with her. I don't want to interrupt her focus with words, so I don't ask if she wants the assist. I want her to enjoy every second of this, because watching her body move above me, chest out and face to the sky, she's lost in it. I bring my thumb to rest under where her clit already drags along my pubic bone, adding more pressure.

And that must be just enough, because her breathing picks up. She's panting, moving faster, and I'm so deep that it can't possibly ever feel any better than this. And as much as I love being in control, I love watching her take what she wants from me. It feels so good to worship her from below.

"I'm going to—" she breathes out. Unable to finish the thought, having to choose between breathing and talking.

I meet her thrusts, ready to unravel and moan her name after the reward. She's kidnapped every feeling from my body and owns every second for the next minute until her thighs start to shake. Her body readying to fall as I feel her grip me tighter, the place where we meet becoming more and more narrow before it chokes me completely.

She yells out in a mix between a scream and a moan, her body jerking forward as she tips completely and lets her orgasm wash over her. Seconds later, it takes me with her, and

I moan so loudly that it practically startles me. I feel my cock pulse inside of her as my orgasm runs rampant around me. She drapes her body over mine, her hair splayed across my face and my sweat-soaked chest resting against hers. If this is what it feels like to give up even just a little bit of control during sex, then maybe I'll need to rethink my apprehension, because that was the most intense feeling I've ever experienced.

What could be minutes, but is more likely close to many later, I brush her hair from my face and hers. I keep the rhythm of dragging my fingers across her back. The constant movement is soothing. Not a single worry or thought enters my mind, and instead I stay present, with her in the now.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and just call it," she says. And then leans up, folding her arms along my chest and resting her chin where they cross. "Best. First. Date. Ever."

I smile at her lightness. The easiness and youthful tone of a simply true statement. I kiss her softly, but like everything with us, it doesn't stay that way. Her lips track paths around mine, slowly and passionately. "I thought for a long time just being around you was enough to satiate the need that you pull out of me, but after kissing you, feeling you, tasting you..." I look into her beautiful eyes. "Anything less than this will never be enough."

She kisses me again. This time, with even more warmth and connection. *This* is what it feels like to love. It's official now, that was the last first date I ever plan to go on. And words that I can only ever imagine saying to this woman come pouring out of me.

"I'm in love with you too."



## *Grace*

IT'S BEEN A WEEK SINCE OUR FIRST DATE. SINCE HE TOLD ME he was in love with me. And I can't help but think about how I get him all to myself after dinner tonight. We've gotten a decent routine down. I spend the day with Miles and Sammy, usually in the pool after breakfast. Then we visit their horses at Asher's ranch. Some days, they want to ride, and others, they just want to brush and give them apples. When we get back to the house, we'll make lunch and then swim again. We pick something from their adventure backpacks to do and always try to bake something for a dessert to surprise their dad with after dinner.

Dinner is always different depending on when Michael gets home, but if he's too late, then we'll all make sure to have dessert together. I've fallen in love with all of it. At night, after the twins are in bed, he usually sneaks into my room. I've gotten used to falling asleep next to him, but I know he doesn't stay for long after I've drifted off. A part of me hates that I don't wake up with him, but the kids don't know how things have changed yet and neither of us would want them finding out in the middle of the night after a bad dream or lost stuffed animal.

Tonight, we're all going to Asher's for the Riggs Sunday dinner. I've been plenty of times over the years, but not since things have changed between me and Michael. I have no idea how much he's told his family, but we still haven't officially said anything to Miles or Sammy yet.

"I have something for you," Michael says softly as he comes up behind me. I bookmark the spot I was just reading on my Kindle.

I turn my head to the side, my eyes tracking where the kids are perched in the living room. "What is it?" I smile.

He looks over at the kids too, and since they're involved in their tablets, he grabs my hand and pulls me down the hall and quietly up the stairs.

“Dad?” Miles yells when we’re out of sight.

“Yea, bud?” Michael shouts back over the stairs.

“Where are you going?”

He rolls his eyes. “Were they not just ignoring everything a minute ago?” he asks me rhetorically. “I just need to show Grace something. We’ll be down in a second.”

He pulls me along with him into his room and then into the bathroom. When the door is closed, he pulls me right into his arms and kisses my neck. “Henry and Giselle are taking them for a sleepover tonight.” He kisses me, his lips slow and hungry, tongue brushing along mine. It has me melting into him even more. He nips my lower lip and smiles against my mouth when he says, “Which means, we get to play.”

He turns back to the door and flicks the lock. “Don’t worry, they’ll be fine. This is going to be quick.”

“Yay. I’ll tick a quickie off our list.”

“What? No, this isn’t a quickie.”

He opens the top drawer of the vanity and takes out a small box about the size of my palm. “Thought you might want to try this tonight.”

I take the box and unwrap the ribbon. When I flip the top open, it’s a bright blue gem about the size of a quarter, with shiny silver around it. When I look up at Michael, he’s watching me as I try to register what the hell this is. It’s not jewelry, it’s more costume-style and likely not real, but I don’t get how to wear—

When I pull to pick it up, I realize there’s more to it under the cushioned surface of the box. The rest of it comes out, and the shiny bulb shape that follows has me barking out a laugh.

“Oh my God, I don’t know if I should be excited or...”

“I want to fuck your ass so badly, and the only way that’s going to happen is if I warm you up.” My stomach flutters at the desire in his voice. He kisses me as I hold it in my hand, feeling the slight weight of it.

“Wait, you want me to wear this now?”

He smiles, and I know that’s a yes.

“We’re leaving for your Sunday family dinner in like ten minutes.”

“I know, and you’re going to wear it for me. I’m going to know that the whole time that you’re chit-chatting with people, you’re wearing this and getting ready for me.”

I should feel like that’s all wildly inappropriate, sipping on a cocktail with Michael’s brothers and sister as I have something jammed up my rear. But honestly, the idea of having a dirty little secret between us turns me on.

“What if it’s too much? I can’t just excuse myself and say, ‘Sorry, I’m full. I need to go take out my butt plug.’ Are you sure tonight is a good idea?”

He takes the sex toy from me and wraps his arms around my waist. “If you tell me no, then we save this for another time, but I think”—he kisses my chin—“if I”—then he moves his hand to the button of my jean shorts—“can touch my new favorite thing...” Pulling the zipper down, he drags his fingers over my panties and into the side, just enough to feel the wetness that’s waiting for him along the lips of my pussy.

“I knew it. You’re wet just at the idea of it.”

He leans in and takes my lips between his, thrusting his tongue in my mouth.

*God, this man absolutely melts me.*

“What do you think? Want to tick another thing off your list?” He drags his nose along my neck. “Then when we get back, I’ll draw a bath for you. I’ll finally get to see you wet and surrounded in bubbles in that tub.”

*Nip.* He drags his teeth along the path from the side of my neck to just below my ear, and I can’t help but moan at the sensation.

“Will you help me put it in?” I ask. And the question unleashes some piece of him, because he captures my mouth



again with force. By the end of it, we're both panting, and I'm turned on and ready.

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I'm a patient person. I've waited for this man to finally see me the way I've wanted to be seen for the majority of my life. But as Miles and Sammy run away from their dad's efforts to kiss them goodbye and goodnight, I'm officially at my last ounce of patience.

Every time I move, I feel a little tickle of excitement roll through me. Have you ever had a tickle on your buttock? I haven't, so this is entirely new territory and I'm ready to go. It's highly possible that I'm going to have a hands-free orgasm, while a butt plug sits hoisted in my rear as I listen to Asher talk about his new mare that's just joined the ranch. Normally, I'd be ecstatic to talk about the horses, but it's been an hour since dinner, and I'm so keyed up thinking about what I'm going to be doing tonight and the reminder of it inside of me, that I need some kind of relief.

Michael finally looks ready to go as he comes toward me. He must read it all over my face, because he cuts to the chase once he enters our conversation.

"Dad, I need to steal Grace. Time for us to go before Sammy decides she doesn't want to do a sleepover for whatever reason."

Good dodge. Let's go.

He lifts his arm to wave to the room and says, "We're headed out. Thanks for dinner. Sam and Miles, be good for Uncle Henry and Auntie G."

An echo of goodbyes follows. Sammy comes running over, finally ready to say goodnight and goodbye to her dad. "Bye, Daddy."

"Be good, sweetheart," he says, picking her up to give her a hug and kiss.

"Love you, Daddy."

She gives me a big hug, but before she turns around, she says, “Love you, Gracie.”

It’s not the first time, but it makes my heart feel full. To be important to her and her brother enough for them to say they love me, it makes me feel lucky.

“Love you too, Sammy.” I look over and shout to Miles, “G’night, Miles.”

He waves, busy looking at something with his Uncle Jack.

When we finally make it to the car, Michael opens my door and peppers a few light kisses to my neck before I get in. It’s an affection I’m growing so needy for lately, that a tiny moan escapes my lips.

He smiles at me as he walks over to his side of the car, knowing exactly how he makes my body crave his attention like that.

When he gets into the driver’s seat, he asks, “You doing okay?”

I shake my head yes, eager to get home and do more.

He rewards me with more praise as we pull away from the house. “That’s my girl. Is your perfect ass nice and ready for me?” Tilting his hips up, he adjusts himself.

“Oh, hell,” I exhale and bite back my smile.

He wraps his free hand around the inside of my thigh and squeezes. The pressure of it and the move itself feels so possessive; it’s a part of our relationship that I can’t seem to get enough of.

“We don’t need to do that tonight if it’s too much. I’d be happy to just lick your pussy for as long as you’ll let me.”

I lean on my elbow, biting my thumb for a second as I look out the window. I mean, that’s an offer only stupidity would refuse. But, if he thinks that’s all I want, then I need him to know I am way better than okay. The thought of him fucking me in every place he wants, has my cheeks flushed.

“I just spent dinner holding back, what I can only guess, is at least two orgasms. You will absolutely lick and fuck my pussy, but I need you everywhere tonight.” I give him a leveling glare, “Everywhere...”

He laughs, and huffs out, “Fuck, baby.”

He picks up speed and we’re back at his house in less than five minutes. Before I can open my door, he jumps out of his side as soon as the car is parked. He doesn’t even pull into the garage. Instead, he throws my door open and as soon as I stand, he kisses me. His arms wrap around my waist, and he lifts me just slightly off the ground. Just enough to move me toward the door. He kicks the Jeep door shut and smiles into our kiss.

“You can’t say stuff like that, Grace, and expect me to be able to think afterwards.”



## *Grace*

I LIKE THIS NEW VERSION OF HIM. THE ONE WHO CAN'T HOLD himself back from me anymore. The one who has every intention of making me feel good, seen, and loved.

“That’s it, my good girl. Just relax,” he croons in my ear.

It took minutes for us to find our way upstairs and into his room. A few more to strip each other naked, and barely any time for him to tease me ever so softly so that I’m relaxed and needy all over again.

“I need you. More of you,” I breathe out slowly. And on my next exhale, I want him to know that this isn’t just about me. “Michael, I want to make you feel good too.” My body arches up for his fingers. He’s lying beside me, licking and sucking on my nipple as his fingers roam my pussy with just enough varying pressure that I’m on the verge of demanding more.

“Baby, doing anything to you makes me feel good. I could spend our whole night face first in your beautiful pussy.” Two fingers glide up and down between those lips, grazing over my clit on each pass.

“Coaxing out whatever she needs, and it’d feel good.”

He takes the same fingers and brings them to his face, beneath his nose. “I can get off just from the smell of you.”

And then he drags the same fingers into his mouth. “The taste.”

When he’s done licking his own fingers, he moves them to the valley between my breasts, drags a wet path down the center, and over to my right nipple.

“I could watch you play with your gorgeous tits”—he pinches, and the feeling reverberates through me—“and I’d fucking unravel at the sight.”

And as much as those words make me feel sexy and powerful, I can’t stop worry from creeping in. “What if I don’t

like anal sex? Like, what if it's just not for me, but you really like it?"

He pulls back from my breast and focuses on my face. "If you don't enjoy it, then we don't do it. I'll stop the second you say."

"Right, but you like it. You know what you're doing here. I mean, you bought me a butt plug. So what if I don't, but it's still something you want?"

"Grace." He smiles at me, knowing I'm nervous. "I don't know if I like it."

"You've never?" I ask, surprised because he just seemed to know what he was doing with prep and materials. His confidence during all of it screams that he's a back door bandit.

"I've never," he says, smiling at me. "I'm exploring this with you too."

"But you're so much older than me." I laugh.

He gives me a look that says, "*Really?*"

"How did you know about butt plugs, like what size, and the details?"

"Baby, if you saw my search history, then you'd realize really quickly that I don't know the first thing other than what I've watched in porn."

"Porn?"

His fingers dance around my skin, roaming from my collarbone down slowly to the curves of my breasts again.

"Yes."

"And I've researched, so I'm as prepared as possible. I like lists, remember?"

He pecks at my lips. "I want to make sure we do this right. I want to do everything I can to help you enjoy it." His hand drags along my thigh and his touch makes me want to abandon any apprehension I might have had. "The butt plug was prep. A way to warm you up."

I laugh, and he looks at me quizzically.

“Sorry, butt plug, it’s the worst combination of words. I need to call it something else, please.”

“I’ll call it whatever you want.” He chuckles at my interruption.

I widen my eyes, because I can’t help but joke with him about this. “Tushy Tool? Rear Jewels? Oh, how about, Cheeky Stopper?”

We laugh so hard that we can’t catch our breaths. His head tucked against my side, his shoulders jumping at my ridiculous turn of the conversation. It reminds me that we’re still us. Regardless of what we’ve added, we didn’t take this part of us away.

I turn over and straddle him, pushing him to his back. The movement reminds me that we still haven’t taken it out. The plug. But I’m ready for more. I lean down and kiss him, his hands coming to my face, and he rakes his fingers into my hair. It only takes a few swipes of his tongue to erase the silliness that blanketed us both, and to bring us back to what we started. His cock’s hard and eager as it strains against his tight dark blue boxer briefs, grinding himself up into me. The arousal that had started is still present and all over him now.

“I want you so badly right now,” he whispers between kisses and nips of my lips.

He turns us back over and guides my knees to my chest. Rubbing my pussy, he finds my clit and gives it the best attention. Moments later, he removes the plug and, instantly, it leaves me feeling empty. And all of a sudden, all of my nerves are gone, because I’m eager for him to fill me. However he wants, I’m giving him the reins to decide. I like submitting to him, having him in control. I thrive on it in this setting.

“Tell me what you want, Grace?” He laves at my clit. The slow rhythm of it has me edging toward an orgasm. “Do you want my cock in this needy little pussy of yours?”

Lick. Flick. Rub.

I moan in response. I can’t seem to form words.

“Or are you ready for me to fuck your ass the way you’ve been asking?”

“Yes,” I instantly moan. “Please,” I plead.

Leaning over, he opens the drawer. I hear the click of a cap, and then a cool wetness coats me.

“Look how hard you’ve made me.”

I look to see him gripping his length. A bead of his precum drips onto my stomach, and I can’t help but smile that I can do that to him. Make him so hard that his cock weeps for me. He may be the one in control, but being with him like this, it feels powerful.

He teases my ass in small circles with his fingers. The motion with the glide of the lube sends ripples of excitement through me, and within seconds, I’m practically begging for him. “Michael, please. More. I need more.”

Leaning forward, he kisses me. “Okay, baby, I’ll give you more,” he whispers. “Grab your knees for me.” As soon as I do, he tilts my hips up higher and then wedges a pillow beneath my ass. He rubs his thumb in circles around my clit. The pressure and unexpectedness of it has me mewling, already teetering on the edge of an orgasm.

“That’s it. Come for me, baby.”

The pressure increases, and his other fingers return to my ass. The combined sensation of it makes me do exactly as he asked, and I fall over. A darkness takes over my vision at the same time as my orgasm shoots right through me. It settles into a full-body vibration that engulfs all of my senses and has me gasping for air.

Just as I relax and the pulsing starts to slow, I feel the stretch and pressure as the head of his cock takes me. He’s so much bigger than the plug I had in earlier, but my body is still so relaxed and spent from the orgasm, that it’s only uncomfortable for a few moments.

“That’s it. Breathe for me, baby. I’m almost there,” he whispers. He stops moving so I can adjust to his size before he moves farther. I tilt my head slightly so I can watch him, his



brow furrows as he bites his lip in concentration. His breath exhales in pleasure as his eyes meet mine. And that's when he glides in even deeper.

“That’s it, baby. Oh fuck, Grace. Look at me just like that. You’re so perfect. So fucking tight,” he grits out. Hearing his voice strained from how good it feels for him intensifies all of it for me. The fullness, the praise, the promise of another orgasm that I can feel is already starting to build up again.

He leans over me farther, resting his forehead on my back and breathing me in. When he’s ready, one hand grabs my hips while the other moves around me. His fingers skate over my clit, and he teases it with pulsing flicks. The feeling of it combined with his cock makes my body shake involuntarily. My thighs quiver. I can’t contain the soft moans that escape my lips. I can feel my breaths move in and out faster. I fight to take in more air. I need more when every part of me is filled and ready to shatter. When he starts moving, his body rolls slowly back and mercilessly forward. The pace beckons something uncontrolled and all-consuming.

“You want more, baby?”

I can’t answer, because I’m enamored with the way he plays with my body.

“Tell me you’re okay,” he says. I meet his eyes and nod.

“You. Yes. Oh God, you feel so good.”

“More?”

I nod. “More. Please. Give me more.”

He growls in response, and then slaps my pussy and buries two fingers inside. His fingers fuck my pussy while his cock fucks my ass from behind.

“Fuck,” he growls in my ear. His body hugs mine. “You’re such a good girl, baby. Seeing you take me so well. Feeling this tight ass pull me in. You going to come for me again?”

“Yes. Don’t stop,” I beg.

“I’m going to fill you up so good,” he promises. “I’m so close, you’re going to make me come so hard,” he croons in

my ear. After another moan, he grits out, “Come for me, baby. I need you to come for me.”

And I do, seconds after he asks, just like the good girl he said I was. A deep, rasping moan follows as his orgasm works its way vigorously through his body, keeping his pace as I continue coming with every thrust. I cry out his name as he moans louder and spills into me. Filling me just like he promised. I feel so complete, so sated; I could have easily blacked out and wouldn't have known.

When his orgasm slows, his body still pumps forward as he draws out every last drop of his release.

We lie there for a while as we both come down from the high. His body heavy over mine and he's still inside of me.

“I might have died,” he mumbles into my skin.

I laugh. “I know. I can't move.”

Sitting up on his elbow, he moves slowly out of me. The loss of him is immediate, and I can feel his cum dripping out of me and down the back of my thigh.

He kisses me and asks, “You okay?”

“Yes. So good.”

He gets up from the bed a few minutes later, and while I know I need to clean up, I can't move. I hear him running water in the bathroom, but I must have started to fall asleep because what feels like a moment later, he scoops me up off of the bed and carries me into the bathroom.

“Let's go, my dirty girl. Time to use the bath.”

“I thought I was your good girl?”

He smiles at me when we reach the bathroom. “You're that too, baby.”

I like when he started calling me Grace and not Gracie. His nickname for me is long gone, but this new one... the way he says “baby” makes my body sway and all of me swoon.

The tub is filled with water and just a few bubbles. Steam surrounds us. It smells like cocoa and something warm, like

burning wood or a campfire. There are a couple of candles on the edge of the vanity and the lights are dimmed. It's soothing. A calming perfection I'm so ready to sink into. He doesn't put me down until we're hovering over the water. My legs submerge, and then the rest of me. The water stings on contact, but the warmth of it makes any discomfort dissipate quickly.

"This is for you," he says as he drags his hand around to my chin. He tilts it up toward his mouth to kiss me. "Relax for as long as you want. I'm going to shower off."

"This feels so good," I hum.

He nips my lips one more time, and then moves to the shower. It's the best seat in the house. The glass enclosure gives me the best view of every gorgeous part of him. The water flattens and darkens his hair, and then falls down his beautiful body.

The way he thought through all of tonight, ending it with a bath, it feels perfect. I never asked for perfect, but now that I'm here, I'll bask in it. The lazy smile I'm wearing is simply because I feel taken care of. I feel important to someone who adores me and shows it. I feel so many things, but the only one I keep coming back to is loved.



## *Grace*

“WE’RE GOING TO TELL THEM TONIGHT.”

“Tell who, what?” River asks as we sit on the lounge chairs.

I stare at her and leave her question unanswered.

She finally lifts the sunglasses from her eyes and looks at me. I tilt my head toward the pool and the splashing maniacs.

“Them?! You’re going to tell them that—wait. What exactly are you planning to tell them? Are you in a relationship? Are you friend turned nanny turned,” she pauses, whispering, “stepmommy?”

The question hits me right between the eyes, and I can’t help but worry for a minute. “No! That’s skipping a lot of steps. Michael and I are together. Dating. Seeing one another as more than friends.”

“You sure about that? That eleven that’s living deep between those eyebrows is telling me otherwise.”

“You’re making me hyper focus here. I don’t want to overthink. Yes, we’re dating. And we’re serious enough that they should know. They’re going to see us hold hands and kiss one another.”

She stares at me, waiting for more. “You’re ready for that?”

“What? No. Yes.” She has me flustered now. “I am. It’s becoming increasingly difficult to pretend we’re not obsessed with each other.”

“That’s been evident for a lot longer than you’ve been sleeping together.”

I give her a fake smile. “Plus, most of Strutt’s knows we’re more than friends, thanks to that whole Beverly situation.”

“You mean, the Eager Beaver Takedown? Oh yes, everyone is aware.”

I ignore her. “It feels weird that his two kids don’t have any clue. So we’re going to tell them and hope that they don’t *not* like the idea.”

“You so sure about that?”

I look over at them. Sammy throwing rings at Miles’s head at full force.

“Sammy, not at his face,” I shout.

“It’s okay. I’m pretending to be a Beluga whale and those are my treats,” Miles yells.

River interrupts. “So this is happening, then? You’re off the market.”

“I remember the moment I saw him. In vivid detail. It set off a massive, almost blinding crush that I couldn’t escape. I know you’ve felt that.” I smile.

“Oh, yes. It’s a dangerous game, falling for a friend. Everyone thinks it’ll be like *Some Kind of Wonderful* where Watts gets the guy. That he leaves his incredible date with the hottest woman and chooses the girl he goes to for advice about other women. But that’s not how it works. That’s not real life. Except it is, for you.”

“When are you just going to tell Benny how you feel?” I ask her.

“Never. It’ll pass. I’m just not having much luck lately. I’m waiting for tourist season to set me right. But we’re not talking about Benny. Liking him is a phase.”

I give her the very appropriate raised eyebrows that ask all of the snarkest of questions silently.

“Okay, one sec,” I tell her. “Sam and Miles, let’s get out and dry off so we can get things set for when your dad comes home.”

Her mischievous smile already has me knowing what she’s going to ask.

“Go ahead. I know what you’re going to say, but go ahead.”

“Can you still feel your coochy?”

I bark out a laugh. “River, oh my God. Yes.” I swat at her leg. “But wait until I tell you about his rope skills. Oh, and anal. Kind of liked it.”

She chokes on her laugh. “Oh my God, I love you. Also, who are you?!”

“What’s so funny?” Sammy asks as she comes over.

“River, are you stealing my jokes again?” Miles yells from the pool steps.

“Miles, why are you the best guy I know?” she shouts back.

“My dad says that if I want to be a good man, then I’ll treat the women in my life like they’re as big as the sky. Aunt Everly is the moon. So what do you say, River, you wanna be my sun?”

“Miles!” I yell out, laughing.

She’s laughing so hard, she can’t catch her breath. “Where did you come from, Little Riggs?”

Sammy laughs with us, but she turns to me once River gets up to bring Miles his towel, and says, “Don’t worry, Gracie.” She pauses, thinking about what she wants to say. “You’re the gravity. You know, the thing that keeps the world from floating away. The thing that pulls us and pushes us.”

“Did you just think of that? Because that’s a very beautiful thing to say.”

“No. That’s what Daddy said you were. His gravity.”

And just like that, I’m sure all of my choices have led me right to where I’m meant to be.

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If they hit the ground, they’re called meteorites. Some of what falls are the size of tiny rocks or marbles, and most are no bigger than grains of sand. But for an entire month, starting

today, anyone in the northern hemisphere can search just northeast of the Perseus constellation and find it.

“Do you think we’ll catch one this year, Dad?”

“Catch what? A meteorite?”

Miles adjusts his finderscope and looks at his star map. “Yes, a meteorite. I think it’s going to happen this year. I can feel it.”

“Dad, this says that is absolutely not Cassiopeia, but... oh wait, never mind, I had it angled wrong.” Sammy rocks in her hammock chair, gazing at the sky through an app on Michael’s phone.

“Sam, use the binoculars or the telescope, not the app.”

I take another bite of my chocolate ice cream. We decided that since tonight kicks off the Perseid meteor shower that we’ll have ice cream sundaes at midnight. Michael told the twins that they can stay up as late as their eyes will let them, but I think it’s also his way of spoiling them a bit before dropping our news. I can tell he’s nervous. I’ve watched him tap his thumb along his button and rub the back of his neck far too many times to really be massaging it.

As I watch him adjust the scope that Miles has been using, and then circle something on his star map journal, I can’t help but smile. He was so worried that he wouldn’t be able to do it. Live up to his own expectations. Be as good of a father as Asher is to him. I’ve only gotten a taste of what being a parent is like through him. I see how he worries. I just hope that I don’t contribute to that worry. Ever.

He catches me watching and pins me with one of his smiles. *How does he expect me not to be looking?* There’s a piece of hair that always manages to flop over his forehead. I can never decide what kind of product he uses, because it doesn’t hold very well. That damn piece flops by mid-afternoon, at the latest. So without thinking, I get up and stand in front of him, pushing the hair back and running my fingers through to his neck. He tilts his head down so I can reach, and I watch his body relax as I comb my fingers up and down



slowly. He pulls me into him and the closeness of it calms us both. This is what people chase after, the ease of another person. It feels so good to be near him this way, to touch him whenever I want to, or to see him struggle with something and let him know I can help if he wants it.

Two giggles burst the makeshift bubble we've built, and both of us realize that we maybe just told the kids what's going on without having to say a thing.

"Dad, I think this is the part when you're supposed to kiss her," Miles says.

Michael barks out a laugh. "Oh yeah? Thanks, buddy." He pulls me in tighter and cups my face, fingers diving into my hair, and kisses me. His lips clasp over mine and open just slightly to lick as he moves them.

Little squeals and barfing noises come from their respective hammock chairs. We both can't help but laugh, our lips still hovering over the others, and he says, "Give me one more, Kid. Let's show them what love looks like."

So we do.

He kisses me with equal parts affection and adoration in front of the two most important people in his life.

"Are they done, yet?" Miles asks.

"I haven't looked. This was your idea. You look," Sammy says back.

"Look! I just saw one. Dad! Dad! It's started!" Miles shouts, and it forces us apart. He's pointing up while he looks through his telescope. And sure enough, Perseids begins.



## *Michael*

“YOU WENT BEHIND MY BACK AND INVITED THEM OUT anyway!”

I sit back in my chair and take his anger. I deserve it. I went ahead and moved forward with inviting the IFSC, even after Law made the call not to proceed. My father had said he supported the decision, but quite honestly, I didn't.

“If you took any time to talk with me about it instead of jumping to the most aggressive decision just to flex in front of Dad, then you would realize this was the right call. We need to take the opportunity. Do you know what kind of message it sends if we actually declined their offer to come out?”

I knew I shouldn't have canceled therapy again this week. What's changed between Grace and me, combined with some of the stress weighing on me here, I really should talk to Doc. My head throbs at the hissy fit that's going to come pouring out of my brother's mouth.

Law slams my office door and drops in the seat across from my desk. He undoes the top button of his collar and loosens his tie. He's been dressing the part lately. Stepping up, but he's been a loose cannon. Taking trips for the weekend and not telling anyone where he's going. It's careless and it's showing. He looks exhausted. The only time I know where he might be is if he posts something on his social media, which also has become somewhat of a problem. It's starting to gain national news attention for the videos he's posting. It's not the behavior I was expecting of him, but something's going on.

“You're acting like a spoiled idiot.”

“That's productive. Thank you, Michael.” He pushes his hand into his hair and huffs out a deep breath. “How am I supposed to do this job when nobody will take me seriously?”

I watch him for a moment, but before I can answer, he shifts back to why he came in here to begin with. So I answer, “You're welcome.”

That gets him to look up at me and laugh for a second. *There he is.*

“It’s a gamble we need to take. Best case, they like what they see. Worst case, they don’t. Then you use that marketing brain of yours on how to spin that the right way for us. There’s always a story to tell, or ways we can improve. This is a business, which means it evolves. So let’s see which way that’s going to be.”

“You grew some balls, I’ll give you that.” He laughs and then shifts in his seat. A few minutes of silence later, which must feel like decades for Law, he asks, “Do you think I’m in over my head with this CEO business?”

“I think if you want it, you’ll figure it out. But if you don’t, then tell Dad. You’re not going to disappoint anyone if you decide you want to stay in your marketing role.”

“I want it. And I’m willing to do what it takes to get it. At the end of the day, I’m a Riggs. It needs to stay in the family. And I know you like where you’re at,” he says. But before I can say anything more to that, he asks, “When do they show up?”

“This weekend. I’ll take them to three different spots along the ridge. And then I’ll show them where that documentary team was shooting and see if there’s potential in that spot as well. We haven’t focused anything in that area of the mountain yet.”

There’s a double tap on my office door. “Come in,” I yell. But it’s already opening and Lenny stands in the threshold. I haven’t spoken to her much at work, mostly because the way we operate here this time of year is that she’ll be in early with the guides and then leave for the day on tours. And now, I stupidly feel like I’ve made some kind of error in not seeking her out.

“Law,” she says and tips the brim of her hat.

“Michael, this isn’t a work visit. This is me stopping by *your* office, wondering why I haven’t gotten so much as a word from you since you started boinking my daughter.”

*Shit.*

“Len—” I start to say, but she cuts me off by holding up her hand.

Law barks out a laugh, and Lenny gives him a death glare. “You’re my boss, so I’m going to tell you to shut it, respectfully.”

We both bite back a smile.

She turns back to me and points her finger. “You’re coming out to dinner tomorrow night. You’re bringing my daughter. You and I need to get to know a few more things about each other, while Gracie gets to know my partner a bit better too.” She smiles at me and says, “I approve, by the way. Always have, but don’t avoid me in the future. I will find you.” She taps the corner of her eye. “I see more than you might think, Riggs. Remember that.”

Then she’s slamming the door behind her.

I look back at my brother, eyebrows raised. “Guess I should have said something?”

Laughing, he says, “Honestly, if she liked men, I’d probably shoot my shot with her. She’s fucking fierce.”

“Get out of my office.”

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“I met with the team this afternoon, and they’re all ready. They know it’s just as much the impression we make as it is about what the ridge offers.”

She smudges the black pencil that she just drew along her eyelid, making her eyes look bigger, sexier. “You’re going to impress the shit out of them, Michael. I’m not worried in the least. You’re going to get this, I can feel it.”

“Where are you going again?” I rake my eyes down her body. The tight black dress hits just below her ass and the tops of her boots go to just above her knees. She looks really good

and, suddenly, I'm rethinking staying in with the kids and sending her out with River.

"River has an invite to this celebrity influencer, cocktails in the mountains thing. I'm surprised your brother hasn't told you about it. I think your rugby player friend, Sean King, will be there, and Law's buddy, Hernandez. Plus, some other folks that River seems to think are big deals. I'm going as her wing woman, but don't worry, I have Benny on standby if I need to tap out."

I run my hands up the backs of her thighs. "Grace, I'm not worried. I'm just eager to take this dress off of you when you get home later." I lean into her neck from behind, and instead of swatting me away to finish her makeup, she turns and drapes her arms around my neck.

"Is that all?"

"You're going to send me texts," I tell her.

"Oh, I am? And what will be in these texts?"

"Pictures."

"Of?" she asks, chiding me. She already knows what I'm going to say.

"Whatever I want. And you're not going to make me wait either."

"Or else?"

"I've been thinking about how much I liked marking up your perfect little ass." I run my hand along the crack of her ass, up and down, until she melts closer into me.

"That doesn't really sound like a punishment, Mister."

"Call it whatever you want, baby. But you're going to do what I ask. And then you're going to come home and let me remind you how much this gorgeous body of yours makes me want to do the filthiest things."

She kisses my neck, pecks my lips, and then turns around to finish her makeup. "Deal. Now go, so I can finish getting ready. My ride will be here any minute."

“River, my sunshine!” Miles yells out from downstairs.

“I’ll tell her you’ll be down in a minute.” I kiss the back of her neck and head down.

When I hit the bottom stair, I see my buddy, Sean King, giving Miles a piggyback ride around the kitchen. River types away on her phone and, without looking up, she says, “Michael, don’t worry, I’ll have your girl back in one piece. I promise.”

“Not worried, troublemaker.”

“Michael!” Sean bellows from the kitchen. The dude is pretty massive, but his voice carries even louder. He’s easily the most intimidating guy in any room, but he’s a good guy. Knowing that he’s with my girl tonight already has me feeling more relaxed.

With my kid hanging from his back, he comes up to shake my hand, and pulls me into a back-clapping hug. “Good to see you, man.”

“Thought you were coming when we pulled up to your place, but then, River informed me that it’s the nanny instead.”

“Not just the nanny,” I correct.

He laughs. “Thought so. ’Bout time you went for it. You’ve been staring at that girl for as long as I’ve known you.”

“Sean, one more run? Please?” Miles pleads from Sean’s back.

“You bet, little Riggs.”

“That’s one of the best rugby players in the world trotting you around our kitchen,” I yell out as they take off, Miles giggling as Sean starts trotting so he gets a bumpier ride.

My phone vibrates again in my back pocket. But I ignore it again when my front door opens and in walks Bishop Jones.

River looks at me quickly. “Shit. I’m sorry. C’mon, Bishop, let’s wait for Gracie in the car.”

“Hold up,” I call after her, Sean coming up next to me. “Bishop, good to see you. You and Sean take care of my girl tonight.”

“Your girl?” Bishop asks.

I look at River, and she knows that I’m pissed at her now. Why would she think this wouldn’t piss me off?

“Don’t give me that glare. These very handsome men are here for my benefit. I’m not looking to cause problems.” She holds up two fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You were never a Girl Scout, River.”

“Maybe not, but I think men should be kept on their toes,” she says with a wink.

*Is she fucking kidding me?*

“I’m ready. I’m ready. I’m so sorry, Riv.” Grace comes down and doesn’t pay attention to the tension in the foyer until she hits the landing. *God, she looks beautiful.* I almost forget about my annoyance at this situation just by looking at her. Her hair is swept to one side, showing off the oversized, thin gold hoops in her ears. The black dress hugs all of her curves with precision. There’s nothing overly memorable about the dress; it’s her body paired with the high black boots that shout, at an excessively high volume, how sexy this woman is. She looks at the faces in the room and reads it all perfectly. Mine especially.

Instead of saying hello to anyone else first, she walks right up to me and says, “See you after the party, baby.” And then she pulls at the front of my shirt and kisses me. A claiming kiss that I know is meant to make me feel important to her. It’s her showing me that there’s nothing to be worried or jealous about. I know for a fact that the thrust of her tongue into my mouth and the length of her embrace, which is just a few beats too long, is making everyone else feel uncomfortable. It’s perfection, just like her.

Leaning in once more for one last peck, she says, “Don’t forget to text me.” She winks, *fucking winks*, and then says to



everyone else, “Ready?”

“Dad! Can we *please* finish watching the movie now?”

“Yeah, the popcorn isn’t even warm anymore,” Sammy whines.

“Let’s make more,” I tell her.

“Yesssss!” She pumps her fist in the air. “Gracie looked really pretty tonight. Do you think I can get my ears pierced like her?”

“Um, sure. I don’t see why not.” I take out another bag of popcorn. “We’ll talk to Grace and maybe she can tell us where to go.”

Sammy thinks about it for a minute. “Or she can just take me?”

I smile and realize that maybe that’s something she’d like to do with another girl and not her dad. To be able to pick out some earrings together afterwards too. I give her a nod yes as the microwave beeps.

My phone vibrates in my pocket at the same time as the doorbell rings.

“I got it, Dad,” Miles yells from the couch.

When I finally look at my phone, I see a bunch of texts from Molly.

MOLLY

I’m in town tonight, Michael. I’d really like to see Sammy and Miles.

Michael, please don’t ignore this. I’m just here for the night and would really like to see them.

You’re a dick.

I’m going to your house. You can’t keep me from seeing them.

And all I think after I read that last text is, yes, I fucking can. But I don't have the chance to even respond because Miles comes back into the kitchen with Molly right behind him.

"Dad—" he says, knowing that we weren't expecting her today. That this random showing up doesn't feel right, but I'm not going to make a scene or allow the kids to feel the discomfort of it.

"Hi, Michael," she says plainly. Her voice kicks up when she says, "Sammy, baby! Come give me a hug." She opens her arms wide and kneels down. Miles stands off to the side, trying to understand what he should do. I know they're both still upset after she decided to ditch them this summer.

"I just saw your texts. We've been busy since dinner," I say as I raise the bowl of popcorn. Showing her that we're in the middle of our night.

"We're watching a movie," Miles says, trying to break through the awkwardness. Sammy still stands next to me, her hand on her hip, just watching her mom stand slowly from crouching down, rejected from the request for a hug. I feel a little sorry for her, but Sammy isn't one to gloss things over. She takes after me in that way. What she feels is what you get and nothing else.

"Do you want to watch with us?" Miles asks.

Molly looks at me, waiting for my approval.

And I count to four because, really, I want to tell her to leave. But I know that's not going to make either of the kids feel good. So instead, I shrug. "Stay, if you'd like."

When we move back into the living room, I see her bags by the front door, but I don't ask. Honestly, there's a part of me that doesn't want to know. She's shown me repeatedly that she's only present for our kids when it suits her. So I'll wait for her to tell me what's going on when the kids aren't in the room, though I can already guarantee it's going to piss me off.

Since I don't think sexting, and then dropping the bomb that Molly is here, would be a great mix, I opt just to text

Grace to let her know what's going on.

MICHAEL

You looked beautiful tonight.

GRACE

Thank you. Wait until you see what I'm wearing under this...

MICHAEL

It's going to have to wait, baby.

GRACE

Boo. Why?

MICHAEL

Molly showed up.

I don't hear from her after that. I'm hoping that her phone died, and she didn't just get pissed. I mean, I'm pissed off enough.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I start overthinking the questions the kids are going to have about why their mother couldn't be here with them this summer, but here she is now. Or why she doesn't want to spend time with them when she comes back. If there even was a European tour. I don't have answers and I refuse to make excuses for her. I fear that they'll feel the same kind of abandonment that I felt when I watched my mother leave. The memories of it have me feeling restless, so I start to count.

My anxiety is always waiting just off stage to come in and try to take over. I worry about what will happen if Grace comes in and sees Molly with us on the couch. How it looks like a family, but how it's nothing close to what it feels like when she's here. I focus on the numbers and timing it with my

breathing. I know I'll keep a panic attack at bay, but the calm that I've been basking in lately is gone.



## *Grace*

“SHHHH.” I PUT MY POINTER FINGER OVER MY MOUTH. “You’re going to wake up the kids. Or worse, Michael. He’s so grumpy when he gets woken up.”

“He’s so grumpy when he’s awake.” She laughs.

“No, he’s not grumpy. He’s sexy. He’s broody? He studies people. And when he’s assessing, it looks like brooding. Or maybe grumpy. But believe me, when you have his attention”—I whoosh a breath of air out of my pursed lips—“it’s worth the wait.”

“You can have him. I’ll take Law. He’s my cup of tea.”

I laugh. “I thought you were into Sean? I can’t keep up with you.”

River trips over two bags by the stairs as we make our way toward the kitchen. “Dammit, good thing I already took off my heels. That could have been a big ol’ face plant. Plant face? Rhode–Rhoden–Rhododendron face.”

I shush her again.

“Please tell me we can have a beer with some grilled cheese. Please, please, please?”

I open the refrigerator and spot two IPAs in the back. And I know the drawer houses both cheddar and American cheese slices. “Jackpot,” I whisper as I pull all of it out. I snag the butter, then the small frying pan and a loaf of bread from the bread box.

“Do you think he’ll want to hook up while he’s in town?”

“Who?”

“Sean. He was so flirty, but then he didn’t close the deal.” She leans on her folded arms that she’s draped over the counter.

“I thought you said Law?”

“Law’s not in the same league. He’s the big fish. A fantasy.”

“I don’t see it, but then again, he is my boss. And my man’s brother.”

She laughs as she stuffs a piece of cheese into her mouth. “Your man. Gosh, I love that for you. But back to me, please.”

I can’t help but giggle at her. “I think if what you want is a hook-up, then yes, go for it with Sean. You’re gorgeous and way out of most of these guys’ leagues. Including Sean King,” I tell her. “And Law Riggs.”

“You’re my girl, you have to say that, but we both know that’s not true.”

“You shut your face right now. You have built a business out of your flawless taste. You’ve turned into a motherfucking boss.”

“Damn, Grace. I like this tone.”

“Shhhh, don’t interrupt my spiel,” I tell her. “Wait, let me plug in my phone. It died before I could finish my texts with Michael.”

I fumble to plug it in. “Maybe he’s awake up there.”

She opens both of our beers and steals another piece of cheese.

I lift my hair off my neck and pull it high in a knot, while I wait for my phone to power back on.

“I think you can do anything you want. And I mean that. Whether that’s a man or building a lifestyle. I think if you could think that way about yourself too, then you might end up figuring out exactly who you want on that ride with you.”

She wipes a tear from the corner of her eye. “Can we put a pin in this? My fragile ego is going to come out of this with way too much big clit energy—”

“Giselle tell you that one?”

“Of course.”

“Now tell me, is Michael bigger than a baby’s arm?”

But I don’t get a chance to answer my friend’s ridiculous question.

“Well, isn’t that interesting. I didn’t realize things had progressed to that level between the two of you,” Molly interrupts as she emerges from the spare guest suite that used to be my room, off of the kitchen.

*The fuck is she doing here?*

“I was in town for the night and wanted to see my children,” she says.

River snorts. “Yup, you said that out loud.” She takes another swig of her beer. “I think my friend is asking what you are doing here. Your kids are asleep.”

“I’m sorry, who are you?”

River looks at me with her eyebrows raised.

Molly looks at me. “I took the guest room. Michael said that I could have it.” She watches as I flip the grilled cheese. “I hadn’t realized it was because you’re sharing his bed.”

“I guess because that’s none of your business, so...”

She huffs a laugh. “The friend and nanny. How cliché.”

“Molly, I’m not interested in doing this. I respect that you’re Miles and Sammy’s mom, but don’t think you have any claim over Michael or his personal life. So I’ll politely ask you to step the fuck back.” I bite my grilled cheese. “And stay in your lane.”

She smiles, like what I just said is funny or something, but I have no interest in doing this with her. She moseys back down the hallway, but over her shoulder, she says, “Goodnight, ladies.”

Her nonchalance makes me feel uneasy.

We finish up our beers and grilled cheeses a few minutes later.



“You want me to stay?” River asks. “I could just give her intimidating glares in the morning if you want?”

I smile at her. “No, I’m good.”

After River leaves, I make my way upstairs and into Michael’s room, I’m exhausted, and now, emotionally drained from that encounter with Molly. After I use the bathroom and wash my face, I throw on one of Michael’s t-shirts, and then crawl into bed with him. With his back facing me, I scoot in behind him and huddle against his body. When I snake my arm through his and wrap it around his waist, he wakes up just enough to hold it there.

I kiss his back and that’s just enough to wake him fully.

He turns and pulls me closer to him. “I’m sorry I didn’t wait up for you.” His voice is raspy from his sleep, and even though it’s dark, the skylights give just enough light that I can make out his smile. “Molly showed up. After the movie with the kids, I’d had enough of being around her, so I came to bed.”

“My phone died. I didn’t know she was here until I just saw her now.”

“Shit.” Rolling over completely, I lock his arms around me farther. He leans down to kiss my neck. “It’s not ideal, but I didn’t feel right just telling her to leave when the kids clearly wanted her to stay.”

“Is she here for more than tonight?”

“No. And I don’t want to talk about her. I’d like to show you how much I missed you tonight instead.” He moves down the bed, lifting my shirt along his descent. And as much as I want to enjoy this, my mind is elsewhere. “Is this okay?” Michael asks, his mouth peppering brief kisses all along my stomach.

I shake off the incident in the kitchen and focus on him. “Yes. Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t. He kisses a path down my body and back up again until he settles himself between my legs and pushes inside of me. We fuck each other in a slow, sensual rhythm

that soothes everything and reminds me that I'm exactly where I want to be.

---

The next morning, despite the way Michael made love to me last night, I feel "off."

It started when I came downstairs to find the twins making breakfast with Molly. A twinge of jealousy passed through me at seeing them do that with her. A thing that we've been doing almost every morning together this summer. I know all of the reasons why that's silly—both my thoughts and feelings on the matter, but it doesn't change them.

I could tell that Michael was anxious all day as Molly and the kids went swimming. He was quiet. Internalizing all of the worry that having her here brings.

"My father is coming over to watch them tonight. Grace and I have plans," he told her when she took a break from swimming.

"I'll watch them. I can stay an extra night. My band isn't planning to be back at the airport until tomorrow morning anyway. I like spending time with them." She shifts and looks at the pool. "Right, Miles, we're having fun?"

Miles waves to her from his float, which is packed with small army men. "Gracie, do you like my water armada?"

"Absolutely!"

Sammy hoists herself out of the water for what might be the twentieth time to practice her "dance diving," as she calls it.

"Grace, you want to swap? I could use a little time on the lounge," Molly asks. The request is annoying because there are two more loungers on the other side of the pool, but I'll take the opportunity to check on Sammy. She is very clearly perturbed at Molly being here.

“Yes, I’m going to join the dance diving.” But instead of heading straight for the water, Michael grabs my arm and pulls me onto his lounge. I laugh at the move, and a part of me preens at the idea of making Molly uncomfortable with it. I’m not above marking my territory. And apparently, Michael isn’t shy about it either.

He whispers into my ear, “I can’t pay attention to anything when your tits are teasing me in this white bikini. Let me fuck them later, please?” The warmth from his breath tickles, and I melt into him.

I tilt my head so I can capture his lips with mine, letting my mouth linger for an extra few seconds and answering him in a whisper. “I think I might like that. I’ll add it to our list.”

I play in the pool with them for at least an hour. Each time I look back to where Michael and Molly sit, I see them both in a heated discussion. Michael’s body language gives him away immediately. He’s rigid and angry, but it’s not my place to be involved. Instead, I make sure the kids steer clear of it and have fun seeing who can swim the farthest in one push off the side. We play a few rounds of the category game, Colors. And then a very aggressive round of Hide and Seek, with the rules demanding we have to remain in the pool.

Around 5:30 p.m., we’re on our way out of the house to meet my mother and Lana for dinner. Michael called off his dad after Molly pleaded to let her stay with them for the night, leaving her a full rundown of the nighttime rules.

“Do you think she’ll be able to handle them?” he asks.

The gondola dings and the doors open. When we take our seat, I squeeze his hand, which is already clasped with mine. Affection isn’t in short supply with Michael. “I think she’s their Mom. And even if she messes up dinner or forgets to tell them to brush their teeth, that they’ll be fine.”

He leans in and kisses my forehead. “I hate that she’s unpredictable. But when I was a kid, if my Mom had shown up, I’d have wanted to see her. Even if it wasn’t planned.”

I nod, knowing that had to be part of it, but I also need for him to hear what else I see. “I think you choose your kids first. You always have, and it doesn’t matter what she chooses, because you always have their best interest at the heart of it. That’s what makes you an amazing dad. It’s not about what you would have wanted as a kid it’s about what you want for your own kids now.”

My phone buzzes in my clutch. When I look at the number, I don’t recognize it, so I send it to voicemail. Two minutes later, the same unknown number sends a text.

UNKNOWN

Grace, I need your help. Please call me back, this is Kate.

“Who’s Kate?” Michael asks, reading the text next to me.

“My college friend. She’s the one who oversees the Olympic and Paralympic Committees Sports Therapy program. I saw her a couple of weeks ago and must have never added her name into my contacts.”

The gondola reaches the mountainside restaurant a few minutes later.

GRACE

I’m just heading into dinner. Can I call you back later this evening?

“Remind me what your mom’s partner does again,” Michael says as we walk into the restaurant.

“Hi,” I say to the hostess. “We have a reservation, but we’re meeting—”

She cuts me off. “Yes, I know. Lenny said. Let me take you back.”

I turn to Michael to answer his question. “She’s a therapist.”

My phone rings. “Okay, maybe this is urgent. It’s Kate again, let me take this,” I tell him as I stop our walk back. “You go ahead, I’ll be right there.”

He kisses my cheek, and then follows the server back to the bank of booths while I move toward the restrooms so I can take the call.

“Kate. Hi, what’s going on?”

“Oh my gosh, Grace. I’m so sorry. I know you said you were going to dinner, but I didn’t want to push this conversation out any further.” She sounds out of breath, maybe even a little upset.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes, well, no. But I will be. I’m having some complications with my pregnancy and the doctor has required that I see him weekly. I’m not able to fly.”

“Oh my goodness, Kate. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you, but I’m calling because now I have to make some adjustments with work. I was supposed to fly out to New Zealand in two weeks, and then be there until the Olympic Trials right after Thanksgiving.”

“Kate, I’m—”

“Grace, I have a team of alpine skiers and multiple snowboarders who have a very detailed therapy plan for their training. I have people on the ground out there, but they’re not qualified to oversee what needs to be done if anyone ends up injured. I’ve had multiple men and women now talk to me about you when they’ve been in Strutt’s Peak, and I could use your expertise.”

“Kate, I have a job here. I can’t just leave.”

“Can we do a swap? I’ll cover your early season and you cover my Olympians. Grace, this could be a big deal for you and Riggs. My guys don’t only train at our facility. They go where there’s good powder and where experts can be close by.”

I wasn't expecting this call. Or at least not the urgency of it.

"Can I think about it?"

"Yes. But I need you to tell me what you decide before the weekend is over. Otherwise, I'll need to find an alternative plan. Grace, I know this wasn't a plan for you, but it's a season's commitment and the benefits could extend so much longer." She laughs nervously. "And you'd be doing me a solid."

"I hear you. Let me think about it. I need to talk to my—I just need to think through it before I can give you an answer."

I hang up and give myself a minute to absorb everything she's said. It would be a fantastic way to elevate some of the ways I treat our athletes. When they're actually competing and training for competition within days, their regimen will be different from what I've grown used to. On top of it, there's a very large opportunity for Riggs Outdoor. Having an Olympic trainer on their roster only elevates their brand. And it'll easily bring in more competitive athletes, not to mention, even some of the folks I'll treat while I'm away. I correct the thought. *If* I decide to go.

When I walk toward the table where my party is seated, I hear Michael's voice raise.

"You didn't think this would be a problem? You've had plenty of opportunities to call me, or even meet with me in person to discuss this." He rubs his hand to the back of his neck. "Really professional, Doc."

My mother has an angered look on her face. Lana looks upset.

"What's going on?" I ask.



## *Michael*

“DOC?” *WHAT THE HELL IS SHE DOING HERE?* I SPECIFICALLY go out of town to see her so that this exact situation never happens.

“Michael. I just learned that you were coming with Grace. I’m so sorry. I’ve owed you a discussion, but I wanted to wait until our next session so we can build out a replacement plan for you.”

“What are you talking about?” I look down and see her hand clasped with Lenny’s. “You’re Lenny’s partner?”

I drag my hand through my hair to the back of my neck. Is she serious about this?

“I didn’t think this would be a problem if I had a plan of action for you, but we haven’t had a session when we could discuss it. You’ve had to cancel the last couple.”

“You didn’t think this would be a problem? You’ve had plenty of opportunities to call me, or even meet with me in person to discuss this. Really professional, Doc.”

Grace’s hand runs up my back to where my hand rubs my neck. I let her. Her touch always calms me.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

There’s a part of me that knows this doesn’t need to be messy, but I don’t like being blindsided with things. First Molly, now, to see my therapist, who knows a lot of very personal and private shit about me, is fucking the town gossip. Not to mention, Grace’s mother.

My phone buzzes on the table.

“Did you know?” I turn to ask Grace. It comes out harsher than how I meant it.

“Know what? That Lana is your therapist? No.” She shifts to look at Lenny and Lana. “Make this right. Mom, I think you and I need to get a drink at the bar.” She grabs my hand, the



one that's been tapping on the button of my jeans in rapid movements. "I didn't know. If I had, I would have said something."

She leans up and kisses my neck. I close my eyes and take a breath. Regardless of how long it took for us to get here, she'd have made sure I was okay, even if we'd never slept together. She's always been the calm for me.

My phone buzzes again. Another missed call from my dad.

"Michael. This is just unfortunate timing. Really, I had planned to discuss this conflict with you in our next session. I have a few additional doctors who I think you might want to meet with before deciding to move on, but we're going to need to end our doctor-patient relationship."

I count. Enough times so that she knows I'm counting. I'm trying to keep my mind clear so that I don't react emotionally, but with a response that's honest and appropriate.

"Doc, this wasn't what I was expecting tonight. You can understand why this would make me uneasy. Not just that you're with Lenny. I trust you; I know that you wouldn't discuss clients with her, but you're connected to Grace too. I've talked with you about her. For years."

"Just recently did I put it together, though."

But before she can say anything more, my phone buzzes again. A third time for my dad is excessive. I'm worried there's something wrong.

"Dad. What's—"

"Are you at home?"

"Why? No, I'm at a restaurant right now."

"Okay." I hear him say something to whomever he's with. "Listen, Cal is headed to your house."

My stomach drops, and I instantly feel dizzy. "Why?"

"I'm in a bar. And, um, Molly is here. Singing with her band. I thought she was with the kids tonight. But maybe your plans changed?"

“My plans didn’t change. She left my fucking kids, Dad.” I get up from the table and don’t say anything. Grace follows me. “No, stay. I don’t need you right now.” I don’t need anything else other than to make sure my kids aren’t in any danger. I can’t believe I didn’t trust my gut and left them with her.

Over my shoulder, Grace says, “I’m coming anyway. What happened?”

My dad, who’s still on the phone, tries to put me at ease. “Don’t panic. I’m sure they’re just watching television.”

But his demand has the opposite effect on me, and I start to breathe erratically.

*Count, dammit.*

I don’t pay attention to the details of my movements, only that I’m hustling as fast as I can to the gondola. Grace running right behind me. All I can think is that I left my kids with Molly, their own goddamn mother, and she couldn’t even handle that. I hate her for it, but I hate myself more for trusting her. How could I be so wrong about someone like that?

“What’s happening? Michael, talk to me,” Grace pleads, her pitch raising with nerves.

“She left,” I yell as I sit on the gondola. This fucking thing better move quickly. “I knew she was a mess. She talked to me all day long about her fucking band. She barely asked about the kids’ summer or how they’re doing.” I shake my head. “I knew she’d fuck this up. Who flakes out on their own children? Repeatedly?” I run my fingers through my hair, and I try counting, but I’m unraveling too quickly, so instead I focus on my breathing before I pass out. “I knew she wasn’t the kind of person I’d want for more than a night.”

Grace’s features scrunch up. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Did you talk to Doc about me?”

She makes a face at me, like I’m crazy. Maybe I am. “What?” she bites back.

“Did you try to find a way to make this more than what it was by using what we talked about?”

The question, as soon as it's out, I know I don't mean it. *She didn't know that Doc was her mother's new partner. One, two, three—*

“I'm not even going to answer that, Michael.”

And I know that she doesn't deserve this, but my last ounce of control in trying to make this entire night make sense is unravelling. I'm so angry. Angry at Doc for surprising me like this. Angry at Molly for how selfish and careless she is. And angry at myself for not seeing all of this coming. So I unleash it. Directly at her.

“You fucking destroyed me the night you kissed me.” She searches my face for some kind of follow-up that makes the accusation sound better. But I don't give it. “I knew, I fucking knew, if I didn't find someone else, I would come back to you. I would have made the age difference between us seem okay for a night. And I knew...” I shake my head and laugh. “You were 18, for fuck's sake. And I *craved* you. I couldn't think straight. I couldn't have you, and I *knew* that.” I punch my thigh. “I held my shit together for as long as I could. Mac and I went to our buddy's wedding the same weekend right after your prom. When I got there, I knew what I was doing. I drank until it was okay in my mind to use someone else. I knew it was going to end up fucking me in the end.”

I laugh at the idea of how much that night fucked me over. How I tied myself to a woman who doesn't deserve the children we made that night. “Molly was the wedding singer, and I fucked her that night the way I wanted to fuck you. I didn't hold back. I gripped her throat and left bruises. She practically begged me to dominate her. So I did. I had zero control. And it makes me sick to think about it. Because I wanted you.” I grit my teeth. “I thought about *you* the entire time. And you were a goddamn kid. You trusted me, and I had to fuck someone else as a goddamn proxy. Your name was on my lips as I came inside of her.”

Grace's face is pouring with emotion as tears fall down her face. I hate that I'm not capable of holding it together, that I'm hurting her like this. "Fuck, Grace." I reach out to her, but she winces as I move closer. I don't blame her.

My phone buzzes as we pull into the gondola station.

DAD

Callen is with the kids. Both are fine. I'm almost there now.

"You don't want to be with someone like me. My judge of character is trash. I disgust myself." I suck in a breath, trying to hold back the tears that are brimming. "You are too good for me, Grace. When are you going to see that and finally walk away?"

"Is that—" Her breath hitches, lip trembling. "Is that what you really want?"

I don't answer. I count. *One, two, three, four...*

"Stop counting and talk to me, dammit!"

"Molly just left my kids alone. Alone! They're six years old, for fuck's sake. It has nothing to do with you. They're my responsibility. I'm not thinking clearly right now. I don't want you around me tonight. I just need to see Miles and Sam. That's it. I can't focus on you or your feelings or anything I've said to you. It's too much."

I drag my hands through my hair. *What am I doing? Besides tearing apart the only person who would never do this to me.*

"Walk away, Grace. You're always hanging around and just waiting for me, but I'm not available. I've been fooling us both, thinking that I could offer more. Friends was the only thing I could offer. That was for a reason. I can't do more. I'm not built for this." I shake my head. "I don't even know how we go back—"

"That's enough," she whispers.

“I’m not built for any kind of relationship with a woman. Not a woman like you.”

“That’s enough, I said,” she yells. “Go and handle your kids, Michael. Then, when you realize who you’re really angry with and deal with that, you can think about all of the shit you’ve said to me and how you’re never going to speak to me this way again.” She sucks in a breath and puffs out her chest.

*I’m such a piece of shit.*

“I don’t regret anything. You hear me, ANYTHING. Not the first time I kissed you or the last. When you realize the only person you’re punishing here is yourself, then you come find me. I’ll be waiting for your apology.” She points her finger at me. “And you make sure that woman knows that there are people who love, LOVE those kids and we show them every day. Every. Damn. Day. And it’s her loss if she can’t do the same. She doesn’t deserve them.”

If I didn’t already know it, then those words solidified the fact that she is too good for me. Always has been. I don’t deserve to be with someone who can pull themselves together after being verbally brutalized by the partner who claims to love them. I’m pathetic. She’ll realize it eventually too. She deserves someone who’s not going to unravel. Someone who isn’t always on the verge of irrational thought and ready to cave in on himself when shit gets hard. I would be disgusted with myself if I was in my right mind, but right now, I’m not. I need to get away.

“Don’t bother waiting for me. I’m done here. We’re done here, Grace,” I say, looking into her eyes. “Move on. Whatever this was, is over now. It’s done. I’m done with you.”

She flinches at my words. As soon as they leave my mouth, I feel sick. I lost control. I lost focus on what was important to me. I left my kids alone with someone who just left them. They’re fucking six years old!

I trusted a person who I have zero trust in normally just so I could run off with my girlfriend for the night. Fucking careless.

I haven't talked to my therapist in weeks. And now, I find out she's fucking Grace's mother. Lenny, the goddamn town gossip, the one person who has no problem telling the world about everyone else's bullshit. Grace must have known too. I must be the joke. Everyone will run their mouths about the forty-year-old man who has anxiety attacks. Who's on medication and works out for therapeutic reasons. The one who barely hangs on by a thread every fucking day. The quiet one. The broken Riggs.

*This* is what happens when I lose control. I can't think rationally. There's no logic in my racing thoughts, only insecurities and overwhelming fears. And I take everyone down with me. And I should be punished for it.

My chest hurts as I get off the gondola and rush to my dad's car. He's waiting for me at the station. I don't look back. I don't hesitate. I just leave her.

"Where's Grace?" he asks as I get in his car, looking behind me from where I just came.

I shake my head, holding back the flood of emotion that I know is on the cusp of drowning me, but right before it does, I start gasping for air. When I look up and out the front windshield, I lock eyes with her. It's too much.

My throat feels like it's closing and the passageway that'll allow me to breathe is getting smaller. Tiny black dots pepper along the edges of my vision. My body shakes like I'm cold, sweat breaking the surface of my skin, embedding into my muscles. I'm either going to be sick or pass out, and I feel helpless to stop it. I'll never be rid of this. This is who I am.

"Breathe, Michael. Breathe," my father says beside me.

But I can't. I've messed up so badly. I try to wrangle control, because the last thing that needs to happen is the panic attack that I know is currently taking over my system. I can't hold my head up, so I lean back against the headrest. Closing my eyes tight, I can try to rid my vision of the blur that's crept in.

The passenger door is thrown open, and a weight is dropped onto my lap.

“You count with me right now. One,” Grace’s voice shouts firmly. I blink and try to focus on her face. On her words. “Two. Say it with me, Michael. Two.”

I suck in air through my nose. And then out through my mouth.

*Do not pass out.*

“Two.” My chest hurts, but I listen. I ignore everything else around me. Where I am. What I’ve said to her. Instead, I only look at her. Focus on her.

“I said, three. Say it. Three,” she says again.

“Three,” I say, and then push out a breath.

Do not pass out.

“Four.”

“Four,” I repeat.

“Again. Count again,” she says with conviction.

I finally focus fully on her face. It’s still streaked with tears, ones that are a result of my words, as she coaxes another four count out of me. She breathes in and holds it. I mimic her and do the same. She pushes out a breath. I mimic it again, wiping the moisture from my face. Tears and sweat.

I notice my father crouched next to me outside the passenger door, following her lead as he squeezes my shoulder. He nods at me, encouraging me to keep counting.

Closing my eyes, I try to hide from her. From what this is. A piece of my nightmare unraveling right in front of me. Grace seeing me like this. A mess of a man, out of control, and barely a man at all. I work so hard to make sure this would never happen. Not at this level. But it doesn’t matter. I failed.

“I’m good,” I push out, but I keep my eyes closed. Shifting in my seat, I encourage her to get up. I can’t face her. “I need to get home. I need to see that they’re okay.”

She eases off of my lap, and the loss of her has me reaching for her, despite what I just said. I clasp my fingers around her wrist, but she pulls it back and out of my reach.

“I love you,” she says, like a question, where the answer she needs is to hear it back from me. And I do. I love her so damn much. Even after what I just said to her, she still made sure I was okay. I’ve never been able to calm down so quickly like that before. I’ve never been that far gone, and then been able to get my wits back that fast. She threw herself on me to talk me through it. And I should hold her. I should hold her and never let her go.

She swats away a tear that’s started to run down her cheek at my lack of a response. Silence being my answer. “Go. Give Sammy and Miles a kiss from me.”

“Grace.” My voice breaks when I say her name.

“You want to be done, then we’re done.” She turns away. But before she moves farther, with her back to me, she says, “I know what you’re thinking...” She looks to the side, without turning her head enough to look back at me. “And you’re right. You don’t deserve me.”

I try to swallow the dryness that coats my throat, but it just causes me to cough. I cover my mouth, trying to keep in the emotion wanting to escape again.

I watch as she puts distance between us and walks back toward the station. Staring as my father runs and stops her. She nods at whatever he’s said, then he leans in, giving her a hug, and kissing the top of her head.

When he gets back in the car, he searches my face for some kind of explanation. A sign that I’m okay, or at least together enough to see the kids. But I’m not. I can’t even look at him.

“The kids are okay. You’ll hug them and snuggle with them. And then tomorrow, you figure out the rest.”

I nod. I breathe. And I watch Grace disappear as we drive away.





## *Michael*

IT TOOK ME TWO HOURS TO GET MILES AND SAMMY TO FALL asleep. Sammy knew something was wrong when I came rushing in, still looking upset. Molly told them she had to run out really quick, but they thought she was still at the house, just outside. They had eaten enough Gushers and leftover candy that Miles ended up throwing up shortly after I got back. Of course.

“You guys want to sleep in my bed tonight?” I asked.

They lit up like it was the biggest treat they’ve ever heard.

Miles nodded and grabbed Mr. Bunny from his room.

“We’re okay, Daddy,” Sammy said as she crawled under the covers, my little girl trying to make sure I was okay. With a few words, she reminded me how lucky I am to have them in my life. And while I’ll always be grateful to Molly for them, I wasn’t going to allow their mother to treat them as if they were expendable. The fact she just left them without any communication with me is still something I can’t understand. I’m not interested in her excuses.

Once they both fall asleep on either side of me, I type out a text.

MICHAEL

I’m not pressing charges. But you are no longer welcome here.

MOLLY

What if I want to see my kids, Michael?

MICHAEL

Then you’ll call them. If you show up here without discussing it with me first, I’ll have you arrested for trespassing.

MOLLY

I'm sorry!

MICHAEL

Not as sorry as I am for trusting you.

She's never been a mother to them, not in the way that matters most. And she continues to show me and them how little interest she has in being one. Actions always speak louder than intentions or empty words.

*"There's no way that guy really thinks his new best friend is a dude," I say as I point to the ridiculous movie on the movie screen in my dad's theater room.*

*She laughs and shoves a handful of popcorn into her mouth, while the other holds Sammy's bottle as she lies in the space between Grace's crisscrossed legs. "It's plausible. She chopped her hair. Her tatas are tucked in tight."*

*I laugh. "Tatas?"*

*She laughs back. "What do you want me to call them?" She lowers her voice to a whisper. "Tits instead?"*

*I clear my throat, nope. I definitely do not want her saying the word "tits" ever again. I can't help myself from looking down at hers at the suggestion. Thank goodness her attention is back on my daughter and not on me. I never allow myself to look for too long, but she looks like everything I've ever wanted.*

*It's so easy with her. I never let myself think it, because it's not my reality, but sometimes, especially right now, I can't help it. If she was their mom, it would make everything. Not just make it better or easier. It would, but it would be my everything.*

*Miles's spit-up trails down my arm and knocks the daydream thought from me.*

*Grace tosses an extra burp cloth at me. "I think he didn't want to see it," she says, referring to the movie. "The new guy,*

*the one she helped become cooler, her new best friend he knew. He just chose not to see her that way. Because, I agree, nobody is that stupid.”*

She was right then, about a movie. About me. The best friend who chose not to see her. And now that I’ve had her, there’s no way to undo it. She’s it for me. I think I knew that even before we made that list together. She’s walked me back from little anxieties over the years. Moments when she knew I was getting anxious or having the start of a panic attack, but nothing like tonight. And as awful as it was, she’s the only person who can do that. My dad has done it before, but with her, she knew and jumped in right away.

I look at my phone. It’s after 3 a.m. My mind keeps turning over all the events of tonight. The way she looked at me in the gondola. The way she made sure I was okay. The way she knew what I was thinking. *I don’t deserve her.* But I still want her.

“Fuck, what did I do?” I whisper out loud.

MICHAEL

Please forgive me.

I know she’s asleep, but I still stare at my screen and wait. I hope for anything, any type of response that she’ll give me. Anything that’ll say I haven’t lost her.

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“What are you going to do next?”

“I’ll need a new therapist,” I tell Henry as he makes us breakfast.

It’s been two days since my panic attack. Two days since Grace put aside the shit I said to her and counted with me through it. Two days since I realized I made the biggest mistake of my life and spoke to her as if she wasn’t the woman I love.

“That’s obvious,” Henry huffs as he slices strawberries. “But I mean with Grace.”

“She texted me back this morning. Told me she forgave me. But I know she’s not okay.” I rub the back of my neck. “How could she be, after the way I spoke to her? What I said. I hate myself for making her feel anything less than everything to me.”

Henry pours out two more pancakes as he flips the ones already bubbling on the griddle. “I get it. And you fucked up, but you’re not going to get her back by hating yourself.”

I look down at my phone and read our last texts again.

MICHAEL

Please forgive me.

GRACE

Always.

“I don’t know if I should give her space or show up on her doorstep and beg for her to tell me what to do to fix this.”

He tops off my coffee, and then leans back, sipping his. I need him to help me. I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do, but doing nothing feels like the wrong choice.

“I think you fight for what you want. Any way you can, you fight for her. If that means you get your ass to therapy and give her time, then do that. If it means telling her you’re thinking about her every day, then you do that. But, bro, you fight for what you want. You don’t stop unless she tells you she doesn’t love you. And I don’t think she’s there yet.” He takes another sip and levels with me. “What that woman feels for you doesn’t just go away after a shitty fight.”

“I said some things I don’t know if I can take back.”

“You fought dirty. You can’t take it back. But you can make sure you don’t talk to her like that ever again. If you love her the way I think you do, then that’s the one person you

make sure you always protect. Even from your own downhill thoughts.”

I swallow and absorb his advice. I know he’s right. Everything he’s saying.

“Uncle Henry, can we have whipped cream and sprinkles too?” Sammy shouts as she comes into the kitchen.

“Already ahead of you, Sam. I have mini chocolate chips too!”

“What about bacon?” Miles asks as he drags himself up to the counter. The poor guy hasn’t had much of an appetite since his overload of sweets from the other night.

“Miles, don’t you know me at all? Of course we have bacon,” Henry says as he pulls a sheet pan of sizzling bacon from the oven. “Michael, go. Stop thinking, and go fix it.”

I kiss both of my kids on the head. “I love you guys.”

Circling back to my brother, I give him a hug. No other words, just a back slap and a nod, letting him know that I love him and what he’s said is what I needed to hear.

I pull out of my driveway with only one thought in my mind: do whatever it takes to fix what I’ve broken.

Ten minutes later, and I’m knocking Grace’s door. It’s early, but she’s always up by now. I knock two more times and wait.

“What do you want, Riggs?” a voice calls out from the video doorbell next to where I’m standing.

“Grace, baby, please let me in to talk.”

“It’s River, not Grace. She’s not here.”

“Can you let me in? I’ll wait for her.”

She doesn’t answer. I knock on the door again, but this time, it swings open. And River stands there with her arms crossed and the look of sheer disdain painted like armor over her face. “You fucked up, Riggs.”

“Yeah, no kidding. River, please. I need to talk to her.”

“You’re going to have to call or text her. She’s not here.” She searches my face for something, but when she doesn’t find it, she says, “Ah, hell. Nobody told you?”

“Told me what? Fuck, what?”

“She’s not here. Like, not in the country here. She left for New Zealand last night. She’s doing that Olympic Trials training gig. Her friend Kate is doing a work swap thing with her. She’s gone for, like, the next twelve weeks.”

I don’t even respond to River. I pull out my phone and call Grace, but it goes right to voicemail. *She left.*

“Grace. Dammit, baby, I messed up. I know you said you forgive me, but I don’t forgive me. And I don’t know what to do. I never know what to do when you’re not in the picture.” I blow out a breath. “You need space. Time. Whatever you need. Just come back to me.”

I sit in my car for a while and play out different scenarios.

I type out a text to my brother-in-law, Jack.

MICHAEL

Any chance I can borrow that private jet of yours?

He responds back immediately.

JACK

Of course. Tell me where you’re going, and I’ll call it in.

But I don’t get a chance to respond, as my phone buzzes in my hand with a text response from Grace.

GRACE

I do need time. Beyond that, I don’t know.

I stare at her words, but I choose not to overthink. Instead, I know I need to make a plan, because I can’t just sit back and

wait. I can give her time. However long she might need. Hell, we've taken so much time already.

MICHAEL

Is it okay if I at least text you while you're there?

GRACE

Yeah. It's ok.

I close my eyes and breathe in, but I don't need to start counting. Instead, I start making a new list.





## *Grace*

A VIBRATION AGAINST MY LEG WAKES ME. IT HAPPENS AGAIN, but this time, it's in the same spot. It doesn't travel anywhere else. It's not a recap or sneak peek, it's my phone. I look around my tiny apartment and the movie I was watching on Netflix is long over. The time zone change and jet lag have me all messed up. It's only 8 p.m. here, but back at home, it's early.

When I see Michael's name and the text message waiting, I feel anxious. I know what I need is this distance. I need to get lost in my work. Make the most of this opportunity with the Olympic athletes whom I get to treat. But I can't help but smile when I read what he says.

MICHAEL

#1 We've watched more than two hundred movies together. 80s romcoms are your favorite. Along the way, they've become mine too. And yes, I'm finally admitting it. After I watched *Some Kind of Wonderful*, I was hooked.

GRACE

What is this?

MICHAEL

My list.

I stare at the screen. *His list?*

GRACE

What kind of list?

MICHAEL

Good luck today.

I read back our texts and replay his voicemail. I miss him. I don't have a plan. But I'm choosing to follow what I saw. The Olympic trials are where I know I'm supposed to be right now. So instead of asking more questions, like how he knows today is my first day, or what kind of list he's talking about, I put my phone in my bag and focus on today.



## *Grace*

MY FIRST WEEK WAS EXHAUSTING, BUT THE KIND OF TIRED I felt was welcomed. I had no time to think about what was happening at home. I had at least six athletes every day and saw them twice. It was a combination of prep and recovery for the level of training they had to endure for their upcoming races.

Every morning, I'd wake up to a text message from Michael that simply said, "Good morning and good luck today." And every night, he'd send me another text that had something to do with "his list."

Tonight's was no different.

MICHAEL

#5 The day you taught me how to braid Sammy's hair.

I smile as I re-read it. I remember that day, too. He was so focused, and then asked me that night if he could practice on mine. I sat on the floor between his legs as we listened to Fleetwood Mac, and he braided my hair over and over until he got it just right.

GRACE

I remember.

I still wasn't sure what kind of list he was making, maybe memories that just stuck with him, but whatever it was, I loved reading it. I love remembering these moments with him. And remembering all of the ways I've continued to fall in love with him.



## *Grace*

THERE'S A DOUBLE TAP ON THE DOOR AND I KNOW WHO IT IS before I even have to ask.

“Come in,” I yell from the bathroom. I’m just wiping off my mascara from the day, which is already mostly gone. I barely wear makeup here. I never have time in the mornings, and I sleep until the very last possible minute before I almost make myself late to my first appointment. It’s demanding, but I love it.

“Grace, I’ve got the dumplings and noodles, but they didn’t have any tuna,” Bishop calls out to me from the kitchen. “So I made the executive decision to just do the salmon sashimi.”

“That’s perfect. I’m starving.”

My phone buzzes next to me on the sink. I know it’s Michael even before I look.

MICHAEL

I miss you.

I smile. I miss him too, but I haven’t said it to him. I’ve kept my responses short over the past month. It’s the space I know I’ve needed, but I’m reaching my limits.

I wasn’t lying about forgiving him. I know things can be said that aren’t meant, but I also don’t want to become the woman who offers excuses for someone else’s hurtful behavior. Because, ultimately, no matter what he’s going through, I won’t stand by and be treated that way again.

Ups and downs are going to happen, and we need to know how to work through them together. He forgot we were a team that day. That I wanted to help him and support him. He was blinded by issues I didn’t even know he was harboring, and that’s on him to deal with now. If he wants to deserve me, that’s exactly what he’ll do.

But for now, until I know what the future holds for us, these thoughtful messages give me hope. His respect for my need to have distance makes me feel heard. And at the end of the day, I'm proud of myself and know he is too.

MICHAEL

#35 You were home from London and out for Everly's bachelorette party. I couldn't keep my eyes off of you. I hadn't seen you in almost six months and I couldn't focus on anyone else.





*Grace*

MICHAEL

#52 I feel more like myself when I'm with you. It's always been that way. I can't explain it.

GRACE

Same.



*Grace*

MICHAEL

#89 I built a house with a master bathroom and the only reason it has a tub is because you said if you ever had a house one day, it would have a big, beautiful tub.

GRACE

You should try it. It really is incredible.

MICHAEL

Only when you're in it.



*Grace*

MICHAEL

Sammy and Miles are eating chocolate ice cream right now. It's snowing here. The first big one of the season.

Watching it drip down their chins made me think of #92. Chocolate. I can only ever think of you when I see it. Smell it. Taste it.

GRACE

That's how I feel about you and chocolate frosted cupcakes now.

Chocolate frosting will never taste as good as it did when I licked it off his fingers.



## *Michael*

“WHAT ARE YOU EXPECTING TO HAPPEN?”

He looks at me, not a drop of emotion reaching any part of his face. Same technique as my old doc. But this new one cuts to the chase. It’s working for me. Especially right now. I need help staying out of my own bullshit.

“I’m expecting the worst, if I’m being honest.” I squeeze my fingers on the bridge of my nose. I wish I wasn’t built like this, but that’s not going to get me anywhere good. I know that now.

He smiles. “Maybe you could tell me what you want to have happen instead.”

I suck in a shaky breath, trying to pin my emotions back. After a few beats, I tell him, “I want her back. I want the rumors about her and Bishop Jones dating to not be true.”

He nods. “Have you asked her if it’s true?”

“No. I honestly don’t know if I could handle the answer if it’s yes.”

He stays quiet. And I hate that he can outpace me in silence, because I need to hear what the hell I’m supposed to do.

“Maybe you need to hear the answer. Maybe at the end of it, you don’t end up together in the way that you want.”

I snap my eyes up.

He smiles at me again, and even though I know what he’s saying, I don’t like it. “You need to figure out where that leaves you. Could you go back to being her friend, if that’s what she wanted?”

I let the thought settle for a minute. “I would be whatever she needed me to be. If she decides she’ll be happy with someone else, and I can only have her friendship, then I’ll take



it.” I cover my mouth and rub at my lips, “But I’m not even remotely done fighting for more.”



## *Grace*

“HOW’S FIRST GRADE?”

“It’s different. Harder than kindergarten,” Sammy says, her big brown eyes taking over the bottom half of the screen. “There’s more work. But I can read a whole book by myself now. Dad says he’s proud of me, but it’s still hard. And we only get one recess.”

Miles pushes her off screen. “She’s lying. Sometimes we get two. And it’s not harder, it’s just different. Did you see any famous people this week?”

I laugh, because even though I haven’t spoken to Michael in almost two months, I talk to Miles and Sammy at least once a week. They call when they’re at Asher’s house. I haven’t asked them about their dad. They don’t belong in the middle of what the grown-ups in their lives are dealing with.

“I saw some of the pairs skaters from Team USA warming up yesterday. Plus, the people you already know who I treat after their practices.”

“You missed Halloween, Gracie.”

“I know, Sam. I’m sorry. I had to be here. It’s a really long trip to just come for a couple of days. But I’ll see you soon, I promise.”

“I think Dad misses you too. He won’t say so, but he seems sad all the time. Auntie Everly said it’s because he misses you, but Uncle Jack tells her not to say that to us. I think she’s right, though.”

I smile, because I don’t know what to say to that. I miss him too. I miss him every single day. I went from talking to him once in a while, to seeing him every day. For years, it was like that. And then this past summer, I got to kiss him whenever I wanted. Felt him in ways I only ever dreamed about, and now, it hurts every day to be so far away from him. I’ve loved my time here, the experience, the people, but the

best parts of my day are seeing the texts from him. And talking to these two.

“When are you coming home?” Miles whines.

“Sammy, Miles, where are you guys?” Asher calls for them in that background.

“Did you steal your Grandpa Ash’s iPad again?”

“Gotta go, Gracie,” Sammy says.

“I want to press the button,” Miles argues.

“No! Bye, Gracie.” Sammy smiles, one of her front teeth is missing. I hate that I wasn’t there for that.

“I want to press the—”

The FaceTime call turns off, and I immediately start crying. It’s like this every time I hang up with them. Complete waterworks. They’ve been my family. And to go from brushing my teeth alongside them to being so far away, it has me rethinking my decision to leave and come here. But I know it was the right choice. In my gut, I know I needed to leave for a little while. I want Michael to choose me, not just regret what he’s said.

A knock on my office door pulls me out of my thoughts.

“Just a minute.”

When I finally wipe away the last of my smudged eyeliner, I take a deep breath and then open the door.

“Want to grab some lunch?” Bishop asks, leaning against the door frame.

I smile at him. He’s been one of the few people here who I spend time with outside of work. He’s listened to just about every emotion pour out of me regarding Michael, and I’m lucky for it. A few tabloids have mistaken our friendship for more, but his publicist has worked to mostly clear it up.

“I just finished eating. Want to go for a run down the mountain later?” I ask him.

“My flight leaves tonight. I promised my friends I’d be back in time for the parade. What time are you leaving,” he asks.

“I’m going to stay a bit longer.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll go back in a couple of weeks. My mom had planned on doing Thanksgiving with Lana’s family. Plus, I have two snowboarders who are working through an injury. We’re going to extend their treatment as close to the break as possible.”

He smiles. “You’re too good, Grace. We’re lucky to have you here.”

*“I’m impressed. And I’m rarely impressed with interns. But I like the approach you have with my guys. You’re not eager to just pump them with meds and weights. I’d like to talk to you more about coming on full-time once the season starts.”*

*I sit, ramrod straight, in the chair across from the head coach of Ireland’s Rugby Team, and I’m not sure what to say. I wasn’t expecting a job offer. I thought that maybe I’d be offered an extended internship to last through the summer, but not anything that would lead to full-time. It’s a job I’ve been hoping for.*

*“I don’t know what to say, sir.”*

*“Coach.”*

*I smile. “Coach.”*

*“I’m going to have HR draw up the offer, and you can decide if staying with us is what you want. The pay isn’t spectacular, but it’s decent. I know you’re from the States, so that would mean we’d need to get you a working visa. Which shouldn’t be a problem. You’re headed home for the holidays anyway, so you may need to stay a bit longer, and then we can get the visa underway.”*

*I stand when he stands and shake his hand. He’s obviously done with this conversation, so I make my way out of his office.*

*“Thank you, Coach.”*

*He nods, and then pushes past me. I finally take a deep breath and let the conversation marinate for a minute. It's what I've wanted. There hasn't been a single offer from any team programs I've sent it to in the U.S.*

*I pull out my phone to text Michael. Before I can type out the news, though, something holds me back. That night, I had another one of my dreams. I knew it was about staying abroad as soon as I woke up, but the tingles started making their way up my arms and down my back. That's when I heard the sound of Ireland's Call, the Irish Rugby Teams fight song playing in the background, but then I see the Riggs Outdoor logo. And with it a warm breeze that blankets over me, like the feeling you get when you sit in front of a fireplace. Warm and cozy. It felt like home.*

I remember already knowing my decision before I left the coach's office. The choice wasn't one that took much thought, but I knew what I wanted even before I had the option. That was the winter that Michael found out he was already a father. Now I know that if we had never gone to prom that night, that maybe he'd have never slept with Molly. But I hate that he would see it in any other way than that was how it was always supposed to happen. Because Sammy and Miles were the result. And I think, more than anything, they're exactly what he was missing.

*"Asher, can I have a minute?"*

*"Hey, Gracie," he says, standing up from his desk at Riggs Headquarters. "Your mom said that you were coming home for the spring break, but she didn't mention you were already here. How's school?" He moves to give me a big hug, and I melt into it. He and Michael always were the best huggers—the kind that let you take a couple of breaths if you need it. "Oh, I hear you're doing an internship with Ireland's Rugby Team."*

*"I am. They actually offered me to come on full-time. I still have some credits that I need to finish up, obviously, but the offer is there if I want it."*

*"C'mon, walk with me. I need a coffee."*

*We walk down to the break room, which is really more like a lounge, with televisions and video games spread around the space. The mural on the walls is of Strutt's Peak and all of the sports that have made his family business thrive. Skiing, snowboarding, climbing, fishing. And it hits me what I want.*

*"Can I talk to you about something? But it would need to stay between the two of us."*

*He takes a sip of his coffee. "I'm listening."*

*"I want to be here. Back in the U.S., sure, but I want to be here. I think there's more you can be offering athletes who are coming into Strutt's from a sports therapy perspective."*

I pitched him my idea. It was a shot in the dark, asking one of the town's most astute businessmen to take a chance on something that I hadn't even properly fleshed out. And I did it with one very selfish thought, or maybe it was selfless. Either way, I knew what I wanted.

When I had come home and watched the person I had crushed on take care of his two kids, it was so obvious to me. He was different. He was messy and barely keeping himself together, but he didn't unravel. Most people would have. He loved them so fiercely, from the moment they came home to him, that it was inevitable I wouldn't choose the job in Ireland. I needed to be there. With him, with them. They felt like mine. And just maybe I'd be lucky enough to feel even a fraction of the love I saw him give to those babies. So I finished my degree and came home. And I had a job waiting for me when I did.





## *Grace*

“WHAT DO YOU THINK, GRACE? WILL I BE READY FOR January?”

I rotate the arm up over her head and then back down. We’ve been working hard to build up the mobility, but a cracked collarbone will affect the way she holds herself on the mountain.

“I think you’re going to do the stretching that we’ve practiced. And then you’re going to be smart about the training schedule when you get home. You have a month until you need to be ready. I want you to give your body time to recover, not just push.”

She nods and gives me a wink. She’s the oldest alpine skier on the U.S. Olympic Team. And this will be her last games. She’ll pull gold this year, I can feel it. And I couldn’t be prouder of the work she’s put in, both on and off the mountain.

“Thank you. I don’t think I would have made my qualifiers if I hadn’t worked with you, Grace. I’m forever grateful. Really.”

I smile and give her a hug. “You have to come to Colorado and show me the medals that I know you’ll take home.”

“Don’t jinx me, woman! And, I will.” She laughs. “Oh, I keep meaning to tell you. My sister is actually moving out to Colorado. She went through the ringer this year, but she’s just been hired as CEO for a pretty big brand out there.”

I toss the last of my things into my bag as we make our way out of the facility. She’s my last client before I head to the airport. “Really? Any idea where?”

“Some small town, I can’t remember the name. Something Peak.”

“Strutt’s Peak?”

“That’s it. You know it?”

I smile. “I do.”

“When I go out to spend some time with her after all this Olympic hoopla, let’s snag a drink then.”

“Deal.”

Two hours later, and my body jolts awake at the sounds of two kids excitedly yelling for their mom. It’s not enough to get me to sit up and wake up completely. But when I hear them again, they sound a lot like Sammy and Miles. Always happy and excited about something. Whatever that dream might have been, it was a good one. Then my familiar feeling starts to pour into me, that cool brush of air that flickers into an encasing warmth that captures my attention. Auction paddles flash in first and then that same blue and shimmering silver that I had seen before, like snow hitting a waterfall. The same colors, but the texture looks different, not like water, but satin. When I blink my eyes open, the fluorescent lights are blinding.

My neck twinges at the way I fell asleep and was perched on my elbow. I must have dozed off waiting in the airport for my delayed flight. And to finally be directed to a new gate.

I need to text my mom.

GRACE

I’m probably going to be delayed a few times.  
I’ve already missed my connecting flight, so I  
guess I’ll be a day later than expected.

My phone buzzes, but it’s Michael. He doesn’t know I’m coming back, but I’m ready to be home. My contract for trials training is over and the time I’ve needed has long since passed. When I read his text, my stomach sinks.

MICHAEL

You may not be mine anymore, but I’m still yours.

I stare at the screen. What? He couldn’t possibly think...

MOM

I've been putting off telling you something.

Less than ten seconds later, a video call takes over my screen.

"I may have fucked up, Gracie. And I realize—" She stops talking to me for a second.

I can hear Lana say, "Don't make excuses and just tell her, Len."

"Fine. Okay, Gracie, so I may have leaned into the rumors that you were seeing Bishop Jones when you went down there."

"What do you mean, you leaned into the rumors, Mom? You know I was never seeing him. We're only friends."

"Tell her I said hi," Leo yells from the background.

"Leo, not the time," she says over her shoulder, and then walks from wherever she just was to outside. "Sorry, I had to pick up my ensemble for The Riggs Annual Tree Lighting tomorrow. I wasn't expecting to do this here."

"Mom, stop talking for a minute. Why would you do that?"

"At first, I was just angry. On your behalf, honestly. I don't think I've ever seen you so upset in all your life. So when those articles came out about you seeing Bishop, I just may have led people to believe that they were true."

"Mom," I huff out. That means Michael thinks it's true too. He hasn't asked me, but our texts have stayed limited to his good mornings and his list.

"Did you tell her?" Lana asks as she joins my mom outside.

"Hi, Lana."

"Hi, Grace. Sweetheart, I don't think your mother thought this through. But you need to know that he came here."

“Michael?”

My mom speaks up. “Yes, Michael. He came to the house. Yesterday. He asked me if it was true. If you were seeing Bishop and if you were happy.”

My heart clenches.

“Mom!” I start pacing along the now empty terminal. I missed whatever the attendant said over the speakers that had everyone moving from where we were waiting. “What did you say?”

“I told him you were better now than when you left.”

My stomach rolls, and I feel like I might be sick. She has no clue that he’s sent me texts every day. That he’s respected my request for time, but never let me wonder if he was thinking of me. He thought of me, of us, every single day. That was how I’ve felt better.

“I’m not seeing Bishop. I never was seeing him. You know that.”

“Sweetheart, I’m sorry. I am.”

I’m so angry at her that my hands are shaking.

“Darling, please. I’m so sorry.”

“What time?” I ask curtly.

She wipes tears from her eyes. “What?”

“What time does the Tree Lighting start tomorrow night?”

“Seven. Why?”

“Bring the phone back inside. I need to talk to Leo,” I tell her, a cold tone laced in my voice. I don’t blame her for wanting what she thinks is best for me, but I need a plan.

“Lenny, baby. We’re going to need—” Leo’s face comes on the screen. “Hi, Gracie. How’s that sexy man of yours?”

“You tell me. He’s in Strutt’s.”

“Hell yeah, baby! That’s what I thought,” Leo snaps back.

“Leo, I need a dress from your shop. Then I need you to make sure it gets to River for tomorrow night. Can you help me?”

“Oh, honey, you know it. I have this gorgeous silvery blue number that just came in that has your name all over it. You’ll look like a snowy waterfall.”

I close my eyes, remembering the colors and texture from my dream. A snowy waterfall. And I know where I’m supposed to be. The choice is clear. It always has been with Michael. Every sneak peek I’ve been given always manages to guide me back to him. And right now, it’s no different.

“Mom?”

“I’m here.” Worry and sadness paint her face.

“Not a word.” I point at her. “I’m going to fix this. And you’re going to stay out of it.”

She nods, tears dripping down her cheeks. “Grace—”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night.”



## *Michael*

MY FINGERS CRAMP AT MY LAST PINCH OF THE JUG. I'M EASILY five feet ahead of the guy below me. I clip into the next quickdraw, and I know I've got this climb in the bag. *Focus*. This is easily the hardest section of our wall, almost parallel to the floor. The next section of crimps is difficult, but I've done it a thousand times. The advantages of my home course. I reach back to my chalk bag and move.

As soon as my carabiner clips, I stretch out my hand, extending my fingers and giving them a shake them, just enough so I can move to the last few quick draws. I focus on the beta. The one place I never need to count is on the wall. It takes too much focus to think about anything other than the path, balancing my weight, and then moving forward. It's what helped me through school when I couldn't figure out what was going on with me, why my mind could never slow down. And it's what I've made a living doing. It's what has helped push me through the past couple of months. And she was right. Competing should have never been taken off my plans.

The bell sounds as soon as I make it to the last jug and swing my arm out to hit the top. There are plenty of brand sponsors watching, mine included, but I'm not here for that. I'm here to prove that I'm good enough. And to keep my mind busy. Even though my season should have slowed around September, climbers still came out. The visit from the IFSC ended up being exactly the kind of buzz we needed in order to push my piece of Riggs Outdoor forward. We are steadily becoming a destination for competitive climbers. At least it's starting to look that way, with the tourists and bookings coming in.

I thought about what I'd want to work toward next. How I could push myself more. It's what Grace would have asked if she were here. So, I decided if there was going to be climbing competitions hosted in my facility, there was no way I couldn't try to beat these young guys at a climb. Her pushing me to do it is what started everything with us this past summer.

“Daddy!” Sammy shouts, and runs toward me as soon as I make my way out of the crowd. She jumps up, knowing that I’ll catch her. “You did so good. Benny said that was your fastest time yet. Do you think I’ll be that good someday?”

“I know you will.” I look over at Ben, who stepped up to hang with them for the day since everyone in my family is busy getting ready for our annual event tonight. “Ben, thanks again, man.”

“Anytime. You know that. And I got a chance to talk to some of the guys with Red Bull. I hear they’re doing a sponsored Pro-Am event next year. Asked if I wanted to be involved.”

“You’d have a blast with them. I know some of those guys, you’d like the tour.”

“I’m starving,” Miles whines from behind Ben. “Dad, what are we eating for dinner?”

“You’re eating pizza with Ben tonight while I get to be auctioned off like cattle for Grandpa Ash,” I say in a happy, sarcastic tone.

“Mooooo, moooo,” Sammy croons and giggles.

“Annie’s mom said she was going to bid on you. And that if she won, you’d be licking milk. Or something about her cat,” Miles says.

I look up at Benny. Both of us horrified.

Sammy’s already moved her conversation to wanting a kitten for Christmas.

“She PTA too?” Benny asks.

“I have no idea. But I know who *won’t* be coming over for a playdate,” I whisper to him. “And I’m not doing PTA anymore. I’m class parent this school year instead. Less intense.”

“Sounds like you might pull in some good money, though, tonight,” he says jokingly.



I pull my phone and wallet out of the backpack that Benny held on to for me, and when I check my phone, I notice three missed calls from Grace. My stomach sinks, and all I can think is that something might be wrong. She hasn't called me since she left, not once.

My phone buzzes in my hand again and the entire world feels like it falls away when I read it.

GRACE

It's not true. Whatever rumors you heard, they're not true. I'm not with Bishop. I never was. Michael, I could never be with anyone else.

I don't think twice. I send out a message to Jack.

MICHAEL

Can you get me and the kids on a flight to New Zealand tonight?

JACK

It'll be fueled and ready for you tonight.

---

Two hours later, and I'm pulling into the decked-out space that is currently Riggs Outdoor Headquarters. Every year, my Dad does something a little more over the top. This year, he's brought a chandelier into the tent that reaches from the floor to the ceiling and doubles as a champagne tower. I don't understand the mechanics of it, but it's beautiful. The fog that billows underneath gives it an air of magic. Evergreens line the perimeter. The stage at the front of the room serves as the focal point as all of the large round dinner tables surround it. I count three full-service bars in different locations, as well as more than fifty bartenders and waitstaff who are pouring drinks and getting prepared for the rest of the guests.

There's an entire welcoming area, where musicians play unique instruments—not the typical DJ or band set-up that's been here in the past. It has such a calming vibe, it almost settles my nerves. *Almost*. But I'm reminded about how this event has been the catalyst to every important moment and people in my life. My family, our livelihood, Grace, my children, even.

“Where's Law?” my father asks as he comes up to me.

“Hey, Dad.” I give him a hug and clap on the back. “No clue. I just got here.” I give him a smile. He looks more stressed than usual. “You okay? Nice ascot, by the way.”

He smiles. “I'm kind of into them now. I feel like I own the room with it.”

“It works for you.” I flick my eyes around the space, which has now started to fill in. “And you do own the room. Quite literally. It looks good this year.”

He smiles and looks around. I'd imagine that he's admiring the way this event has evolved over the years.

“I heard you smoked everyone on that wall today,” he says. A waitress comes up, handing him a scotch, neat. He takes a sip. “Proud of you. You made the right call. Your instincts were on point, despite mine and your brother's pushback.”

I give him an appreciative nod.

He waves at a few people he must recognize.

“Go,” I tell him.

Looking around the space, I see plenty of people I've known my whole life. Another handful who I've snowboarded with. About a dozen I've had in my after-school program. And a bunch who I'm sure I've met at least once or twice in passing. But none of them are the ones I want to be here with. If this event wasn't happening right now, I'd already be on my way to her. She didn't answer my calls back, but I'm done waiting. Her text was enough of a green light for me, and now I'm anxious to get to her.

“She’s not here,” G says, coming up next to me. “Don’t pretend like you’re not hoping she shows up. All of us are taking wagers on whether or not you finally get your head out of your ass and just get on a plane to New Zealand.”

“Me and the kids are on a flight tonight after the auction.”

She smiles wide, and raises her hands above her head. “Thank all the goddesses of the universe. It’s about time.”

“What are you making all of these animated movements over here about?” Everly asks as she saddles up next to me. She slings her arm into the crook of my elbow. “You look great in this tux.”

I smile and give her a kiss on the cheek. “I was just telling your partner in crime that the kids and I are headed out for New Zealand tonight.”

Everly sips her matching electric yellow shot, clinks it against G’s glass, and they both shoot it back. “It’s about time.”

“That’s what I said!” G winks.

I don’t elaborate any more; I don’t need to explain to them that it wasn’t about pushing her. She needed to leave. She asked for time, so I gave her as much as I could. But now? Now, I just need to see her. Talk to her. Hold her. However she’ll let me.

Everly tilts her head toward the stage where our dad looks like he’s ready to wring Law’s neck. “Let’s go figure out what’s happening over there before the auction starts.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” my dad’s voice echoes around the room. “I’d like to welcome you to this year’s Annual Tree Lighting Event!”

Applause and whistles make their way around the space.

“It’s been a fantastic year for our small town with so much growth in our competitive sports, as well as some of the new businesses that are coming to Main Street. Most of which are locally owned and operated.”

I take my spot up on the stage next to Law, who, when I get a little closer, realize is either incredibly hungover or still drunk. His hair is mussed, bowtie undone, and eyes bloodshot. I lean in. “You alright?”

He doesn’t look at me. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he says, “I’m fucked. That’s what I am. Good and royally fucked.”

Before I can figure out what’s the matter with him, our dad’s voice grabs our attention. “Our night every year changes a little bit. We have a silent auction, which I encourage you all to participate in. There are tons of incredible items that have been donated from Strutt’s and some neighboring towns as well. If you’ve been to our annual event before, which most of you have, then you’ll know that most of the money we make this evening happens when I auction off my single kids.”

The room erupts in a mix of laughter and whistles. Every year, it’s the same and we do it because it’s an incredible way to build out a program for the town. It’s my family’s way of giving back and making sure we do more than just profit from our business. It helps to keep Strutt’s Peak thriving, and still maintain that small town feeling of supporting each other. It’s the only reason why I allow the circus of it. Last year, Wanda from Sugar Valley won my bid. *Thank goodness.* I spent the weekend reconstructing her pop-up candy shop while she enjoyed a two-night stay at the luxury resort on the mountain. This year, all proceeds will go toward rebuilding the public-school after-hours program.

I search the room again, taking in the evening’s magic. It hums in the air and moves around each of us. Offering a promise of special memories as the night moves on. This year, though, it’s the first time I don’t want to be here. That feeling I should be somewhere else. With her. I keep scanning the space, hoping to see *her*, but Lenny and Lana sit at their table together with some of the others from the downtown business association. Grace isn’t here. And I’m at my limit. I’ll grab the kids at home right after this. Our bags are packed, and we’ll head to the airport.

The echo and volume of my dad's voice brings my attention back to what's happening. "My son, Michael, as most of you know, runs everything in our adventures programming. He's also one of the world's best climbers and managed to bring several competitive athletes into Strutt's not just to train, but also to compete in the IFSC World Championship."

The room applauds. Somewhere in the back, someone shouts, "Whoop! Whoop!" and "Michael!" The stage lights make it harder to see out into the room. My guess is that it's my team, who hustle as hard as I do. They made this past year what it was, because they showed up and worked their asses off.

"Let's start the bidding at five hundred," my dad announces. He points to the back of the room at a raised paddle. "I've got five. Do I hear six?"

"Seven-fifty," Wanda shouts.

"One thousand," Beverly Harpson chirps from the middle of the room.

"Twelve hundred," the elementary school principal raises.

Law nudges me, seemingly back from his funk from just a few minutes ago. "You're like catnip for the moms."

"Two thousand," another voice from a front table yells out.

I give my brother a glare not to say another word.

My dad says, "Two, do I hear three?"

"Three," Leo from the boutique downtown shouts, paddle raised.

"Three-thousand, five hundred, and fifty," a voice I'd recognize from anywhere shouts from the back of the room. *She's here.*

I'm moving off the stage even before I see her. My face squints as I try to hold back my emotions. She's here, and she's bidding on me. When I finally reach the bottom step, I spot her standing there. She's holding back tears, her chin trembling, and I can't wait another goddamn minute to have her in my arms.

“Three-thousand, five hundred, and fifty,” my dad repeats. Going once—”

Beverly Harpson and another woman stand up at their tables as I move past them, yelling their respective increased numbers, but my dad ignores it. He knows exactly what’s happening.

My sister and G yell back in their direction, “Sit down!” and “Keep your top on, Bev!”

“Sold! For three-thousand, five-hundred and fifty dollars to Miss Gracie McKenna.”

I barely hear my dad as I move as quickly as I can across the room to her.

Most of the room, or maybe it’s just my family and Lenny’s table, erupts in loud cheers. As I get closer, it feels almost impossible to breathe. Her long burgundy hair is draped around her shoulders, and a blue and silver dress that reminds me of the ocean, flowing and breathtakingly beautiful, hugs her body. And I want nothing more than to stop wasting time and kiss her.

“You paid too much,” I tell her as I move closer.

Tears roll down her flushed cheeks.

And that’s it. I can’t hold back the emotions I’ve tamped down for months. I couldn’t care less who sees it because I love this woman. With every inch of who I am. I love her.



## *Grace*

### *TEN MINUTES EARLIER...*

“We’re almost there,” River says as she drives like a maniac up the main drag of the mountain. The weather, as usual here, dictates how quickly we get anywhere.

“Riv, slow down. It’s snowing.”

“Ben, it’s a Jeep. It’s made for this shit,” she huffs out.

“River! You should have said poop,” Miles says from the back seat.

“Or you could have said something like, ‘it’s made for nights like tonight!’ or something with more drama,” Sammy says, waving her hands in the air.

“You’re drama, Miss Sam,” Benny says as he huddles between the dynamic duo.

“Obviously, Benny. I am a Riggs, after all. Haven’t you been paying attention?” she says back to him.

I can’t help but laugh. “I’ve missed you guys.” I turn around and give them both a big smile. “Sam, what are you looking at?” I nod at the book resting in her lap.

“She makes scrapbooks now,” Miles answers and rolls his eyes.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I take pictures like Uncle Jack. See, Gracie, here’s some from the summertime,” she says as she flips toward the front of her book.

When she holds it up for me to see, I can’t help but feel a bit dizzy. An entire page of blurry pictures of Michael and me. A few of the four of us too, but the one in the middle is of Michael and me and all I can do is remember seeing these in my sneak peek. And I can only think, once more, this is where I’m supposed to be. All of it, leading me back to him. To them.

“Wait, does this mean we don’t get to go to New Zealand?” Sammy asks.



My head whips back around to look at her. “What? When were you going to go to New Zealand?”

“Tonight,” she says simply.

My eyes well up with tears, and I look at Benny between the kids. “They’re all packed. If your flight came in any later, you might have missed them.”

“Gracie, does this mean you love our dad?” Miles asks.

Before I can answer, Sammy chimes in, “Because if you love him, then you should marry him. And then you can finally be our stepmom. But the good kind, not the evil kind.”

“Of course, she’s not the evil kind. She’s the best kind,” Miles says.

“Guys, you’re going to make me cry. That was some really heavy stuff, even for mature six-year-olds,” I say as I turn in my seat to look at them.

“You’re the gravity, Gracie. It’ll always be heavy with you,” Miles says.

I turn back to look at River. My eyes blurry, trying to hold my shit together.

“Oh, I know,” River says, squeezing my hand. “I think I saw him wink in the rearview. This kid is going to be trouble in about a decade.”

When we finally coast up to Riggs Headquarters minutes later, I take one last look in the mirror and slip on my heels. My flight landed less than an hour ago, and this little crew was waiting with my beautiful dress in hand—a tight bodice draped in satin, with a flowy skirt overlaid with shimmering silver tulle, and beneath it, layers of more satin in different hues of light to dark blues.

“Thank you!” I jump out of the car and try to right myself.

“Go! Get your man,” River shouts as I shut the door, the twins yelling in the back seat. And I can’t stop myself from laughing. I’m so anxious. It’s the longest I’ve gone without speaking to Michael. And now, I’m just going to show up and make this grand gesture in front of an audience.

The double doors to the massive tent are pulled open, decorated with beautiful winter colors of deep blues and greens, creams and whites splashed around the entryway. The visual is as captivating as the music. The melody is a sound I've heard before. Windchimes or a—I pause—a Tibetan Singing Bowl. *You've got to be kidding me.* The sound I heard in my dreams at the beginning of the summer follows me through the doors and into the place I feel like I was always meant to end up.

Goosebumps race down my arms. So many emotions rush over me. It all feels *right*.

I hear Asher on the microphone in the main room. Shuffling quickly down the corridor, I come to a stop at the entrance of the space, I'm taken aback by the beauty of it.

My mother's at her usual table, speaking closely into Lana's ear. Vinny from the flower shop is next to them, with Leo on his other side. Leo does a double-take when he sees me, giving me a big-ass smile.

Every year, it's a breathtaking sight. But as I watch the man I've loved my entire life stand on stage with so much confidence in his stature, I'm in awe. My breath catches looking at him. The way he holds himself, scanning the room, listening intently to his father, he's absorbed by the night. He'll never understand how much the rest of us mere mortals are enamored with him.

*I've missed him so much it hurts to think about it.*

His hands are casually slung in his suit pockets, his posture straight and tall, making his dark suit look as if it were measured and sewn for his body only. It probably was. I forget often how insanely rich the entire Riggs family really are. His crisp white shirt and bowtie have him looking like a present, just for me, that I will have the pleasure of unwrapping later. *I hope.*

"One thousand," Beverly Harpson bellows from the middle of the room.

I laugh to myself. *I don't think so, Harpson.*

The muscles in Michael's jaw visibly flex as he bites down on the anxiety of what's unfolding in front of him. Every year, he's an anxious mess and he usually works something out with Mac if it's a bidder who he in no way, shape, or form would want to be around. My guess is that Beverly made that list this year.

"Two thousand," another voice calls out. This time, it's from another mom in Sammy and Miles's class.

Asher calls out, "Two, do I hear three?"

"Three," Leo shouts, paddle raised. I know he's a shit-stirrer, and if I don't know any better, he's making sure I have my moment.

*Here we go.*

"Three-thousand, five hundred, and fifty," I bid. Everyone who's seated in the last row of tables turns toward me.

His body, for as tall as it stood only moments ago, I see his shoulders jolt back and then go rigid. His posture moves taller somehow, and his head looks out to where I'm standing. I don't think he can see me with the stage lights, but he knows it's me. My bid. A number I called out years ago to secure him as my prom date. And now, I'm hoping the number will grant me something like: *for as long as we both shall live*. Because I'm not interested in anything less. I want all of him.

My chin wobbles and tears pool in my eyes, making everything blurry. But I don't miss him moving toward me.

"Three-thousand, five hundred and fifty," Asher repeats. "Going once—"

Beverly Harpson starts yelling four thousand. Someone needs to tell her to let it go.

A moment later, Asher announces, "Sold! For three-thousand, five-hundred and fifty dollars to Miss Grace McKenna."

I smile as I watch him get closer. "Mine," I whisper to myself. His face is overtaken with the same emotion pouring out of me. Need. Relief. Love.

“You paid too much.”

I gasp out a laugh and try to wipe away the tears that drip to my lips.

He tugs me into his arms and every part of me feels like screaming “finally.” His body shakes slightly as his tears hit my shoulder. He nuzzles his face into my neck and wraps his arms around my middle tighter as I drape mine around his shoulders. Dragging my hands across his neck and up into his hair, I breathe him in, the smell that’s as much home as it is him. My fingers run a path that I’ve drawn so many times along his hairline, and it’s the same reaction every time. He melts. His body relaxes, he lets out a breath that he was holding, and then he inhales deeply.

“You’re here,” he breathes out.

He kisses the spot below my ear. A place that’s easily his.

“I’m here.” I pull back so I can look at him when I tell him this. “I missed you so much.” His eyes close at the admission and he leans his forehead against mine. As he runs his fingers up the side of my neck, his thumb finds its way from the curve of my chin to my bottom lip. Every part of me that’s touching him melts into his body farther. “I hear you were planning to take a trip tonight. After this.”

“I couldn’t stay away any longer. You wanted time, but please, ask me for anything else. Time away from you, not knowing if I’d ever hold you like this again, it’s not something I’ll survive.”

He wipes the path of tears that fall down my cheek and past my lips. Tilting back to look at his handsome face, I smile. His green eyes plead for me to love him back. And it’s almost crazy how much I do. *Almost.*

“That’s very romantic and even more dramatic of you.”

At that, he smiles at me and moves his hand down around my neck. The way it feels when his fingers find their place behind the pulse in my neck, when his palm touches my skin, it’s intimate and possessive. And my body bows closer as his lips meet mine.

He pulls back and then rethinks by kissing my lips once more. Leaning into my ear, he says in his low, raspy whisper, “You said you wanted romance. Someone who was obsessed with you. Someone who ached for you.”

“You know I wanted it to be you when I said that.” I close my eyes at the next words, because he has to know this already, but I’ll say it again so he can feel it. “It’s always been you.”

I barely get the words out as he pushes his lips against mine again, this time with more intensity, and I don’t care what it looks like to the room filled with people watching. I want him to kiss me exactly like this. Like he’s missed me. Like he can never get enough.

I pull back enough to meet his gaze.

“Let’s get out here.”

He smiles, then guides me toward the doors without looking at anyone else in the room. If this were any other time, I’d get him to stay. But not now, I just want him.

Holding my hand in his tightly, we make our way through the tent and out to the gondola. “Benny is watching the kids, so I left him my car.”

I smile. “Oh, I know. How do you think I got here?”

He raises his attention to me as we step onto the gondola.

“I was on my way home. And my mother told me that you came to her asking about Bishop. Asking if I was happy.” I look up for a minute. “I was so mad at you for saying what you had.” He squeezes my hand. “And I could make excuses for you, since I knew what was happening. I knew it was you reacting, but it still hurt. Then this Olympic opportunity happened, and it made sense. I had a choice, and I chose me.”

He pulls me into his lap instead of letting me take the seat next to him. An empty gondola car with plenty of room, but he doesn’t want any space between us. And neither do I. We’ve had enough of that. And while I’ve forgiven his words, I wasn’t lying when I told him I already had, I still need him to know what I’m not going to allow.

“What I said to you that night was not okay. I unraveled and took you with me. I knew as soon as I said it. I regretted it. Then I chose to punish myself for it. You jumping into the car, talking me through my panic attack, there’s no one else who can do that for me. I had just hurt you and you were still there for me.”

“I want your good, but I’ll be there for the bad. I’ve always been here for you to lean on when you needed, but I want you to respect what I’m giving you. You’re not allowed to speak to me that way. You would have never done it when we were friends. I hated that you did it when we were more.”

He leans his forehead into my shoulder, and then tilts his lips up to kiss me there. When he pulls back, his eyes meet mine. “I’m so sorry, baby. What I feel for you, Grace—” He brushes a piece of hair from my face and tucks it behind my ear. “I don’t want to mess this up, not like that, not ever again.”

“Then don’t.” I lean in and kiss him, resting my forehead on his. “We’re going to fight. And we’re going to get mad. Don’t you remember when I rearranged your protein bars in the snack drawer?”

“I have a system,” he says, smiling.

“That I made better.”

“Questionable.”

“But I’m not going anywhere. I’m not leaving. I needed time, but I was always coming back to you. *I’m* the one that stays. Don’t punish me for the ones who didn’t.” I push back the hair that’s fallen on his brow and comb my fingers through it. “I choose you. Every time, I choose you. You have to know this by now.”

“Us,” he says. “Not just me. It’s always been ‘us,’ Grace.” I catch the tear that falls down the outer corner of his eye, where it slightly wrinkles. I catch it before it goes any farther. He nuzzles into my chest, gripping my waist, and I hold him the same way.

“I liked your list,” I tell him.

He kisses my neck, right below my ear. His spot. “When you told me about the dreams you have. The things you see and feel after them, I felt jealous that you had something special like that. But, when I really started to think about my life since you, I realized that I’ve had a version of that. That list...” He brushes his lips against mine slowly. “That list I sent to you, when each of those things were happening, it was moments with you. Things that made me cling to you tighter. I craved more, longed for it with you. When I pulled them all together, it was my peek at the love of my life. I didn’t know while it was happening, but I was falling in love with you long before you ever shook me with your sex roster.”

I bark out a laugh. “Sex roster?”

“Yup. My dirty best friend and her fuck list.”

“I feel like I should have rolled it out sooner.”

Nipping at my lower lip, he says, “Me too.”

He kisses me, emotion pouring itself from his mouth to mine. A kiss I get lost in and feel from the tips of my ears to the pulse in my wrists.

When the gondola dings and comes to a stop at our station, I can’t help but realize how this ride is so different from the last one we took together. Then, it felt like an ending, but now, it feels like something brand new.

He holds my hand as we get up, kissing the inside of my wrist and holding me close.

When we finally get back to his house, Benny and River are on the couch at opposite ends. I look at my best friend, who is obviously trying to cover up the fact that her hair is a mess, her eyeliner smudged, and her lips slightly pinker than they would normally be. The twins are on the floor in front of them, sprawled out like starfish on a mound of blankets, sleeping soundly.

Benny and Michael each take a kid to carry up to their rooms.

“You’re not fooling anyone, Riv. Your shirt is on inside out.”

She curls her lips inward, trying to stifle her smile. “We had an enlightening conversation over some popcorn. Apparently, he’s into me.”

“You think?” I say sarcastically.

I hug her, and she whispers, “I didn’t get a visual, but by my backhanded swipe for size, I can confirm it’s bigger than a baby’s arm.”

I pinch her.

“Ow! What? I’ve been crushing on the man for far too long. I needed to know.” She looks at my dress again. “You look like a happy mess, by the way. I’m guessing your grand gesture went over well since you’re here?”

I smile. “Very well.”

Before I can elaborate any more, the guys come downstairs, and as much as I love her and am dying to know the details, it’ll have to wait. I have every intention of showing Michael just how much I’ve missed him. And by the way he’s shuffling them to the door, I guarantee he’s thinking the same.

“Coffee tomorrow?”

“Mid-afternoon, Grace. I’m hoping my night is just starting.” She wiggles her eyebrows. Benny shakes his head and laughs. He places his hand on her lower back to lead her out the front door.

Once they’re gone, Michael pulls me into his arms. “How jetlagged are you?” he asks, and then brushes his lips along my neck.

“If you’re asking if I’m too tired to have you take me to bed and remind me how much more fun it is to have an orgasm with you instead of by myself, then the answer is no. Zero jetlag here.” I undo his bowtie. “I’ve forgotten how good your mouth feels on my body. I think I need to be reminded.”

He smiles, unbuttons the top button of his white-collared shirt, and steps back. As he rubs his thumb along his bottom lip, his heavy-lidded eyes scout around my body. I can feel the way he’s thinking about what’s below this dress.



“Where did you have in mind?” But, before I can say anything, his familiar demand has me ready to play. “Why don’t you show me?”

I pull my pointer finger around my lips, and then dip it into my mouth to get it nice and wet. I plan on making a show of this. So, I drag it across my lips again. “Here.” I move it slowly down the side of my neck, along the path he seems to enjoy so much. “Here.”

He licks his lips and crosses his feet at his ankles, calmly leaning and watching against the wall. “Where else?”

Reaching behind my back, I find my dress zipper. I drag it down until it hits its end, just above my ass. The thin straps flop down each shoulder, but the bodice stays in place. I drag my finger across the swell of my breasts, his eyes pinned to my cleavage. My body is on fire already at the anticipation of what he’ll do when I point to all my favorite places. I tug the dress down, pulling it over my hips and down my thighs. The house is quiet. My dress hits the floor, the silky material pooling around my stilettos.

“So beautiful. Fuck, I almost forgot how sexy you are.”

He moves his gaze around my body, taking in the lingerie that’s perfectly matched to my dress. A baby blue thong edged in delicate lace and a bralette that barely holds my breasts from spilling over the top. The sheer nylon isn’t there for support. The dress did that on its own with its corseted design. What I have on underneath is purely for enjoyment. Purely intended for him. I lift my tits above the bralette and push the lace and nylon under each curve. Now he has an unobstructed view of where else I want his mouth.

With both hands, I run circles around each nipple and then pull. I let a small moan escape, and his eyes flare to mine. The thought of him doing this to me has me so turned on and eager.

“I know that’s not all.”

I shake my head slowly.

“I’m holding on by a thread, Grace,” he grits out.

“So impatient,” I tease, laughing lightly.

“Tell me where else, baby. Show me where you want my tongue to savor you. Fuck you. Make you come and scream. Show me exactly where you need me.”

His words swirl around me and settle right at my center. Words that have already started to build the kind of heat I’ve only ever felt when I’m with him.

“I want your lips and tongue here.” I drag one finger from my right nipple, over the undercurve of my breast, and down my side. Skimming my ribs, to the front of my tummy, around my belly button, and right over my pussy.

“Push that aside and let me see,” he says as he works to unbutton his shirt with one hand, the other still slung in his pants pocket. His confidence, the way he unabashedly asks for what he wants, is almost as intoxicating as his words.

I pull the sheer fabric aside, and he expels an audible breath. “Do you know your pussy tastes sweet? Like chocolate. And then when you come.” He licks his lips, and I can’t help but mirror the move. “It’s salty and coats my tongue like fucking caramel.”

*Oh damn, the mouth on this man.*

He drops to his knees as he shrugs his shirt off his shoulders. “You’re so goddamn delicious that you could point to every inch of your body, and I’d lick and suck on it for as long as you’ll let me. I want to leave marks all over you, just so I know where I’ve been and where else I still need to worship.”

He crooks his finger at me and moves it in a come-hither motion. And a sexy half smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. This man turns me into a puddle. But I plan on making him learn from his mistakes.

I step out of the pooled material beneath me, heels still fastened.

“I need a taste,” he demands, but it has a pleading edge, as he stares at the thong that’s moved back into place. And as much as I want him to taste every inch of space that I’ve drawn for him, I have other plans.

“Oh, Michael,” I exaggeratedly exhale. “It’s so cute how you think you’re in charge right now.”

His eyes flick up to meet mine.

“Put your hands behind your back.”

The twitch of his mouth is the only tell that he’s going to comply. Because he hesitates for a minute. I’d have to imagine that handing over the control he craves to always maintain is going to be hard to do. I know this will be a challenge. But he’ll do it anyway. It’s on our list, but even if it weren’t, he’d give me what I want. And I want this. I can’t help but get excited at the sight. I need it.

“Tonight, you’re not allowed to kiss me, lick me, fuck me, or come unless I give you permission.” I step closer and he looks up at me. “How handsome you look on your knees for me.” He tries to hold back his smile and fails miserably, shaking his head. “Such a good boy.”

I change my tone so he knows, that as much as I want him, this is important. “You’re never to speak to me ever again the way you did that night.”

“Baby, I promise I’ll never—”

But I stop him by holding up my hand. “No. I didn’t give you permission to talk.”

Another smile and curt nod.

“I love you. With everything I have, but I will not be the kind of woman who ever allows it again. You’re incredibly smart, so if it’s a situation where you’re pissed at me, figure out a better way to communicate.” I lift up my foot and press the sole of my stiletto along with its 4-inch heel against his upper left peck. He doesn’t fall back or lean against the wall behind him; no, Michael pushes forward. His skin pressing against the strain of my forced weight.

“Tell me you understand, Michael.”

The corner of his mouth ticks up again. It’s not a smile, but he’s going with it.

“I understand.” He tilts his head toward the bright blue shoe resting on his chest. “May I?”

I nod yes.

He lifts his hands to unbuckle the strap and lifts my foot and shoe so that neither falls. When I see the mark it left, I smile. And maybe that’s fucked up, but I have no interest in feeling bad for it. Part of me feels powerful for the things I’ve said and the controlled confidence it took to say them. When my barefoot hits the floor, he nods to the other one. I kick it up the same way, my heel pressing into his chest.

As he unbuckles, he repeats, “I understand.”

When he tosses the shoe to the side, and my foot touches back to the floor, he resumes the same position and puts his hands behind his back again. I don’t understand why I need this, but I do. I also need him to hand over this piece of himself. The part that always needs to be stoically in control.

“Tell me what you want,” I demand of him.

He sucks in air through his nose, taking a deep breath. I know he thinks about his words as he exhales. “I want to do what you tell me to do tonight. Whatever it is that you need.” He looks at me in a way that feels grander than desire. A wordless exchange in telling me this is important. Maybe even cardinal. “I’m in. I’m all in.”

A tear slips from the corner of my eye, because the emotion that’s pouring out from him is ricocheting. He’s a good man. Far from perfect. But then again, I’ve never seen the appeal of perfection.

“I know,” I whisper. I let the emotion linger before I pull us back to the demand I’ve made. I raise an eyebrow, challenging him to see if he’ll hear in my tone what I’m asking for. “What else do you want?”

“You, is the obvious answer. But right now...” He composes himself, slipping back into the controlled exterior that he wears so well. He licks his lips. “I want you to turn that gorgeous ass around and sink to your knees. Put your hands on the floor so that you’re on all fours. And then with my hands

still behind my back, like you've so politely asked me to do, I'll bury my face in between those cheeks and lick that delicious pussy and tease your perfect asshole until you're coming all over me."

The heat from his words splashes across my skin. "That sounds a lot like you telling me what to do."

"Simply answering your question." He shifts himself down slightly, so he's kneeling lower and almost at eye-level to where I want him. "Now, are you going to let me?"

I take one more look at his body, at his broad shoulders and strong chest. His muscled waist and the guide right toward his cock that's fully ready to join the fun.

I don't answer. Instead, I smile, turn around, and bend at the waist. It's the same move I made in the pantry months ago. I pull my baby blue undies down and give him one hell of an eye-full upon their descent.

"Fucking hell," he whispers to himself, and I can't help but smile. I love hearing that reaction from him, especially when it's about my body.

I lower to my knees first and then place my hands on the floor. As he kneels behind me, I tilt my ass up just slightly. My cue for him to proceed.

And he does. So eagerly, that he pushes my body forward as his teeth graze my skin. The anticipation and roughness of it has me eager for more. He shakes his head to snake his mouth in closer, and when his tongue pierces me, I gasp, searching for air to refill my lungs.

"Michael." I can't help but exhale his name.

He drives his tongue in and out, lapping it lower so it hits my clit on every pass. The way his mouth promises pleasure, it's the most addictive feeling. Hearing his filthy words in my ear, feeling his lips glide into my pussy, and how his tongue explores along my body and coaxes me to respond, it's my drug of choice. The fact that he's making this happen without any hands is pretty damn impressive, but the piece that adds to the ecstasy of it is that the only satisfaction he's getting in

return is what he's giving me. I was never prepared for that, to turn someone on simply by experiencing my own pleasure. It makes me feel sexy at an entirely new level.

He pulls back, just enough to free his mouth and speak.

“Balance, baby. Take one hand and rub this ripe pussy. I need you to coat those fingers with cum before I fuck you.”

I let out a little laugh. “No, Mister,” I manage to say. “This is your job right now.”

“Let me use my hands, then.” He pauses.

And I wait.

“Please.”

I smile. “One hand and your mouth only.”

I may be the one demanding what I want and need, but he's still very much controlling my body. The second he touches me, I realize that the only one I was punishing by not allowing his hands on me, was me.

He rubs exactly where I need. His tongue saturates the entire pathway from my ass to my slit, dipping in to fuck me at the end of each pass. As his fingers pluck at my swollen flesh, the sounds he's making are *so* filthy. Moans mixed with the wetness that he pulls out of me.

It only takes a moment more. My orgasm barrels into me, and there's no warning. It takes over every muscle, seizing me completely. I can't control the moan that comes barreling out with his name as it's punctuation. “Michael!”

He covers my mouth to stifle anything more.

He quiets my words, but doesn't let up. Shaking his head vigorously from side to side, he pushes into me farther. He doesn't stop until I'm on the cusp of another orgasm. I can feel it building, so soon after the last. My shoulders hit the floor, pulling his hand away, but my ass is still high and ready.

“Fuck me with your fingers. Please, I need more.”

His only response is to do as I've asked. I moan as his fingers push into me instantly. Two at first and then a third that

stretches me exactly how I need. The fullness of it, along with the orgasm so close to the surface, has me suspended from anything else. No more words or movements, I can't do anything other than experience everything he's drawing out of me. His fingers glide in a rhythm that's too slow for instant gratification, but too fast to anticipate a pattern. It's overwhelming.

“Make me come again, Michael. You can do better, baby.”

He growls into my pussy, the frustration of my comment evident with the way he speeds up, sinking his fingers into me deeper, faster. And then he hits my G-spot just right. I've never felt it before, not like this. I'm at his mercy as he milks the orgasm out of me. It doesn't barrel through me or build and crash through me like a wave. Instead, it flows out of me, the sensations almost never-ending, but only as he permits. The most exquisite feeling of weightlessness and pressure. A vibration that lingers on every limb, across my back and up my neck.

When I stop gasping for air and my awareness comes back, he pulls back from lapping up the cum that I've just gifted him.

“Your ass in the air like that feels like an invitation,” he growls out.

“It is,” I mumble. My body's slack and primed for what's next. I tilt my head and neck back so I can see him as he peppers kisses along the curve of my hip. His teeth graze every couple of centimeters, and I'm trying to decide what might come next. I'm far from being done, but this little game of dominance might be over. I want to submit to whatever he wants from me.

“Tell me I've been a good boy now, Grace, and let me have both of my hands back. I need to touch you,” he whispers into open-mouthed kisses along the backs of my thighs.

I turn over to look at him and give him the praise he's asked for. Seeing him still on his knees, arms pulled back again, and vibrating with need is nothing like I thought it'd feel like. It's better. Seeing him give me what I've asked for,

even though I know it's not his typical state, submissive and vulnerable, it's a powerful feeling. And one that I'm happy to give back.

"You did so good, baby. Your mouth does things to me that I've never felt before."

He smiles.

"You can have your hands back now, but I'm still in charge."

The smirk he gives me makes my body tingle.

"I'll give you a head start," he says. "But if I catch you before you reach our bed, then we're not sleeping tonight. I'm going to spank that pussy so hard. Bite your ass and suck on your tits until you're begging me for my cock."

"Is that list supposed to be a punishment?"

"Nope, just a promise. One..."

"What happens if I get there first? What do I get?"

"You're in control, Grace. You tell me. Two..."

I get up and start moving toward the bottom step. "This was the last thing on our list."

"And?"

"And I like it. I like telling you what to do. I like that it's taking everything you have to not throw me over your knee and spank me." I lean in and nip at his lower lip, pulling back before he can pull me into him. "Maybe I'll spank you tonight instead."

He raises his eyebrows at me, surprised, or maybe just intrigued, at the idea. "I think we might need a new list, then."

"Oh, I already started one," I say as I start backing slowly up the stairs.

"You better get moving, baby," he says as he stands slowly. "Three."

I take off running.



I hear, “Four...” and then nothing more except the pounding of his feet behind me as he travels up the stairs, what have to have been two at a time. I’m lifted as soon as I cross the threshold of the master bedroom, the door kicked closed behind him as we fall onto the bed. He holds my face in his hands as he hovers above me.

“I’ll never stop showing you how much I love you,” he says as he lightly drags his nose across my chin. He moves up and captures my lips, kissing me with so much want and love.

“I know.” I smile into his lips. “Now, get on your back, Mister, and grab the headboard.”

He laughs and rolls us over, doing exactly what he’s told.

I take in his handsome face. The want and affection that radiate from his smile.

Every sneak peek. Each decision made has led me here. I have this strange and beautiful gift of seeing where my paths split. Where I know that whatever I choose, it’ll change the course of my life. Even when I’ve chosen myself, I’m led back to him. I called it a crush. But, Michael called it something bigger. The feelings I had for him and the way I’d felt drawn to him. The way it’s only gotten stronger the closer we were. It was inescapable. The magnitude of what we’ve become to the other. The way I’ve always been his and the way that now, he’s mine. *My gravity.*

**THE END**

# EPILOGUE

## *Michael*

I CAN FIND MORE THAN FOUR GOOD THINGS ABOUT THIS ENTIRE situation. I'm sure if I hyper focus, I can also pinpoint about a half dozen that'll make my anxiety flare up like the meteors flying across the sky, but I won't do that. Today, I'll focus on the good.

"Dad, I think tonight is going to be the best divisibility," Sam yells from behind her telescope. Miles studies the star map laid out in front of him.

"Visibility, Sam. Close, but not the right word."

She peers over her viewfinder and says, "No, Dad. I mean divisibility. Four is the best number for divisibility and that's what we're going to be. The four of us."

I smile at my daughter. Life before them was good, but since them, I feel like it woke up a part of me that I hadn't known was there. Making sure they're okay, protecting them, amplified the shit out of my anxiety, but moments like this remind me that the chaos is worth it.

"Okay, so I've got an entire s'mores charcuterie board here. The Gushers really make don't sense, but I brought them out anyway." Grace carries the massive board of goodies over and sets it up right in front of our star-gazing station.

Miles pumps his arm in the air and screeches, "Yesssss."

She looks up, and I can't help but watch her take in the beauty above us. When she smiles at me, I feel it. In every part of me, I feel that same kind of contentment. The way that our life finally feels full circle. Together. I pull her toward me and down onto my lap.

"I can't get over how clear we can see it tonight," she says. "Better than last year."

I look over toward my kids. Both of them watching me for the signal that we've been practicing for a week.

I point up and hand her the binoculars. “Look over there, it’s an entire cluster.”

Sammy nods at me. “I think it’s a meteorite! Dad, can we go look?”

Grace looks at me, surprised. “Do you think it is?” She looks back in the viewfinder, but there’s nothing there to see.

“C’mon, let’s go look before someone else comes traipsing over.”

Sammy and Miles run to where they’ve pointed, about a hundred feet or so from where we’re set up. I see them stop and kneel, looking at the “meteorite.”

Grace and I stand up. I hold her hand as we make our way to meet the kids, where they’re gawking at something on the ground. When we reach them, they both are smiling big and bright, like they can’t hold on to the secret any longer. I can’t blame them. *Me either, guys.*

“What’s it look like?” I prompt.

Both of them are still kneeling in front of Grace as she bends down to look. A small black box sits in between them. She turns around quickly to find me, but I’m kneeling behind her now too.

Her eyes search mine and instantly flood with emotion. She chokes back a cry.

“I love you, Grace. More than words will allow me to say. More than actions will afford me to show, but I’ll try. I’ll try to show you every single day how much I love you and what you mean to me. To us.” Miles brings me the ring box, and I pull out the solitaire diamond ring. Closing the box, I hand it back over to Sammy.

“Marry me. Let us be your family. You are everything to me. You pull and push me every day to grow and evolve into a better person, a better partner, and a better father. You’re our gravity, Grace McKenna. Please be ours.”

She cries and shakes her head, a part of me nervous that she’s not saying yes, but the way she throws her body into

mine, holding me so tightly, is telling me that it's one helluva yes. I bury my face in her neck and wrap my arms around her. I watch my kids standing in front of me, hugging each other, also crying. And I remember they have something to ask her too.

I pull her back and look at her face, tilting her chin up to kiss me. A tear-soaked brush of her lips before I ask, "I'm gonna need your words, baby."

She chokes out a laugh. "I'm already yours. Yes. Obviously, it's yes."

I kiss her again as she sits on my knee. Wiping her tears with my thumbs, I give her one more kiss before I say, "Now, I think these two"—I nod toward where Miles and Sammy are standing—"might have a question too."

Sammy starts by saying, "Gracie, I love you so much." Her little face squints into a cry.

Grace rushes from me and pulls Sammy into her arms. "I love you so much too. Both of you." She pulls Miles into their huddle.

"Good, because we have something we want to ask you," Miles says.

I rest my chin on my fist as I watch my kids bravely ask the woman they've regarded as their mom for their majority of their lives if she'll officially call them hers.

"We know that when you marry Daddy, you'll be our stepmom," Sammy says. "But we want you to adopt us too. We want to be yours just like Daddy does."

Miles doesn't have the patience, so he asks, "And we'd like to call you Mom."

Grace turns back to me with tears still falling uncontrollably from her eyes, wordlessly asking if I know what's going on, and if it's okay.

It was a long fight with Molly for her to agree to the adoption, but eventually, she did.

"Whaddaya say, Grace? Want us?"

“You’ve always been mine. All of you,” she says as she pulls them both into her arms. “Yes to all of it. Let’s make it official.”

“See, Dad, I told ya. Four is the best number.”

When Grace’s eyes flash to mine as soon as Miles says it, I just about choke on my laugh. They have no idea that number is going to be changing soon.

**Thank you for reading the ARC for**

**The Sneak Peak!**

Can you guess whose story is next?

He may be the one who interrupts everyone else’s love story, but the youngest Riggs brother, Law, will get his in **A Peak Performance** coming this October 2023.

**ALSO BY VICTORIA WILDER**



*Jack & Everly's Story*



*Henry & Giselle's Story*

## A SIP FROM BREWS & BOOKS

### Chocolate Frosted Cupcake Coffee

1 tablespoon of chocolate chips (dark or milk)

½ tsp cocoa powder

1 packet of sweetener (*or 2 tsp of sugar*)

¼ tsp sea salt

¼ cup Oat or Almond Milk

1 cup of coffee freshly brewed

*A milk frother or whisk*

1. Brew single-serve dark roast coffee over the chocolate chips. Stir well.
2. Combine milk, cocoa powder, sweetener, and salt with milk frother. *Heating this step is ideal if you plan on drinking this hot.*
3. Top with a pinch of sea salt. *Don't skip the salt, it makes it really taste like cake!*

This drink can be served hot or over ice!

**Side note, if you're of legal drinking age:** You can always add a splash of coffee liquor and/or chocolate liquor for a boozy version. Drink her in a tall glass because martini glasses are ridiculous and a guaranteed spill.

*Whether you're currently crushing on someone or reminiscing about some of those crushes from another lifetime, you might*



*also enjoy flipping back to **chapters 13, 16 and 25**. They'll offer just the right amount of steam to top off your beverage!*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you're still reading, I'd like to say officially, THANK YOU! Thank you for reading this story.

This was never on my big life agenda—writing and publishing love stories. At least, not in a real way where people actually read them. Now that I'm here, I feel like it's the ride I've been waiting so patiently to board. With every story, I learn more about myself, the nuances and emotions of love and sex, and the swirls of life around those two things. I discover and meet more incredible people in the romance community every day, and I learn more about this business every time I put out a new book. I feel lucky for it and hope all of it continues. So thank you for making it all possible.

To my editor Mackenzie, you're such a badass. It's as simple as that. I feel so lucky to have you on my team, in my corner, pushing me and helping me to grow as a writer. Beyond that, thank you for all the hats you wear: friend, mentor, swoon captain, cheerleader, and motivator. I am forever grateful that you said yes. Here's to the next!

To my beta readers, Amy, for your Hawkeye level of proofing and making sure limbs are where they're meant to be, as well as commas. Jill, your expertise and sensitivity read for this story were imperative. Thank you for ensuring I handled Michael's anxiety, therapy, and coping with care. Thank you both for your constant support across socials and the genuine excitement you've shared. It's been fuel for my soul.

Thank you for catching the small bits that still fell through the cracks, Kate and Adi. You're both incredible supporters, and I'm so happy to chat with you often! Laura, you are so creative and the kind of supporter all indie authors deserve. Thank you for hyping this series with your gorgeously creative posts. Charlotte, thank you for your excitement about the climbing aspect of this story. Your videos and recommendations were

exactly what I needed to really dive into sport climbing. To my sisters and our belayer, Blaine, rock wall climbing was a blast!

I've been lucky to make some exceptional author friends. Julia Connors and Nina Arada, thank you for always being such excellent colleagues and sounding boards. I adore you both!

To my alpha readers, Pam, Erin, Fran (Mom), and Blair, you are the absolute best for taking these janky early reads for a whirl. Your feedback is exactly what I need every time. Thank you so much for your time.

My partner and husband in this life. I love you. Thank you for just buckling in for the ride. You're my calm. And somehow, you manage to get hotter as we get older, so yay for that too!

To my sister, Blair, cheers to the take-out, Margherita-induced laugh-fests. At some point, I will write the words "from across the pool," and you can have a big fat laugh about it. In the meantime, thank you for your constant support in ALL of this. See you at Sunday dinner.

Lastly, to those boys I've crushed on throughout my life—Joey McIntyre, Devon Sawa, Kevin, Jake Ryan, John...I'm sure there's more...I meant what I said in the dedication. Thank goodness my crush on you all existed. You were the catalysts in pushing my imagination, and now, here I am, making a career out of writing really delicious love stories about imaginary relationships.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Forever a hopeful romantic, author Victoria Wilder writes contemporary romance with deliciously witty and wild characters. Her stories range from small-town swoon-worthy men to fiercely powerful families and lead characters whom aren't afraid to ask for what they want.

She's an east coast girl, always chasing the next season and living it up with her husband, two kiddos, and dog, Linus. When she's not reading or writing, you'll find her training at a kickboxing class or finding an excuse to sink her feet in the sand at the beach.

She believes in the power of a great story. That words have the ability to change the trajectory of your life.

