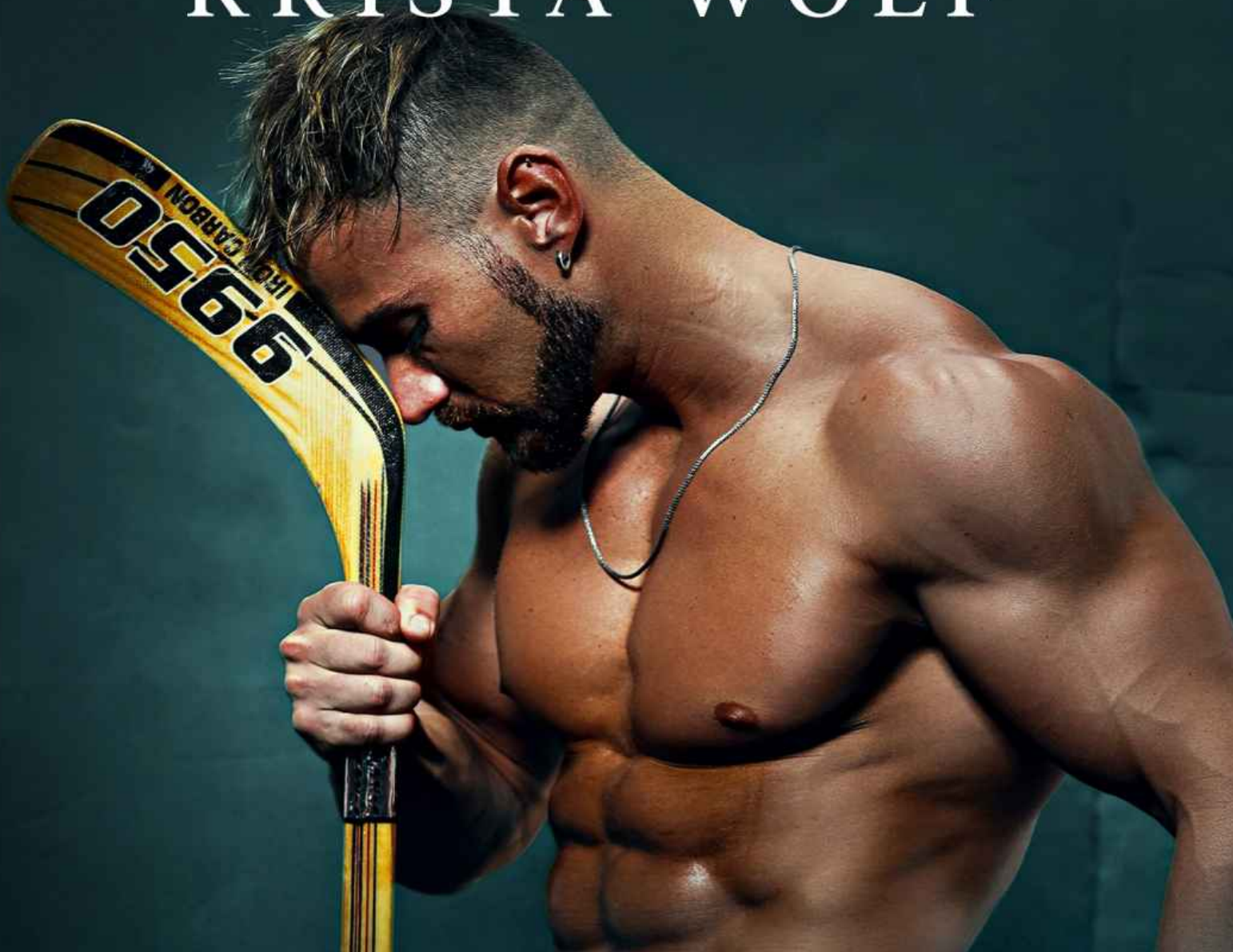


AMAZON AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
KRISTA WOLF



BEST FRIENDS
NEVER

Kiss

A Reverse Harem Hockey Romance

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Best Friends Never Kiss

A Reverse Harem Hockey Romance

Krista Wolf

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ARIANA

“Sooo... are you finally going to tell me what it is you do for a living?”

My date blinked back at me from across the table, not exactly sure how to respond. He’d answered the question twice already. Neither answer was to my liking, however.

“Well, as I told you, I’m a freelance publicist.”

I held out a halting finger as I finished draining my beer. As the last of the suds slid down my throat, my date was regarding me curiously.

“What?” he tilted his head. “You don’t believe me?”

“Oh, I believe you,” I said matter-of-factly. “It’s just that those words don’t have any true meaning. Not in the sense that it conveys anything real, I mean.”

He was cute, my blind date. Handsome, too. Maybe a tiny bit on the shorter side, but he was well-dressed enough to make up for it. His hygiene was good, and he was groomed past my usual point of satisfaction. Which in this day and age, was a sliding scale.

Still, he’d ridden up to our date on a bike. Not a motorcycle either, but an actual bicycle. A mountain bike, to be more accurate. One with big knobby tires that seemed oddly incongruent with Seattle’s smoothly-paved streets.

“Alright, what do you do as a freelance publicist?” I prodded him. “And don’t use the words ‘freelance’ or ‘publicist’ in your answer.”

The man’s mocha brown eyes flitted upward, as if the answer were somewhere above him. When he spoke again his voice was more monotone, more mechanical.

“Well, I drive progress,” he started.

“Ah, progress,” I chuckled. “Always good.”

“And I support influence marketing initiatives,” he went on. “I nurture client relationships. I provide strategic, team-based oversight...”

It was like he was reading directly from a book. Or from his resume. Which was probably directly from a book.

“I also develop systems and tools, to optimize synergy and enhance media outreach—”

By now I was already distracted, and taking in other stimuli. I scanned around, soaking in the sights, the smells, and the atmosphere of the place he'd chosen for our rendezvous. Three waiters were serving up frothy pitchers of amber-colored beer to a dozen or more high tables scattered throughout the open room. The place wasn't a restaurant — well, not technically anyway — although it did have food. But it had axe-throwing, which was apparently good for building upon my already significant appetite.

“So is this your go-to first date, Chris, or what?” I asked.

Chris stopped talking immediately.

“Hmm?”

“I mean look around,” I waved an arm. “It's pretty specific. Axe-throwing bars and restaurants are pretty trendy right now, don't you think?”

He looked suddenly uncomfortable. “I— I guess.”

“So I'm thinking you bring a girl here, you ply her with booze, you throw a few axes around... it becomes your thing, right? Your lead-off first date?”

Chris's face was expressionless now. Utterly blank.

“Hey, I'm not saying it's a bad one,” I said quickly. “It's clean, it's casual, it's fun...” I picked up one of the onion rings from the basket we were sharing and crunched into it. “Kinda noisy though,” I added. “But a lot more unique than, let's say, dinner and a movie.”

“Would... would you rather we went to dinner and a movie?” he stammered.

I shrugged. “No, not necessarily.”

“Then what—”

“I mean dinner and a movie is a lot more intimate,” I went on. “It's conversation-driven, too. Then again, spooning me from behind as you show me how to throw axes is intimate also. In a different way, of course.”

“It—It is?”

“Of course it is,” I answered, as if the observation were obvious. “But then you have the added danger of competition, too. I mean, what if you beat me and I resented it? Or even better, what if I beat you?”

“But you did beat me.”

I smiled prettily. “See? There's my point.”

My date looked around again, as he had when trying to find the server who brought us our drinks. His eyes were different this time, though. They were shiftier now, almost panicked.

“As a freelance publicist, I'm not sure how you synergize the intimacy of physical closeness with the pitfalls of a competitive—”

“Can you excuse me for a second?” Chris asked abruptly. “I... I need to run to the men's room.”

“Sure. Knock yourself out.”

Chris left, and I resisted the temptation to drain his beer as well. He'd barely touched it, and after a minute or two the beads of condensation running

down the sides of his pint glass were outright beckoning to me.

Relax, Ariana.

It had been a tough week. The coffee shop was busier than ever, and people seemed to be on edge. I was looking forward to this date, as random as it was. Meeting people online could be like that, though. No matter what their profile looked like or how many interests and hobbies you lined up on, going out and sitting across from a perfect stranger was always a roll of the dice.

“Umm, excuse me, miss?”

Our server was back. I tilted my head in the direction of the restrooms.

“I’ll wait for him before ordering, thanks.”

“Yeah, umm...” His expression was troubled. “That’s what I was going to talk to you about. I’m afraid your friend left.”

I sat up a little straighter. “My... friend.”

“Yes.”

“What do you mean he left?”

The man gripped his serving tray a little more defensively against his chest. “Well I don’t know how to say this—”

“Just say it, then.”

“He climbed out the window,” the server said apologetically. “The bathroom window.”

There was a second of confusion, followed by two seconds of shock. Then my brows came together.

“Wait... what?”

“We only know because there was a commotion, and the window shattered,” he explained. “It was a small window. Really small, actually. I still don’t know how he managed to get out. But there was a lot of glass, and there was some blood too, and—”

“Blood!?”

“Not a lot of blood,” the man added hastily. “I don’t think so, anyway. They’re cleaning it up now.”

A resounding cheer went up from one of the axe-throwing stalls. Either someone had scored a bullseye, or a group of six or eight fraternity brothers were celebrating my latest dating disaster in unison.

He climbed through a window.

Holy fucking shit.

A tiny window...

I didn’t know whether to freak out or start laughing hysterically. I wanted to do both. Neither seemed strong enough a reaction, though.

“I’m really sorry,” the server said again.

The man’s look was a mixture of apology and restraint. I wondered if he wanted to break out laughing as well, but protocol wouldn’t allow it. In truth, I wouldn’t have minded.

“Alright then,” I said, trying to gather up the last scraps of my dignity. “I guess I’ll take the check.”

Awkwardly, the man fumbled with his server book. Eventually he tore one out and laid it gently on the table.

“Again, I—”

“Forget it,” I told him. “It’s not the weirdest date I’ve ever been on, anyway.” Now I did laugh, and it felt surprisingly good. “Not by a longshot.”

His eyes went a little wider at that, which brought an even bigger smile to my face. The server smiled back, albeit weakly, then hurried off.

“Fuck you, Chris,” I said, reaching across the table and toasting my date with his own beer. I was suddenly more determined than ever to salvage the night.

“Fuck you and the mountain bike you rode in on.”

ARIANA

GreatSkates was the type of place that looked totally closed down, at least from the outside. The half-moon-shaped building was comprised of mostly dilapidated and crumbling cinder-block, with a roof that was patched in so many places it looked like an art project. The paint was chipping away in layers, and the sign's electronic letters flickered, noisily. The parking lot was cracked and pitted, with entire swaths of grass growing through the once-sealed asphalt.

Finally, if the building appeared to be tilting to one side, that's because it was. Engineers had determined the west side of the foundation was sinking at least a half-inch per year, which meant that no matter how much lipstick you slapped on this pig, GreatSkates' days were ultimately numbered.

"Axel?" I inquired, on the way through the door. Two hockey players in red-and-black jerseys nodded and pointed. "He's over there, feeding the puck-bunnies."

The first player laughed, while his friend gave him an admonishing shove. I smiled to let them both know it was alright.

"Thanks."

They shuffled off, still wearing their skates, and I turned left at what used to be the snack bar. Once upon a time, GreatSkates had been a roller rink — and a glorious one at that. I'd seen photos of it back in its heyday, and by the smiles

on the faces of the 1980's mullet-wearing, high-haired, neon-wearing crowd, it had apparently been *the* place to be.

Sometime in the early 2000's it finally closed down, only to be bought and refitted as a flea-market venue. When that eventually failed it was left abandoned and rotting... at least until a few fiscally reckless investors bought the building, gutted it down to the cement walls, and turned it into an ice rink that was as much nostalgia as it was actual profit.

“Axel! AXEL!”

Two girls bumped me on either side as they went flying by, bounding over to the boards. And there, at the edge of the ice, was Axel. There were three other girls surrounding him, and a fourth had ventured onto the ice with nothing but a pair of flats on. He was holding her up with one arm, and balancing his helmet on his stick with the other.

I stopped short on the dirty, threadbare carpet to admire my friend since the seventh grade. Axel was of course *ridiculously* hot and handsome, with model good looks and a panty-dropping smile. His thick brown hair and stunning blue eyes captivated anyone who saw him, but it was his charisma and charm that really sealed the deal. Simply put, Axel had an energy that could not be explained. His voice, his mannerisms, his killer eyelashes — all of these things were wrapped up in a cool confidence that made everyone want to be around him, guys and girls alike.

The man was a god, at least amongst hockey players. Not to mention his many, *many* female fans.

“Axel, AXEL!” I mocked, using my best teasing voice. “Can I have your autograph?”

The girls surrounding him gave me a dirty look as I approached. Especially the one clinging to him on the ice.

“Or could you maybe sign *these*?”

Laughingly, I pushed my tits together and sauntered over. I had some really great tits, actually. Three of the girls wrinkled their noses at me, including a bleach-blonde with a skirt so tight she could barely even move.

When Axel saw me his whole face lit up. In hilarious contrast, his fans all wore insta-frowns.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?” he asked cheerfully.

“Coming to find you, so you could take me to dinner.”

“But I thought you had a date?”

An image of Chris climbing through a tiny broken window floated to mind. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Yeah, let’s just say that ended early.”

He shrugged off the girl who was still clinging to him, handing her his stick and helmet. She was still holding them, open-mouthed, as he skated over to me.

“Yeah? You’re hungry?”

“Starving.”

Before I knew it he’d reached out and lifted me onto the ice with two corded, powerful arms. It occurred to me that there’d once been a ‘nobody on the ice without skates’ rule, but the days of enforcing the rules at GreatSkates had long-since passed.

“Good. Me too.”

The kiss Axel planted on my cheek happened quickly, much to the dismay of the puck-bunnies. They gave up a collective groan and slowly began to shuffle away.

“Umm... your stuff?” I chuckled.

Axel glanced back. The girl still holding his stick and helmet looked frozen, like a deer caught in headlights. He nodded in a certain direction.

“You can put that down in my locker if you don’t mind.”

She nodded mechanically as he led me away, slipping a friendly arm over my shoulder. I could feel his pads shifting beneath his jersey. The scent of him was overpowering; a heady but familiar mixture of moisture, musk, and sweat.

“Ugh. You really need a shower.”

I teased him and others all the time like this, but in reality I didn't mind. Over hundreds of games in dozens of arenas, I'd grown to sort of like it.

“Tyler and Zane hit the shower ten minutes ago, so I'll make it quick.”

He gathered up his duffel from the other side of the boards, and together we walked the length of the once-proud, but now ramshackle building. Before he ducked through to the showers however, I squeezed his hand.

“Sorry if I just ruined your night,” I apologized, nodding toward the line of girls at the exit.

Almost on cue Axel's phone buzzed and lit up. He pulled it from the side pocket of his bag, then checked it with a laugh and a grin.

“Night's not ruined yet,” he winked.

I felt a strange stab of jealousy, which was odd because that sort of thing had never happened before. I'd born witness to dozens of Axel's many conquests, and some of those women had been damn near close to perfect. None of them however, had made me feel like this.

“Be back in ten,” he grinned, as his hand slipped from mine. “And whatever you do, don't let Tyler pick the place.”

ARIANA

“And he escaped through the fucking *window*?” Zane swore incredulously. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” I smiled sheepishly.

“Broken glass. Blood...” Tyler tilted his head. “Totally gone?”

“Totally gone,” I agreed. “Like some asshole magician.”

They guys set their beers down, utterly astonished, but they also looked like they were holding back. More than one of them was stifling a laugh, which of course would’ve been at my expense.

“So what did you do?” asked Axel.

Looking down, I stirred the deflated remains of my whipped-cream into the rapidly-melting amalgam of my hot-fudge sundae.

“I paid the bill,” I said with a shrug. “Then I came looking for your sorry asses.”

It was definitely getting late, but the sports bar we’d agreed upon was known for its late closing times. It sure as hell wasn’t known for its food.

“Why didn’t he just use the front door?” asked Tyler.

“Or the back door, even,” Zane added.

Once again, I shrugged. “Maybe he thought I might see him? Who the hell knows?”

The table before us was scattered with the remains of our late-night feast: cheeseburgers, fried pickles, and a three-quarter eaten poutine pizza, half of which had been downed by Axel. Not a single busboy had come to remove anything, in all the hours we’d been here. The waitress had come five times with more drinks, however.

“Look, this is the third and last time I’m telling the story,” I chuckled. “Whether you believe me or not—”

“Oh, we believe you,” Tyler cut in. “It’s just... well...”

He hesitated, searching my expression to make sure he could go on. I tightened my mouth into a smirk and gave him the go-ahead.

“It’s just that no one’s ever *bled* themselves to get out of a date with you, before.”

If we weren’t so many beers in, I might’ve kicked him under the table. Instead, I joined in on their laughter. I was buzzed. Happy. Sated. Lazily dissecting the remains of a hot-fudge sundae, while surrounded by my three best friends in the world.

Told you that you could salvage the night.

I looked at Axel, who’d been on and off his phone all night — presumably with puck-bunnies. It was hard not to smile. The jealousy I felt before was gone now, and I was actually happy for whatever midnight hookup he might be arranging.

Tyler was staring at his phone just as much, but I didn’t envy his messages at all. If I had to guess, his overly-controlling girlfriend was firing off an endless stream of nonsensical bullshit, mostly aimed at getting him home. Not that he even lived with her, mind you; he lived with Axel. As always though, Lexus just wanted him anywhere but out.

I hated to see it, too. Tyler and I once lived next door to each other, and I’d known him most of my life. We’d grown up together, braved the perils of puberty together. As friends

we'd fought each other's battles and stood up for each other through thick and thin. I'd watched him grow from an awkward, gangly boy into this tall, gorgeous man who towered over me at six-foot-four. We were connected on levels only childhood friends understood. I'd always felt like a part of Tyler belonged to me, and vice-versa.

That left Zane, who spent the night throwing me the usual side-eye and flicking pickle chips my way. I spent equal amounts of time sticking my tongue out at him and admiring his deeply-tanned, Italian frame. His chestnut eyes and sexy, stubbled goatee made him easy to look at, all throughout high school and beyond. He'd also been my hometown buddy, sticking around Seattle those few lonely years when Tyler and Axel were off doing the college thing.

"So did you win tonight?" I asked, having missed the entirety of their game.

"Nah," Axel grumbled. "We lost by a goal."

He shot a semi-accusatory glance at Zane, who of course was goaltending. As usual, Zane didn't even acknowledge him.

"I guess we're all losers then," Tyler winked at me. "Right?"

"Well, not necessarily..." I teased.

The guys leaned back in their chairs and regarded me curiously.

"This particular date might've bombed, but I've got another one lined up for tomorrow night," I explained. "So there's always redemption."

"Oh yeah?" challenged Zane. "A date with who?"

"Garth."

I dropped the name and then quickly sipped my beer, waiting for the other shoe to inevitably drop. I didn't have to wait long.

"Garth?" Tyler repeated. "That blonde defenseman on the Mother Puckers?"

“Yup.”

“*That* Garth?” Axel swore.

“So?” I demanded, trying to keep my voice from becoming too defensive. “I like Garth. He’s kinda cute.”

“That guy’s a duster!” Axel cried loudly. “He never leaves the bench!”

“Yeah, well he asked me out the last time you guys played him,” I explained.

“Probably from the bench,” Zane grumbled. He grunted and rolled his eyes. “Look, if you’re going to date a hockey player at least date a successful one. Not some guy who only comes over the boards once or twice a—”

He stopped mid-sentence in a wince of pain. I knew immediately that Tyler had come to my rescue, kicking him under the table.

I cast my gaze down for a moment, trying to remember what Garth actually looked like. Were they right? Had I taken the date just because he asked me, without even knowing whether or not I even liked him?

When I glanced up again, Tyler’s eyes locked on mine. All three of my friends knew my love life had been full of land mines, but Tyler knew more than the others that casual dating just wasn’t my thing. Half the time I was uncharacteristically and almost painfully shy, and the other half I just couldn’t shut myself the hell up. No matter who it was that took me out, most of my dates ended in disaster. I really seemed to suck at it.

“Look, Garth’s okay from what I understand,” Tyler spoke up. “So go out and have fun. You have our blessing.”

His brotherly speech elicited an awkward laugh from me. “Uh... thanks.”

“Yeah, what Tyler said,” Axel finally nodded. He grinned and toasted me with his beer. “Stick to the basics and you’ll do just fine.”

I raised my own glass in salute, and the others joined in. Across the table however, Zane's smirk was wider than ever.

“Whatever you do, just don't let him go to the bathroom,” he winked.

ARIANA

Working at the coffee shop was one of those jobs you took to pay your bills for a while, as you searched for your true career. You never really expected to stick around very long. It was a mere pit stop in the race of life.

That's what I told myself four years ago, anyway.

In reality though, being a barista at *Java Queen* wasn't a bad gig. The hours were good, the pay was adequate, and the tips could be outstanding at times. The place was clean, the work was honest, and it smelled heavenly every single time I walked through the door and tied on my apron.

On top of all that, I was entitled to all the free coffee I could drink... which as a consummate coffee drinker, saved me a small fortune by itself. They even threw in some pastries, too. I also got to practice my coffee art, which admittedly was pretty impressive. Instagram and TikTok accounts included.

No, the place was generally alright, even on the bad days. And today, I was in a really good mood. A spectacular mood, actually. The kind of mood that nobody could mess with, except for—

“Ummm... *Ariana* is it?”

The way he said my name was uncomfortable enough, but the man's eyes still lingered on my name tag. As if he needed to explain how he knew my name.

“Yes?”

“There’s something wrong with my latte.”

‘Franklin’ — or at least that was the name I’d scrawled across his cup fifteen minutes ago — had been sitting in the corner, watching videos on his laptop. I knew he was watching videos because he didn’t have the common courtesy to use earbuds or headphones. Right now, he was holding the lid to his coffee in one hand, while tilting the beverage my way.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s... well... something’s just not right,” he said, struggling to summon some frustration. “It’s not as *creamy* as it usually is.”

I nodded apologetically. “Yeah, sorry about that. The milk foamer’s been acting up all week.”

“Oh.”

“We’ve been trying to lock down the problem, but sometimes it works and sometimes it—”

“Don’t you think I should get another one?”

My mouth went instantly tight. Under any other circumstance, I would’ve poured him a new one right away. But it was the snotty, snobbishly effete *way* in which he asked the question that sent my hackles up. Not to mention how casually and unapologetically he’d interrupted me.

“Well... you did already *drink* this one,” I said with a sigh. “Didn’t you?”

It was true. At least three-quarters of his latte was gone.

“Not all of it,” he said defensively.

Rather than answer him, I smiled and shrugged.

“If your milk foamer is broken maybe you shouldn’t be pouring lattes at all,” he grumbled. “And if you think for one second—”

“You know what? You’re right,” I cut him off. “Hang on sir. I got you.”

I plucked the cup from his hand, tossed it away, and grabbed one of *Java Queen’s* proprietary ceramic mugs. A minute and a half later I was handing him a hot, steaming latte. Freshly-poured milk foam and everything.

Franklin accepted it graciously. He was halfway back to his laptop when he stopped dead in his tracks.

“You’re kidding, right?”

The disgusted way he was staring down at his mug made me giggle. “No. Not really.”

“I think you need to get me the manager.”

I paused for a moment, then shrugged one shoulder. “Sure, no problem.”

As the man returned to the counter I ducked behind the cappuccino machine. When I stepped out again, I had a much brighter smile and an ear-to-ear grin.

“Hi, I’m Ariana! How may I help you?”

The man’s lip curled back in repugnance. “*You’re* the manager?”

“I sure am,” I said cheerily. “Supervisor, too. And head barista. And—”

“Can I speak to the owner, then?”

I motioned, and somehow caught Katie’s attention. She put down the broom she’d been sweeping with and glided over.

“Can I help you with something, sir?”

Franklin squinted skeptically at the curly-haired blonde. “Are you the owner?”

“Yes, why?”

Katie shot me an inquisitive glance. I shrugged in response, and her eyes rolled.

“Alright,” she sighed heavily. “What’d she do this time?”

The man was speechless for a moment. He was still staring down at the coffee art I’d so thoughtfully provided him.

“Did she draw an asshole again, or—”

“Well no, not exactly.”

“Did she write a curse word then?” Katie frowned. “A bad one?”

“No,” the man admitted. “Here. Look for yourself.”

Holding the mug out, he rotated it so that she could finally read it.

“What does that say?” Katie squinted through her glasses. “T-E-A-M G-R-”

“It says Team Grumps!” the man exploded, rather grumpily.

Katie let out a sigh that was half-relief, half-frustration. “Ah, yes. Team Grumps. I can totally see it now.” Her frown deepened. “Is *that* all?”

“Wha—”

“You’re angry about *that*?” Katie pointed. “Seriously?”

The man began turning a shade of red. It wasn’t an angry red, either. It was more like the crimson of deep embarrassment.

“She could’ve drawn something terrible,” Katie explained. “And I mean *really* bad. She’s done it before. Trust me, she’s got the chops for it. But all she did was put you on Team Grumps. Which, quite honestly...” she leaned in confidentially, “... you might actually deserve.”

By now I’d taken the broom and was sweeping furiously. It was the only way I could stop from breaking out in laughter.

“And look at it,” Katie said, tapping the mug. “I mean, it’s so well *done*. Don’t you think?”

His astonishment complete, the man said nothing more. Eventually he wandered numbly back to his seat, taking his latte with him.

“Some people,” Katie smirked. “They just don’t appreciate an artist at work.”

“I know, right?” I chuckled.

“Of course... it *would* probably be better for business if you don’t insult the customers,” she added casually. “Not too many of them, anyway.”

I nodded sheepishly. “Right. I’ll be more... selective.”

“That’s all a girl can ask,” she grinned, adding a wink.

The door jingled as a trio of new customers came in. The place was mostly empty, though. The morning rush was over, and the afternoon lull was here.

“Hey, you’ve got class today, don’t you?” Katie asked.

I stopped sweeping and nodded. “Three of them, actually. And then afterwards, I’ve got a date.”

She smiled and nodded approvingly. “A hot date, eh?”

“Well that part remains to be seen,” I admitted. “But I’m always optimistic.”

Katie looked me over for a second or two, and her smile widened. The owner of *Java Queen* had always been cooler than cool. It was just one more perk — pun definitely not intended — that came with the job.

“Why don’t you knock off early then,” she suggested. “You could stop at Pagliacci and grab yourself a slice, or something else to eat.”

I pointed at the pastry case. “Well... I was going to grab those scones.”

“*Other* than my scones,” Katie admonished.

I untied my apron, then bunched it up and threw it at her.

“Yes boss,” I said, kissing her on the cheek before bouncing away.

ZANE

The ice-resurfacing machine hummed beneath me, grinding away the day's grooves and gouges. The augers were set to the perfect depth. The board brush rotated at the just the right RPM's, as the spray bars put out new ice behind me.

"Move the fucking Zamboni, jackass."

I guided myself smoothly through another one-hundred and eighty degree turn. As I swept back up the ice from the opposite direction, the asshole in the blue jersey dropped a puck at his feet.

"Did you hear what I said?"

I responded by flipping him off. He responded by winding back and taking a slapshot.

THWACK!

I didn't even flinch as the puck ricocheted off one of the screw conveyors at the front of the machine.

"You missed, dickhead."

I rumbled by, skirting closely around the asshole who was still leaning on his stick. A part of me wanted to play chicken with him, to see if he moved out of the way. But it would've been messy if he didn't.

"Why are you doing this?" the red-bearded goalie demanded. "I've still got ten minutes left."

“We close at eleven,” I told him. “It’s well past that.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t get started until late. Locker jammed.”

“Sounds like a whole lot of your problem.”

He’d been skating around in full gear, flicking wrist shots at an empty net for the better part of an hour. Most likely because his teammates hadn’t shown up to practice shooting at him.

“The stuck locker’s *your* fault,” he insinuated. “Or at least the owner’s.”

“Take it up with him then.”

The asshole ripped off his helmet and spat. “Shit, I don’t even know why we practice here anymore,” he seethed, “much less play. This place is such a shithole. The roof looks like it’s going to collapse at any second.”

I shrugged. “All the more reason you should go home.”

I couldn’t argue with the shithole comment, but I certainly wasn’t going to give him an inch. We remained at a stalemate, glaring back at each other with equal amounts of disdain.

“Look man, just hit the showers already. I gotta take the nets down.” Under my breath, I stifled a curse. “I’ll tell Greg to credit you for fifteen minutes.”

“Screw that,” he spat again. “I want an hour.”

I shook my head. “You’re not getting an hour. It’s not our fault your teammates didn’t show up. You’re lucky you’re getting anything at all.”

The flame-haired asshole’s name was Devin, or Devon, or something equally ambiguous. I’d hated him since the moment I’d met him, which was unfortunately some time ago. He had a point about the lockers though, and maybe even the roof. Hell, the whole place was falling apart and the owner wasn’t doing jack shit about it. It didn’t make the guy any less of a dick, though.

“Fine, I’ll give you a half hour,” I relented. “Just get your shit and go.”

The old Zamboni ran pretty decently when you got it started, but it was a bitch to get it going again once you stopped it. You had to set all the dials correctly, and run it at just the right speed. It didn’t have any fancy digital gauges, or a laser-leveling system to keep the ice even. Everything was done by feel, by gut, by instinct.

And I’d been doing it way too fucking long.

Eventually the asshole relented, and began gathering his things. He skated up to me one last time before leaving the ice, however.

“You know... it’s not my fault you didn’t make the cut,” he smirked.

My hands balled into fists. Somehow, I willed them back open again.

“You just need more practice, that’s all,” he taunted, adding a shrug. “Maybe next season.”

Grimly I looked over my shoulder, wondering if Greg had left yet. We were probably alone. Anything could happen.

“Then again...”

No one would hear his screams. Especially over the sound of the Zamboni.

Easy, Zane. Don’t blow this.

“Then again, you can’t teach speed,” the asshole pressed onward. “Or flexibility. Or hand-eye coordination.” He paused to scratch at the back of his head. “Those things are gifts, I guess. Either you have them or you don’t.”

The words I could ignore, but it was the smile on this prick’s face that made me want to punish him in the worst possible way. I wanted to launch over the front of the machine and grab him by the head.

“And from what we’ve seen as a team...”

If I pressed hard enough, I could use his front teeth to carve my name into the ice.

“... I guess you don’t.”

I jumped down, landing nimbly in front of him. I could see in his eyes that he wasn’t expecting it. But he dropped back into a fighting stance anyway.

“There you go, loser,” Devin or Devon chided snidely. He tapped his ugly bearded chin with a gloved finger. “Go on. Take your shot.”

I reached out with one hand... but instead of grabbing him, I pushed past and detached the nearest goalpost from its moorings. I had to take the nets down before the Zamboni stalled out. And if there was one thing I was sure of, it *would* stall out.

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “That’s what I thought.”

I watched as he skated away; a giant dick holding a garishly-painted goalie mask and wearing overpriced pads. He was a douche for sure, maybe even the king of all douches. But he had one thing I didn’t have, and the both of us knew it:

A starting spot on the River Kings.

ARIANA

We'd barely cleared the door to my apartment when the kissing began again. They were hot kisses. Fast kisses. A bit clumsy at times, maybe even a little sloppy too. But they were kisses nonetheless. And for that reason alone, I was happy to have them.

You need this, I reminded myself. Remember?

Yes, I did remember. And I was reminded even more sharply as my date spun me around and spooned into me from behind.

Mmmmm...

“Hang on, let me get the ligh—”

My sentence ended in a gasp as he buried his face into my neck, and for a glorious few seconds it felt indescribably good. His hands slid past my hips. They locked firmly together, somewhere just below my navel. A second or two later, they were slipping someplace even lower.

“Hey,” I chuckled. “Easy...”

My date with Garth had been cute, and that was the only real way to describe it. He was a little nervous, but his anxiousness came off as endearing. He fumbled a few things here and there, but he messed up in all the right places.

We'd had an Italian dinner, and stopped for drinks at an Irish pub. The conversation was light, and although it never

steered too far from hockey, that was okay. Hockey was common ground for us — something we were both familiar with. Besides, this wasn't a job interview. It was only a first da

“EASY,” I said again, lifting his hands a little.

Garth spun me around once more, and the kissing began anew. It was much more urgent now, though. Less refined. Less...

Hot?

His hands settled over both cheeks of my ass. I sighed involuntarily, letting them rest there even after he squeezed. It had been way too long since I had someone's hands on my ass. I wanted to enjoy them.

“Let me just—”

I freed my arm up long enough to toss my keys on the table. They clattered, skidded across the surface, then fell to the floor. Garth didn't even hear them, but it triggered my OCD to see them resting there.

Ah, fuck it. Who cares?

Nobody, to be honest. I mean the real focus here, as far as I was concerned, should be getting myself laid.

Exactly!

Garth's palms moved again, sliding lower. Sliding *inward*. His hands were relentless, his fingers even more so. He was like a hungry octopus now, searching for prey. I was a helpless scallop on the ocean floor...

So what?

Sighing again, I ran my hands through his hair and focused on kissing him back. For a hot second I considered letting it all go, letting him have his way. God knew I needed it. And shit, it was obvious that *he* needed it too.

It would be so simple. So easy. Over quickly, most likely.

But...?

A slow feeling of dread regret began creeping its way upward, starting in the pit of my stomach. Garth was cute in some ways, but too eager in others. He was too just handsy, too forward. Not savvy enough, not cool enough, not patient enough.

Too desperate...

Besides, even if I slept with him purely to get my rocks off I knew it would only be a temporary fix. Then I'd have to see him again and again down at the rink, waving to me knowingly from the bench. I could imagine the smirk on his face, knowing he'd *had* me. Knowing I'd only gone out with him once and I'd given it all up so easily...

"Ummm..."

Somehow I extracted myself from his eight octopus arms, using only my two. Stepping back, I pushed him gently away.

"I think we'd better call it a night."

Garth blinked, then blinked, then blinked again. He looked like a child who'd been given the exact toy he wanted for Christmas, only to find out there was some kind of mix-up.

"Sorry," I apologized needlessly. "I... I guess I'm just tired."

"But it's early," he protested.

"Not *that* early."

"So make us some coffee," he scrambled, pointing toward the kitchen. "That'll perk us right up! You're a barista, right?"

"So?"

"So I'll bet you make a totally kickass cup of coffee."

Garth was fading fast before my eyes. Falling further away from the cute guy with the goofy smile who'd pulled my chair out only a few hours earlier.

"I'm really sorry," I apologized again. "I've got work early tomorrow, and—"

He took a step forward again, with the same dreamy look in his eyes as when he first kissed me. I couldn't believe I ever thought it was endearing.

"You need to go," I said, putting my hand up.

Garth froze, his expression blank as he wracked his brain for just the right combination of moves that might turn this ship around. It's likely he didn't realize there wasn't one.

"Right *now*," I added firmly.

I pulled open the door. He still hadn't moved.

"Should I call Zane to come drag you out?" I asked loudly. "Or Tyler? Or Axel—"

"Why not call all three of them?" Garth suggested glumly.

"Good idea!" I said reaching for my phone. "In fact—"

"It's like you're with them anyway."

His last statement confused me, but only for a moment. Garth slunk through the doorway, his shoulders slumped in defeat. I almost felt sorry for him. Almost, but not quite.

"Goodnight Aria—"

The slam of the door swallowed anything else he had to say.

In the cold silence of my basement apartment I let out the heaviest of sighs. It wasn't supposed to go like this.

No, it wasn't.

I looked up and caught a glimpse of myself in the little foyer's full-length mirror. I'd worn a cute new dress I'd bought just for the occasion, specifically because it matched my favorite pair of shoes. I'd done my makeup and hair and everything else, all with the highest of hopes.

And now here I was, home alone, drowning in bitter disappointment. My body still surging with the adrenaline of almost-sex, as my brain still hadn't broken the news to it that I wasn't getting laid.

“Ah, shit.”

Just then my phone buzzed in my loosely-clenched grasp. It tickled my fingers and startled me at the same time.

I glanced down just as a silly animated GIF showed up. In it, Garth from *Wayne's World* was dancing wildly back and forth in a Motley Crüe T-shirt.

Exxxxcelleent?

The group message included the guys — all three of them. It was Axel who'd sent the image, however. Apparently he'd remembered my date.

No, not excellent. At all.

I typed back out of reflex more than anything else. Under normal circumstances the mid-date intrusion would've teed me off. But the animation of Dana Carvey was so cataclysmically stupid, it only made me laugh.

Men Suck.

Present company excluded, of course.

I set the phone down on the counter and picked up the coat I'd previously shrugged to the floor while in the heat of the moment. Then I went about kicking my heels off. My feet thanked me instantly.

No, I'm pretty sure we suck too.

The self-depreciating message was from Zane. The one that came immediately afterward was from Tyler:

Yeah, we definitely suck. No question.

I rolled my eyes and picked up the phone again. I was about to hammer out a response when Tyler added:

**But if your date bombed,
you should come over.
We're at the loft,
about to watch movies.**

I bit my lip and read the message a second time. It was late, but not *that* late. I'd even said so myself. And if they were all at the loft, that meant they'd be hanging out late anyway.

Besides, the loft was fun, and warm, and spacious. The leather couch was soft and deep. There was wine there too; some of it I'd even brought over myself. Hell, I could even go for a movie.

Most of all, I knew I could use the company, especially after tonight. There might be a few "I told you so's," and I'd definitely be required to give up the sad details of my date with Garth. Even so, I was betting the guys would take pity on me. Maybe. Hopefully...

I'm in. Don't start without me.

I grabbed my coat, squeezed back into my shoes, and flitted through the door without even changing. If I didn't get there fast, one of *them* might pick the movie.

And then the night might be a total loss.

ARIANA

“So where exactly would you say the date went wrong?”

Tyler asked the question as he topped off my wine, bringing the glass to within a half-inch of being totally full. If I didn't know any better I'd say he was trying to get me drunk, and maybe he even was. But best friends tended to pour heavy when commiserating, especially over bad dates.

“The turning point?” I asked.

“Sure,” Axel chimed in. “We're looking for the precise jump-the-shark moment.”

I was stretched out on the couch, legs up, feet tucked beneath me. I'd ditched my pretty dress an hour ago, when Tyler had offered me a pair of comfy sweatpants. Right now it was hanging in his closet, just above my favorite shoes.

“I can't put my finger on it, really,” I admitted. “I mean the restaurant was nice, and the food was good. The conversation was... well...”

“Garth-ish?” Zane smirked apologetically at his own comment. I frowned at him.

“Sorry. Please continue.”

I was pleasantly buzzed now, all warm and cozy and feeling no pain. It wasn't like that earlier, though. Less than two hours ago I'd left my apartment still breathless and horny,

angry at my choice in men. Or in this particular case, their choice in me.

Now however I was resting comfortably in the open loft studio apartment shared by Axel and Tyler. The place was downright cavernous, with beds on either side, a full kitchen on one wall, and a living area in the middle. It was totally decked out like a bachelor pad, though. There were clothes everywhere, alongside hockey sticks, pads, gloves, and countless years' worth of gear. Decades of trophies and medals spanning back to childhood lined the walls. It looked exactly like two kids lived here that never had to grow up.

"I guess we really didn't talk about much," I admitted finally. "Hockey, mostly."

"What's he do for a living?"

I stared up at the ceiling for a few floundering seconds. Eventually I shrugged.

"Shit, I don't even know."

"Did he at least ask what *you* do?"

"I... I *think* so?" I sipped my wine, totally unsure. "I mean, what's the difference? It's not like being a barista is all that interesting anyway."

Tyler shook his head at me. "Ariana you're an *artist*. You draw, you sketch, you paint. You go to school for these things."

"Not to mention all the amazing spurting dicks you create with latte art," Zane added.

"Dicks with *balls* even," Axel jumped in. "Incredibly detailed balls."

I smiled and raised my glass at him. He winked one gorgeous eye back at me.

"Once I even saw you draw a girl being bent over a—"

"Okay, okay," I chuckled. "I guess I'm pretty good at latte art. But it's not like I have any of it lying around to show anyone. Other than on my Instagram, that is."

The screen across the room flickered, garnering my attention. The movie playing on their oversized TV was *Groundhog Day*, a rom-com classic. I'd picked it as a guy-approved compromise between *Tropic Thunder* and a more sappy, girlie flick. But considering how many failed dates I'd had in a row, I was wondering if there were more subconscious reasons for my choice.

"Where's Lexus tonight?" I asked all of a sudden. Tyler and his girlfriend were usually glued at the hip.

"She went to bed early," Tyler answered. "She's been doing that a lot lately. Her new job is exhausting."

I couldn't even remotely hide my shock. I half sat-up.

"She has a *job* now?"

Somewhere over Tyler's shoulder, Zane silently mouthed the word "job," while using his fingers to make air-quotes around it.

"She works for her father," Tyler went on. "He got her in with some—"

"Never mind all that," Axel interrupted him. His gaze swiveled back my way. "Stop changing the subject, here. We were talking about your date, remember?"

"Ah, yes. My date."

I settled back in, getting even more cozy against the couch as I told my three best friends in the world about the crash-and-burn end of my date. One by one, I watched as anger crossed their handsome faces. Just like me, they didn't like the octopus part of the date at all.

"I'll kill him," Zane murmured when I was finished.

"No," I countered. "No, you won't. He really didn't do anything wrong. I mean, sure he was a little handsy. But it wasn't anything I wasn't going along with."

"Until you weren't," Tyler pointed out.

I nodded, considering his words. "Until I wasn't," I agreed. "But even then, he stopped when I stopped and he left

when I told him to. I guess he was a decent enough guy, just a bit too fast and a little too desperate.”

“A *lot* too desperate,” Axel huffed.

Zane shook his head solemnly. “I still might kill him.”

“You will *not* kill him,” I reiterated.

“Can I pancake him into the boards the next time we play him?”

The others seemed to approve of the idea. They nodded in unison.

“Look, Garth’s harmless. He’s just... well...”

Eventually I shrugged. “He’s not what I’m looking for.”

I stretched my tired legs, scanning their faces one by one. I looked at Tyler, my oldest childhood friend now grown into a bushy-haired, dirty-blond, broad-shouldered Adonis. Whatever he thought of Garth, he looked more unhappy that I was unhappy than anything else, and that’s because our connection ran miles deep. I had similar reservations about *his* choice in women, though. Especially “Lexus.”

Axel casually tilted his beer back, as always exuding his natural magnetism. His almost humble inability to recognize how desirable he actually was made him even *more* desirable, if that were even possible.

And Zane... well, he was just Zane. He stood there with his arms crossed, all dark and brooding and gorgeous.

Damn, I thought to myself — and not for the first time. *You’ve got the three hottest friends in the world, and somehow you’re hopelessly single.*

“You know what?” I smiled at last. “I think I just suck at dating.”

My merriment seemed to relax them for a moment. But it was Axel who spoke up.

“Maybe you just need practice.”

I chuckled into my wine glass. “Practice?”

“Sure. Like hockey, for instance. Without practice, we wouldn’t know what the hell we were doing.”

Arms still crossed, Zane nodded. “He’s right. Practice might be the one thing that could help you. It could identify all the things you’re doing wrong.”

“Practice,” I declared skeptically.

“Sure.”

My brows came together slowly. “Practice *dating*.”

“Yup.”

“And just how do you expect me to—”

“With us, of course,” Tyler chimed in.

TYLER

She had no idea how cute she was, all curled up and comfy on our big leather couch. Then again, Ariana had no idea about a lot of things. With some of them, she was downright oblivious.

“Practice dating...” our friend repeated again. The words dangled precariously for a moment as she leaned forward and set her wine glass down on the coffee table. “With *you.*”

She tilted her head. “Like actually go out on dates?”

“Not ‘date’ dates,” I replied quickly. “Just... practice dates.”

I watched as she curled into a ball, bringing her knees up to her chin. Most of the time the move was a defense mechanism. Every once in a while though, I’d seen her do it in deep contemplation.

“Which one of you would take me out?” she asked.

I didn’t need to look to Axel or Zane. The answer was obvious.

“All of us.”

Her brow grew even more furrowed. “*Together?*”

I laughed inwardly at how adorable she was. “That could work, but no,” I shrugged. “It would probably be more like three separate dates. That way it would seem all the more

real. It would feel more like a romantic date, and less like friendship.”

“Plus we could compare notes afterward,” Axel reasoned. “Identify commonalities. See where you’re going wrong.”

“Or where you might be going right,” I added.

Ariana glanced over at Zane. So far he’d said nothing.

“And what do *you* think?” she asked, keeping her voice playful. “Wanna ‘date’ me?”

Zane smirked and raised an eyebrow. The two big arms already folded across his chest tightened. “What do I get out of it?”

“The satisfaction of helping out a friend?” Ariana grinned.

Zane huffed. “I get that all the time anyway,” he countered. “I got it when we helped you move. I got it when I loaned you that money three months ago.” He seemed amused now. “And then there was that time you needed—”

“Alright, alright,” Ariana relented. “Jeeze. I’m *gonna* pay you back.”

“Oh, I know,” Zane smiled.

“What else is there, then?” she asked. “I mean, it’s only a practice date.”

Zane said nothing. Ariana bit her lip through the silence, and thought for a moment.

“I guess there *could* be a goodnight kiss in it for you,” she teased. “If you play your cards right, that is.”

The flirty way she added that last part sent a pinprick of jealousy rocketing through me. Zane and Ariana stared at each other for an uncomfortably long time. There was a strange look in her eyes I hadn’t noticed before.

Oddly, there was one in his eyes too.

“Look, I know I suck at this,” Ariana sighed. “And I know you guys are just messing around with me—”

“We’re not messing around,” I cut her off. “And we’re not kidding. Three practice dates, and more if you need them. It’s the only way you’re gonna learn.” Just so the last part didn’t sound insulting, I added a friendly grin. “It’s not like it can hurt, can it?”

She looked from me to the others, who were already nodding.

“We’re in if you’re in, Ariana,” grinned Axel. “A few dry runs can only help.”

I examined my friend carefully as she pretended to contemplate the arrangement. And I knew she was pretending, too. I’d already seen all the telltale signs of acceptance in the subtitles of her body language. There was even excitement.

“Fine,” she sighed at last. “I’ll let the three of you date me. Just one more thing...”

Her smirk was sardonic, but also somewhat grateful.

“Who’s paying?”

Axel laughed, although a little nervously. “Maybe us, maybe you,” he teased. “Who knows? Don’t worry though,” he added. “We’re generally cheap dates.”

“Oh boy,” Ariana rolled her eyes. “Just what every girl likes to hear.”

“Cheap but fun,” I agreed.

“Fun and adventurous,” Zane added with a wink.

Ariana reached for her wine glass again and took a long, emboldening pull. It felt like the girl I’d lived next door to for so much of my life had grown into a strong, beautiful woman when I wasn’t looking. Maybe even too strong for most men.

Yet underneath that gruff exterior, I knew the person Ariana truly was. She was sweet, thoughtful, and kind. If she

was coming off as too sarcastic or abrasive, it was something we could totally work on. If she'd let us, that is.

Either way, I knew we'd have fun taking her out and playing the part of her suitors, even just for a night or three. And it was obvious to everyone that our friend could use a few good dates. Even if those dates were platonic.

"So... are you boys absolutely sure?" Ariana asked coyly. "This is your last chance to back out."

She stretched her legs, and those legs looked a lot more toned and tan than I'd last remembered. My gaze lingered on them for a few extra seconds, and I had to shake my head to clear it.

"Sure we're sure," I spoke up. "Practice makes perfect."

Ariana's sly grin came with an eventual nod. "Alright," she declared, raising her wine glass and swinging it our way. "Let's make it official and clink on it."

ARIANA

The next few days were busy ones, filled with classes, projects, and work. Scheduling enough time for everything was an eternal chore, but it was a happy chore. Besides, I'd always found myself at my happiest — and most inspired — when I was lost in the chaotic joy of multitasking.

“Hey... are you using those?”

I glanced down at the fifteen-pound dumbbells and shook my head. “Nah. They're all yours.”

“Thanks,” the pony-tailed blonde smiled, before bouncing away.

Somewhere between everything else, I squeezed in some gym time, and it was here that I could really let go. The exercise was cathartic, and always seemed to clear my mind. I was able to erase the coffee shop and forget about classes. I could even forget, for short spans of time, anyway, that I was currently renting the basement apartment of my original childhood home.

Talk about depressing.

These things tended to happen though, when you stuck around long after your family moved on. My parents were in SoCal, having packed their things a while ago. The new owners were happy to keep me renting the basement, and at first I was grateful. In retrospect however, I really could've used the kick in the ass.

“Forget it, I think I’m gonna use the tens.”

The bubbly blonde materialized out of nowhere again, dropping the weights at my feet halfway through my next set of bicep curls. I hadn’t been using them anyway. They just happened to be nearby.

“Wait,” she stopped suddenly, turning back around. “Do you think they have twelves?”

“Maybe,” I hissed through clenched teeth. Pumping the curl bar up and then down, I realized with frustration I’d lost count of my reps. “Did you try the rack?”

“The rack?”

“Yeah,” I breathed heavily. “It’s this magical place where the weights go after you leave them on the floor for a while.”

The young girl who couldn’t be much older than a teenager looked back at me, totally confused.

“They teleport there automatically now,” I went on. “Before that it happened by osmosis. Or maybe levitation. So yeah, just dump those things right back at my feet. It’s not as if —“

Ariana, STOP!

My inner voice was stern in its admonishment, letting me know I was doing ‘it’ again.

Shit.

I glanced back at the girl with the ponytail. Her expression of confusion had turned into embarrassment mixed with trepidation. She wasn’t responsible for putting the weights there to begin with. She was only returning them.

“Sorry, forget everything I just said,” I apologized. “I’m Ariana. I’m a big asshole.”

I set down the curl bar and extended my hand. To my surprise, she shook it.

“Claire.”

“Nice to meet you, Claire.”

Her smile returned. It was a pretty smile.

“Claire, mind if I ask your opinion on a hypothetical situation?”

I watched as she pulled a water bottle from her hip and deftly screwed the cap off. Simultaneously, she flipped her ponytail.

“Shoot.”

“Would you agree to go out on practice dates with a guy friend of yours, just so you can polish your dating technique?”

Claire took a long sip of water and shrugged. “Depends on the friend.”

“What if it were *three* friends?”

She arched a blonde eyebrow. “Friends with benefits?”

I hesitated. “Does it matter?”

“Yeah. Totally.”

I bit my lip. She saw my struggle.

“Wait, what do these guy friends look like?” Claire asked. “Are they hot?”

I took in a deep stalling breath, then let out a long sigh of admission. “Yes. Extremely hot.”

“So you’re attracted to them?”

“No, no, of course not,” I countered immediately. “I mean... not *really*.”

Claire chuckled. Her laughter was as cute as her smile.

“Not really,” she repeated glibly.

“Not in that way, no,” I explained further. “It’s not like I can be, anyway. Attracted to them, that is. I’ve known all three of these guys forever. I love them as friends, but that’s all we ever can be.”

There was a loud CLANG as someone dropped something heavy on the other side of the gym. A round of scattered applause eventually went up, signifying everything was okay.

“So you’re trying to up your dating game,” Claire theorized, turning her attention back to me, “so you can find the right guy for you.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re going to do this by practicing on three really close guy friends.”

“That’s right.”

“Three guy friends who you already *love*,” she went on, slyly. “Just using your own words, here.”

“Ummm—“

“And who, according to you, are ‘extremely hot.’ All three of them.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it without speaking. There was nothing I could think of to say.

“So... what’s the problem again?” Claire laughed. “Because honestly, I forgot.”

She screwed the cap back on her water bottle and pivoted away, her twenty-year old ass not bouncing even a centimeter in her tight black yoga pants. Before leaving however, she turned back and leaned in confidentially.

“Mind if I say something that might not have occurred to you?”

I was regarding Claire with an entirely different opinion now. The bubbly blonde looked suddenly much wiser than her years.

“Of course.”

“Sometimes, when you’re looking too hard?” Her pretty smile curled in at the corners. “You can’t see the forest for the trees.”

ARIANA

“So... do you come here often?”

I rolled my eyes at Axel, and probably for the fifth or sixth time tonight. He knew damn well it was my first time at the adorable little cafe. We’d driven clear across town just so our ‘date’ wouldn’t feel like any of our normal hangouts.

He however, had already run into four different people who knew them. And of course, in true Axel style, all of them were girls.

Pretty girls.

No, gorgeous girls.

“C’mon Ari,” he pleaded with a grin. “If you want to get anything out of this you’ll need to actually immerse yourself, right? So get back into it.”

His palms slid across the table and easily found mine. I relented, letting him pull my hands forward until they rested between us.

“Right now I, umm.... I work as a barista,” I said, feeling totally silly. “Cool little place Java Queen.”

Axel tapped his lip. “East of Lake Union, right?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes again. “Yes.”

“So you serve coffee?”

“Very kickass coffee,” I added with pride.

“Cool, what else?”

His question set me aback. I guess it was something a first date *should* ask, just not the ones I’d been on.

“I also go to school,” I eventually added. “Gage Academy of Art.”

Axel made a face indicating he was impressed before leaning back with his beer. “Ah, so you’re an artist!”

“Sure.”

“Sure?”

“I guess I’m as much an artist as anyone is, until they’re actually paid to be one.”

It was all so silly, really. Axel knew me better than ninety-nine percent of my closed little world. He’d been to the coffee shop a hundred times, and he’d seen just about everything I’d ever drawn, sketched, sculpted or painted. Even the crazy foam art designs I’d always create when he ordered a latte.

And yet here he was sitting across from me, still asking questions, trying to gauge how easily I might open up to a total stranger. The only problem was a simple one: Axel was as far from a stranger as anyone could get.

“I grew up here in Seattle,” I continued needlessly. “My parents lived out in Somerset. Eventually they sold the house and moved down to California, but I’m still renting there.”

“That’s gotta be lonely,” he said.

“You know it is.”

Axel nodded consolingly, then squeezed my hands with a strong but gentle grasp. The only thing between us on the little cafe table was a flickering electronic candle and the smeared remnants of the chocolate lava cake we’d so savagely divided between us.

“Aren’t you supposed to talk about *yourself* on this date?” I finally asked.

So far there really hadn’t been much talking. We’d gone out for drinks, shot some 8-ball at an old billiards hall, and ended up here. There’s been laughing, hand-holding, even flirting — as much as you can flirt with your best friend, anyway. And while the casual flirting had mostly been initiated by Axel, he’d eventually coaxed me into flirting back. We’d shared all the light touches and subtle caresses of a successful first date, or at least I thought so.

But then something *else* had happened.

Axel had been behind me, showing me how to properly line up a difficult shot as his strapping body easily molded itself over mine. His hands took over my hands. Our heads were side by side, his face right alongside my own.

At that point all I could smell was his sweet, musky scent. I could feel the stubble of his warm cheek pressed against mine as we focused on breathing and steadying the cue stick.

And it was right there, with his hard body spooning against me, that I’d felt... well...

I’d felt *him*.

For a few long seconds all I could focus on was the thick, warm knot pressed into the small of my back. Axel wasn’t exactly hard, but he wasn’t soft either. He was somewhere in the middle. Someplace dangerous, between platonic friendship and full-blown arousal.

And he felt absolutely *enormous*.

I was too afraid to move, too shy to speak. Part of me wanted to laugh it off, maybe even make a casual joke about it. But another, more sinister part of me — a deeper, greedier part — wanted it to go on forever.

In the end we’d made the shot together, and the game had gone on like nothing had happened. I risked a few quick glances to the crotch of Axel’s jeans, which were more than tight enough to show I’d felt exactly what I thought I did.

Had that really happened though?

I chalked it up to a physiological anomaly more than a romantic or sexual one. After all, we were dealing with a red-blooded American male body pressed tightly against a warm, female ass. What the hell did I *think* would happen?

“So you really wanna know about me?” Axel mused, interrupting my thoughts.

I shrugged off the billiard hall memory. It wasn’t easy.

“Sure.”

“Well, I just so happened to grow up in Somerset also.”

“Wow,” I chuckled. “Small world.”

“I play a *hell* of a lot of hockey — I practically live on the ice, actually. It took me to college for a few semesters on a full ride scholarship, but I came back early to help out when my father’s lumberyard was in trouble.”

At this point in the story Axel couldn’t help but frown. I knew how much he loved being away at school, and how great he was at what he did. But his loyalty to his family was stronger than anything, including his own interests.

“We did what we could,” he floundered, “but at that point the business was pretty much finished. There uhh... there wasn’t anything to do but...”

I listened as he explained what I already knew: Axel’s father was buried in debt, and had been for years. Even with his son putting in sixty-hour work weeks and not taking a paycheck, he couldn’t get out from under the bill collectors. It was just too little, too late.

“Anyway, a guy named Rocky bought the yard from my dad and settled everything up,” Axel finished. “I still work there, only now I actually get a paycheck, so that’s nice. Plus, Rocky isn’t so bad.”

Now it was my turn to squeeze *his* hands. When I did, his smile returned.

“I know all this already,” I told him bluntly. “We lived through it with you, remember?”

Axel’s normally hot, panty-dropping smile was unusually lukewarm and subdued. He was still smiling, though. Maybe because I was breaking the fourth wall of our ‘date’.

“Why don’t you tell me some things about you that I don’t know?”

Axel sipped his beer from the fancy glass they’d given him, looking thoughtful.

“Here’s one: my mother could never read.”

I blinked. “Wow, seriously?”

“Yup. Up to first grade I didn’t realize it, but once I began learning she made me read stories to her every night. Book after book, she’d fall asleep in my bed with her head on my shoulder.”

“That’s... that’s actually adorable.”

Axel’s grin was suddenly handsome again. “I know, right?”

“What else?”

“Let’s see...” he tapped his finger. “Oh, one time I drank ants.”

“Eww! You did not!”

My friend nodded and shrugged. “Paul Bunyan Day Camp. The kids there could be brutal at times. I can’t remember if they were hazing me or it was just some cruel joke, but I was dying of thirst and they handed me a can of warm soda with a hundred ants floating around inside.”

“Axel, yuck!”

We both laughed, and for the first time all night our eyes locked. His eyes were amazing. I couldn’t believe how incredibly *blue* they looked, even in the dim electronic candlelight.

“One more.”

He leaned back again, resting one arm casually on the back of his chair. “Okay, how about this... I had a crush on you when we were younger.”

His words took a moment to register.

“What!? When?”

“All through middle school.”

I had to pick my jaw up from the table. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Why didn’t you *tell* me?”

Axel gave a shrug of his beautiful shoulders. “Because we were good friends, and I didn’t want to screw that up. And then of course there was Tyler, and Zane. They might’ve killed me.” He scratched at his chin. “No, they *definitely* would’ve killed me.”

“But—“

“It was tough to even look at you for a year or two,” Axel admitted with a grin. “You blossomed early. And you really had me smitten.”

“I... um...” My stomach erupted with butterflies. “Holy shit.”

Had he turned a shade redder? It sure seemed that way, but I knew such a thing was impossible. Axel had so much confidence it rubbed off on everyone around him. I’d never once seen him embarrassed about anything.

“Eventually my brain convinced my heart to rule you out as a love interest,” he went on, “and I saw you more like a sister again. And right after that I started getting attention from other girls, so...” He smirked sheepishly.

“So that was that,” I smirked back.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “I guess so.”

My mind was still spinning as I tried collecting my thoughts. I could’ve told Axel I had a crush him too. A very

big crush! Back then, I'd kept quiet like he did. I'd shoved those feelings aside for all the same reasons.

“Hey, you wanna get out of here?”

My shoulders relaxed, grateful for the change of subject. “I thought you'd never ask. Where to?”

“We could go back to my place,” he suggested. “Watch Netflix, no chill?”

“Now you're talking,” I declared happily.

ARIANA

Stepping into the loft was like slipping back into reality. Everything changed back to the way it was. The carriage transformed back into a pumpkin, and I was plain old Ariana again, instead of the girl lucky enough to be out on a date with Axel. Even worse, I still had both my slippers.

“Home sweet home.”

I was actually sad our ‘date’ was over. Mostly because after the cafe, all the way home, we’d had a little fun role-playing it up. We’d gone from walking side by side to cuddling close; from hand-holding to Axel slipping his arm around me and pulling me tightly and protectively against him. There was an intimacy that wasn’t there before. A feeling of closeness embracing our friendship, at least for a little while.

And now here we were, back in the loft. Back in the familiarity of a place that had always been synonymous with fun and laughter and really great times, but nothing romantic.

“Wow, nice digs,” I smiled. “Where’s the bathroom?”

I was still playing the game. Down to the last roll of the dice.

“Funny,” Axel laughed, taking my coat. When I still hadn’t moved, he raised an arm and pointed. “Down there, on the left. The same place it’s been since the last five-hundred times you’ve used it.”

“Hey, you’re the one who told me to immerse myself. I just need to freshen up.”

I sauntered rather than walked, taking my sweet time. I wondered if he were still smiling or watching me.

“You’re not gonna come out in lingerie and seduce me or anything, are you?” I heard him ask.

I halted to glance back over my shoulder. “What kind of dates do you think I’ve *been* on?”

My friend only chuckled.

“Why? Is this something that happens often on *your* dates?”

Axel didn’t really have an answer. As the silence played out, his smirk said everything.

“It *does*?” I asked incredulously.

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Wow.”

All night long we’d run into people who knew him, young and old. There was a fair number of pretty girls and puck-bunnies, but mostly they were guys he’d played hockey with. I knew he’d dated a few of the women, or at least fooled around. But that was Axel. His charisma, his charm, his stunning good looks — all of it was rounded out by a magnetic, happy-go-lucky personality that attracted men and women alike.

Face it. He’s fucking amazing.

Yeah, my friend was definitely the complete package, and everyone adored him. Everywhere he went he made friends, lovers, and more.

“Here.”

Reaching back, he tossed me a square cloth package wrapped in plastic. I caught it out of reflex more than anything else.

“These just came in the mail for Tyler, but fuck it. They look cozy, so put them on.”

I dipped into the bathroom, slipped out of my ‘date’ clothes, and stepped into the pair of comfy red hounds-tooth pajamas that Axel — or Tyler, rather — had so thoughtfully provided. When I emerged again, wearing them with a locally-sourced bathroom T-shirt, I could only laugh.

“You *too*?”

Axel was on the couch wearing a matching pair of pajama bottoms, only his were green. Together we looked like Christmas morning.

“Tyler’s gonna kill us, you know.”

My friend shook his head with a grin. “No, but Lexus is *definitely* gonna kill us. I’m pretty sure she ordered these for the two of them.”

“Damn. We’re royally fucked.”

He patted the couch and I bounced over, swiping the remote as I curled into my spot. Axel’s usual spot was opposite mine. He took the spot next to me however, and pulled a blanket over us.

“Where is Tyler tonight, anyway?” I asked. “He out with Lexus?”

“Nah, I think he’s out with his brother,” replied Axel. “Actually Lexus hasn’t been around so much lately. Not that I really mind.”

He muttered the last part in a lower voice, but still loud enough that I could hear it. On this subject we were both in overall agreement, too. Lexus... well...

Lexus kinda sucked.

“That’s weird,” I mused, flipping channels. “She hardly ever lets Tyler out alone. Unless she has something to do, that is. But otherwise—“

“Otherwise she’s on him like white on rice.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “That.”

I yawned, and Axel reached out and pulled me closer. I squirmed even deeper into the couch, leaned down, and put my head on his shoulder.

“So how’d I do on our ‘date’?” I asked. “Objectively speaking, of course.”

“I dunno,” sighed Axel. “I’ll have to get back to you.”

I lifted my head. “Oh?”

“Yeah, well, I’ll have to confer with the others. Once they’ve taken you on their dates, of course.”

“Did you take notes? Jot down any details?”

“No.”

“So how will you remember?”

Axel chuckled, shifting his body so he was almost laying down now. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll remember.”

He patted my shoulder and pulled me even tighter against him beneath the blankets. Without reading too much into it, I snuggled into him.

“Make sure you tell them how totally fucking hot I looked tonight.”

“For sure,” he chuckled.

“And how great I was at flirting and talking. And the same thing for reading and giving off signs.”

“You’ll get credit,” Axel assured me. His grin turned fiendish. “Maybe. If I remember.”

I climbed further up along his body, until my elbows were resting on his chest. Then, without warning, I shot both hands beneath the blankets and tickled him mercilessly.

The reaction was instantaneous. Axel bucked wildly, throwing my body into the air. I came crashing down on him, twisted sideways, then rolled off the couch onto the floor.

And in my vain efforts to keep from falling, I dragged him with me.

Axel's body rolled directly over mine, where gravity took over. For a split second I expected to be crushed beneath an entire mountain of warm man-muscle. And for a fraction of *that* split second, I wasn't necessarily opposed to it, either.

Then he locked his arms, and saved us both at the very last minute.

"Damn, Ari..."

We were body to body now, face to face. I could feel Axel's hips and thighs, pressing against mine. The comforting weight of his lower body gave me involuntary tingles, as his two big arms remained locked, keeping his sculpted chest hovering just over my own.

There was a moment of silence and inactivity, as the surprise faded and our eyes remained locked, searching each other. In that moment I imagined something terrible. Terrible and terrifying and yet absolutely amazing, all at the same time...

I could see myself kissing him.

It would be so easy, too. Our mouths were right there, hovering against each other's. I could totally kiss this man, smashing my lips against his and letting our tongues go wild. Even just for a few seconds, or half a minute, or—

Only you CAN'T, Ariana! the voice in my head screamed. *No way!*

I even had an excuse if I wanted it. Multiple excuses, really. I could say that I slipped, and then rolled with things in the heat of the moment. Or I could just make out with him shamelessly right here on the floor, kissing him over and over... and in the end I could chalk it up to more role-playing, and the two of us still being out on our 'date.'

There were a hundred good reasons I should kiss Axel in this once-in-a-million moment. And there were thousand more, banging around in the forbidden recesses of my mind.

But then suddenly he was up again, pushing himself to his feet. I stared forlornly at the flex of those incredible biceps and triceps. I reveled in the delicious pressure of his body

pressing against my groin, as he pushed off me and rose to his feet.

And in that instant I knew it was all over.

“Ummm... sorry,” was all he could say. “That could’ve been bad.”

I wanted to agree but I couldn’t say anything. I was too far gone.

“I mean I could’ve broken your arm,” he added hastily. “Or worse, your ribs. Or we could’ve banged heads and gotten stitches. Or—“

“I get it.”

He reached down to help me up, and we were suddenly face to face again. But the moment was gone. Whatever strange chemistry that existed down near the floor, when our bodies were touching, had completely dissipated.

“Do you want popcorn?”

His smile was innocent now. His intentions, too.

“Yeah, sure,” I breathed, sinking slowly back into the couch. Part of me felt an overwhelming sense of relief. But also, the bitter disappointment of something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“Popcorn would be nice.”

ARIANA

“And you’re absolutely *sure* you don’t mind if we stay in all night?”

Tyler wolfed down another big mouthful of lo mein, employing his chopsticks clumsily but effectively. His technique was terrible, but it still got the job done.

“Of course not,” I answered. “Why would I mind?”

He’d come straight from his hockey game, looking as exhausted as he was unshowered. I’d given him an out of course, and told him we could do it another night. But he’d wanted to come anyway.

“Because I’m supposed to be taking you on a date,” Tyler bemoaned.

“This *is* a date,” I smiled.

“You know what I mean,” he frowned. “A *real* date.”

Technically more a non-date that was a supposed to be a ‘date’ date, I thought to myself, or at least pretending to be. But hey, who was keeping track?

“Look, we’re together, aren’t we?” I countered. “That’s all that matters.”

Tyler sighed and dove back into his quart of lo mein. He emerged long enough to take a swig from one of the beers

that had been lurking at the back of my fridge, probably from the last time he'd been over.

“Ordering Chinese takeout to eat on the couch in your apartment doesn't count,” Tyler assured me. “I wanted to take you *out* out, and do something special together. Instead I'm here, bringing you down instead of bringing you up.”

“Fine then,” I told him. “I'll take a rain-check, and I'll hold you to it.”

My last suggestion seemed to satisfy my friend. He nodded and smiled weakly, then clicked his chopsticks together before going to town on his food again.

Damn. He really does look tired.

I'd seen Tyler tired a thousand times, of course. Most of our lives, we'd lived right next door to each other. We'd had sleepovers as kids, and played games past midnight. We'd pretended our houses were haunted, explored them with flashlights, and once or twice even made it till dawn.

Right now however my friend's shoulders were slung low, and his normally bright eyes were dull and unfocused. It concerned me a lot more than whether or not we went out.

“Tyler, what's wrong?”

For a few long seconds he stared down into his half-finished takeout carton and said nothing. But he knew he couldn't hide his feelings forever. Not around me.

“Can I take a shower, Ari?”

My friend looked up at me hopefully. I scrambled to my feet.

“Of course,” I said quickly. “There are towels in the bathroom already, but if you want me to get a fresh one—“

“No, those towels are fine, thanks.”

I watched as he trudged off down the little hallway, draining his beer and setting the bottle down on the bathroom counter as he slipped inside. The door swung shut, but only partially. Tyler hadn't used nearly enough energy to close it.

The shower spray came on, and before long I could see clouds of steam rolling through the cracked door. Noises eventually filtered out: the sound of Tyler's clothing hitting the floor before he stepped inside.

What's wrong with him tonight?

I asked the question needlessly inside my own mind. And that's because I knew the answer already:

It's Lexus. Has to be.

Silently I cursed my friend's long-term girlfriend, who over the years had gone from bad to worse. Alexandra 'Lexus' Carter attended high school with us, but only tangentially. As one of the 'popular girls' she hadn't necessarily run in any of our circles, but the summer after our junior year she set her sights on Tyler and quickly sunk her claws into him.

The fierce, blue-eyed maniac who'd flattened our friend's tires and keyed his car after their first big fight had been the same sweet-talking asshole who'd made it up to him by offering to buy a brand new one. Tyler hadn't accepted that gift of course, but these attempts at control were only the tip of a much bigger iceberg. Over the course of their tumultuous multi-year relationship, Lexus had showered our friend with various toys, electronics, concert tickets, and unwanted gifts. All courtesy of her very rich parents, and a near inexhaustible bank account replenished by a sickening monthly stipend.

I'd talked it over countless times with Zane and Axel, but none of us could see the appeal in staying with such a vile narcissist. Other than having the fortune of being bombshell beautiful, Lexus brought almost nothing to the table. She was moody, nasty, vindictive, and constantly at odds with just about everyone around her. Even her small group of high school friends — growing smaller and smaller now with each passing orbit — seemed completely over her daily antics.

Lexus responded by tightening her grip on the one thing she still had: our friend. And so, with Tyler very much in love with this evil succubus, we started including her in our plans whether we liked it or not. Only we didn't like it. And she didn't like us. It wasn't long before the rift between us

became irreparable, and soon the two of them were spending all of their time alone.

“You got any *real* soap?” Tyler called out lustily, from over the rush of the steaming spray. “This shower gel definitely isn’t cutting it.”

“That shower gel is fifteen dollars a bottle!” I called back.

“Maybe,” Tyler laughed. “But it’s still not soap.”

Edging my way into the bathroom, I averted my gaze and hunted down a bar of Irish Spring. After pulling it from the cabinet under the sink, I extended one arm blindly past the shower curtain and into the steam.

“Here.”

Hot water rained down on my hand and wrist, making me glad I’d rolled up my sleeve first. A moment later however, the shower spray became entirely inconsequential.

“Take the— Oh!”

The backs of my fingers grazed something wet and smooth and scrumptiously taut. Something that might be a stomach, or thigh, or hip... but was most likely the curve of Tyler’s ass.

“Hey, watch it!” I heard him chuckle.

It was good to hear him laughing again, especially considering his previous mood. Maybe a hot shower was all he really needed.

“You almost hit... well...”

“Well what?” I challenged.

Tyler’s laugh was more nervous now. “Something else.”

I felt a hand close over my wrist, grasping it firmly in place as the soaps were switched. By the time I withdrew, Tyler was already lathering up.

“Thanks, Ari.”

I turned on the sink and washed the soap from my fingers, while looking up to see if I could discern anything in the mirror's reflection. But wall to wall, ceiling to cabinet, it was covered in a thick layer of fog.

Damn.

"There's a clean T-shirt in my bedroom, bottom left drawer. One of you left it here a few weeks back."

"Bottom left. Got it."

With that I pushed out through the swirling steam, and back into the clarity of the hall. I made my way to the fridge and uncapped a fresh beer, in anticipation of his return.

Five minutes later Tyler emerged in a pair of loose-fitting sweat shorts, and a T-shirt I was pretty sure belonged to Zane. He was rolling his right arm in a slow circle, wincing slightly as he tested its limitations.

"That shoulder's not acting up again, is it?"

My friend nodded.

"Sit here," I patted the floor at the foot of the couch. "I'll work on it."

He sighed gratefully as he sank down, giving me his back. Scooting forward, I positioned my thighs on either side of him, handed him the beer, and began kneading his injured deltoid. For a good two minutes there was nothing but silence, as he took long sips from the bottle and allowed his body to slowly relax. I'd rubbed these big shoulders more times than I could count. At times, Tyler even returned the favor.

"Wow. You smell good."

He sniffed at his arm. "I smell like fruit."

"Wild raspberries," I agreed. "Totally delicious."

Tyler extended one corded arm, still warm from the shower, and held it out near my lips. "Bon appetite."

I pretended to bite him, just like I used to when we were kids. He'd never smelled this good, though. I was actually tempted to sink my teeth into him.

“Tyler?”

“Yes?”

“What’s wrong?”

I’d asked the question before, and he’d deflected with a shower. This time, rather than try to avoid the subject, he simply lolled his head back and looked up at me upside-down.

I kept kneading and rubbing, gliding my thumbs down the thick, striated muscle of his upper arm until I could feel the knots unraveling beneath my fingertips.

“It’s Lexus,” I ventured carefully. “Isn’t it?”

Tyler sighed heavily, and the sigh was a mixture of pleasure and frustration. I was bringing him one emotion. His girlfriend was providing the other.

“Yeah, it’s Lexus,” he admitted, letting his eyes close. Taking a long, deep breath, he let that one out too.

“It’s *always* Lexus.”

ZANE

“Would you like some wine?”

The door clicked behind us, but I only barely noticed. I was too busy staring. Ariana’s thighs looked fantastic in her pleated skirt, and even more so from behind.

“Is it good wine?”

“Umm... sure?”

“Then yes.”

She looked like the devil walking through my little apartment, swinging her purse, her high-heeled boots clicking rhythmically across the floor. Her hair and makeup were on point tonight. She’d even curled her eyeliner up at the corners in that cat-like way I loved so much.

Just one of the many perks of taking her out on a ‘date.’

“I usually don’t go home with a guy on the first date,” she teased, as if reading my mind.

“So why did you?”

She turned to face me and shrugged. “I dunno. I guess because you’re cute.”

The bottle was at the end of my tiny bar. I twisted the cork and it came out with a pop.

“Puppies are cute,” I admonished her. “Babies are cute.”

Tilting one of the only two wine glasses I owned, I began to pour. The deep red liquid splashed into the glass, looking like blood in the evening light.

“I am *not* cute,” I told her, approaching with a glass in each hand. Ariana’s skirt flared as she whirled to face me. Staring into my eyes, she took one of the glasses and lifted it gingerly to her lips.

“What are you, then?”

She took a sip. I watched her expression change; as the warm liquid reached the back of her throat.

“I’m a dashing, dangerous bachelor about to ply you with eight-dollar wine.”

Ariana nearly spit, caught herself, and just barely managed to swallow. Then she laughed, long and hard, before punching me in the arm.

“You asshole, you almost ruined your new rug!”

She pointed downward. I followed her gaze.

“And how do you know that rug is new?”

“Because I was with you when you picked it out, remember?”

I took my own sip, trying not to wince at the obvious bitterness. In the end, I failed miserably.

“This is bad, isn’t it?”

“God awful,” Ariana agreed.

“Here, then. Give me that.”

She chuckled as I poured out both glasses, then fired the bottle straight into the garbage. After a little rummaging around, I found what I was looking for: a half-full bottle of Kentucky bourbon. I held it up.

“Better?”

My date smiled. “If it gets the taste out of my mouth, yes.”

I poured into tumblers this time, of which I had an overabundance. We clinked in silence, toasting nothing in particular as we lifted our glasses together — all while staring out through the window over my very limited view of the city.

“Thanks for tonight,” said Ariana. “It was fun.”

“*Was?*”

“Still is, I guess,” she corrected herself. “As far as dates go, this was the most comfortable, no-pressure one I’ve had in years.”

I watched as she tilted her glass back, taking slow sips of the warm amber liquid. I wasn’t used to seeing her with her hair down, and I noticed it had gotten long. It went well past shoulder length now, the chestnut tips curling up against the surface of her big, beautiful breasts.

Our date had been a whirlwind of rides and games, culminating in a leisurely walk along the edge of the waterfront. We’d eaten the most ridiculous burgers, and shared a giant milkshake. At dusk we’d climbed aboard the Ferris wheel at pier 56 and watched the sky go from gorgeous cerulean to a deep, midnight blue, as the lights of the city lay spread out beneath us, flickering like colorful jewels.

Through it all there’d been the usual undeniable chemistry, and as always we’d tried to ignore it. But tonight... well, tonight was different. Tonight Ariana and I were on a ‘date.’ For that reason alone it was somehow okay if our bodies kept grazing against one another, or that when she finally spooned into me, I could slide my arms so tightly around her I could feel every last one of her troubles melting away.

It was liberating as hell, not having to pretend that I didn’t notice the sway of those shapely, feminine hips. I could stare without guilt into those emerald green eyes, and let my own gaze linger as much as I wanted to on that perfectly-shaped, bubble-butt.

Hour by hour she looked more delicious in the outfit she'd worn for me. With each passing moment—

The slam of a car door down in the alleyway snapped me back to reality. I shook my head clear.

“Holy shit, it’s Friday! What time is it?”

Ariana looked confused as she pulled out her phone. “Eight-thirty. Why?”

“Quick, come here.”

I ushered her over to the far corner of the window, right up against the glass. With one hand still on her hip I pointed downward.

“See that white Infinity? Middle of the alley?”

Ariana squinted into the shadows. “Yeah. So?”

“Watch.”

I clicked the lights off behind me, so we could get a better view. As our eyes adjusted, the man who'd left his black sedan to climb into the white Infinity was also climbing onto something else. Or rather, *someone* else.

For a good two minutes Ariana stood in total silence, watching the scene in the alley unfold. It was the same scene I'd watched a dozen or more times, on a dozen other Friday nights. The two people in the vehicle embraced for a while, then climbed into the back seat.

Then, just like always...

“Holy shit,” Ariana swore. “Are they—”

“Fucking?” I leaned in closer. “Yes.”

The big white car began bouncing rhythmically, shimmying up and down, left and right. I had to hand it to whoever designed the Infinity's suspension. Maybe it wasn't made for this, but it may as well have been.

“They get together every Friday night, right around this time,” I murmured, gliding up behind her. “Sometimes they use his car. Sometimes hers.”

I had both hands on her hips now, and Ariana didn't flinch. On the contrary, she bent even further over as she looked out the window, presenting me with a more rounded glimpse of her magnificent ass.

“But they always get right down to it,” I continued. “Very little foreplay.”

My hands slid down her thighs, savoring the warmth and smoothness. Palms spread, fingers splayed, I could feel her shiver beneath my touch.

“Think they're secret lovers?” she whispered, as if she spoke too loudly they might hear. There was fascination in her voice.

“Probably.”

She was grinding back against me now, rolling that ass into my crotch. Inch by inch I hiked up her skirt. Ariana's heart was pounding now. I could feel her pulse racing wildly, beneath the very tips of my fingers.

“Cheating on their partners, maybe,” she continued. “Or spouses, or—“

My date hissed with pleasure as I plunged my face into her neck, kissing her so hotly she let out a series of whimpers that were absolutely adorable.

“Or maybe they're coworkers who get their rocks off every Friday night after drinks...”

Her body was reacting to mine, arching backward to accommodate me. At the same time, one of her hands reached back to close itself hungrily over my growing hardness...

It felt so incredible I wanted to scream.

“I've never seen anyone *fuck* before,” she breathed, lost in the moment. The way she emphasized the word made it sound deliciously dirty.

“Oh no?”

I kissed her shoulder, her neck, the soft curve of her throat. Her respiration was growing shorter and louder now.

She was practically in heat.

“N—Not in person,” Ariana managed. “I mean, not anyone *else*, anyway.”

Her skirt was hiked all the way up to her waist, exposing both globes of that incredible ass. The pretty little G-string she’d chosen to wear tonight was white satin. I hoped she wasn’t too attached to it. I was about to destroy it.

“Wow,” she breathed, watching intently. “Look at them go.”

From this angle we had a perfect view of the Infinity. Through the side window we could see a man’s naked, churning ass, pumping away between two bare, outstretched thighs. It was raw and primal. Savagely voyeuristic.

And thoroughly, thoroughly hot.

Ariana gasped as I slid my fingers through her *very* wet thigh gap. My fingers pushed forward, disappearing inside her for a few heated moments as she braced herself against the window.

“H—Holy...”

A moment later I was pressed tightly against her, pants down, skin against skin. Ariana reached back to clutch me desperately against her body. She was still grinding backward when I seized total control, grabbing the hard base of my manhood and dragging it up and down through the molten valley of her dripping entrance.

“Holy *fuck*, Zane...”

I yanked her panties so violently to one side the fabric ripped in protest. And then I was right where I wanted to be: pressed firmly against her flower. One glorious thrust away from being buried in the hottest, most beautiful place on the whole fucking planet, maybe even in the entirety of the universe.

And then she bit her lip and shoved herself backward...

... and it felt just like coming home.

ARIANA

It was the first autumn out of high school that it actually happened; years of insane chemistry had finally come to a head, and my own curiosity had driven me to change our friendship forever. Most of all though, it was the loneliness. Tyler and Axel had both gone off to study at opposite schools, leaving Zane and I still hanging out together and missing them both.

On top of all that, I'd somehow made it out of high school untouched and unsullied. I'd had three incredible friends watching out for me, inadvertently chasing away would-be suitors while providing all the testosterone-fueled male attention girls crave at such an age.

Or *almost* all, anyway.

Like everyone else, I wanted my first time to be special. I wanted to lose it with someone I trusted, someone I loved and admired. Someone I was both physically and emotionally attracted to, and someone who loved me deeply in return.

And so I went over Zane's house the night before Halloween, and told him to teach me *everything*.

There had been no pretenses, no hesitation. No worrying about what Tyler or Axel might do or think, because Tyler and Axel were thousands of miles away. I'd been dressed to the nines when I flung myself into Zane's arms,

finally allowing our writhing, lust-filled bodies to crash magnetically together. And as I drank from those sweet, gorgeous lips I'd imagined so many times, I thought my torment was ended. The moment he buried himself so deeply inside me, piercing my maidenhood with a shuddering gasp while holding me gently but firmly against his hard, masculine body, I thought I'd reached the pinnacle of happiness, and would never crave anything so badly again.

But holy *fuck*, was I wrong.

We did it again the very next night, and every day and night for a full two weeks. It was like the floodgates of our pent-up lust had finally been opened. The dam keeping our hormones at bay had spectacularly shattered, and we swam happily together through ocean after ocean of dripping hot sex.

Zane taught me everything I'd ever dreamed of wanting to know, as he brought me fully into womanhood. We rutted like animals at his place and mine, sneaking off to wherever we could get a private moment and screwing our brains out. He took me hard and fast, pinning me to his bed, drilling me until I gushed violently around him, exploding so hard I practically passed out. But there were times he took me slowly, sensually, with soft music and romance. He spent long, glorious hours between my legs, sawing slowly away between my thighs. Holding and kissing and loving me with a raw intimacy that only the best of friends could possibly understand, all while staring into each other's eyes as we reveled in our shared orgasm.

Right now I was reminded of those wonderful times, as Zane gripped my hips and pushed his thickness past my aching folds. He was so deep inside me I had to bite my lip. I was lost in the moment, so desperate for this to happen, yet also so turned on by watching these two complete strangers screwing each other silly in the alley below.

“Jesus, Ari...”

Zane grunted the words while chewing my ear, marveling at how good I felt wrapped around him. The crack in his voice told me he was already drunk with lust. His hands

slid up to my breasts as he continued working me from behind, and together we just bounced there for a while, enjoying the connection between us. Feeling the heat of each other from the inside out, as we screwed and groaned and grinded ourselves deeper.

God, I needed this!

I was fucking him back now, kissing him wildly over my shoulder. His sweet tongue danced with mine, and I was reminded sharply of all the times we'd done this together, so wantonly, so recklessly...

But the gratification was worth every last bit of the guilt or greed.

“Go harder...” I begged. “You know what to do. Don't hold back.”

I had both hands braced on the window now, and Zane was giving it to me as deep as he possibly could. My cheek felt cold against the glass. Right beside my parted lips, it was fogging over with every breath.

“Don't stop...” I pleaded. “Don't you fucking stop...”

I was getting closer now, creeping deliciously nearer to that ultimate goal as I reached back with one arm to clutch him more tightly against me. Back arched, with his hot mouth chewing my shoulder, I focused on squeezing him even tighter from the inside.

“Zane...”

One strong arm slid downward, draping itself snugly around my waist. Zane pulled me against him, our bodies screwing even closer together. Spooning so incredibly perfectly, it felt like we were actually becoming one.

“ZANEEEE!”

My climax was a cascading avalanche of pent-up heat, surging over me with unstoppable force. It flowed upward and outward from my molten womb, flooding me with a euphoria so deep, so tremendous in its totality, that Zane needed both hands to hold me steady as I bucked and churned around him.

Fuuuuck!

I let myself float downward through the victory of my orgasm, spasm by beautiful spasm. As I did, sweet memories flashed through my endorphin-addled mind. I recalled every sizzling time we'd been together, Zane and I. Our two weeks of pure animalistic fucking had ended with him being called out of state for work, building concert stages for his brother's company. By the time Zane got back, things were somewhat strange between us, or maybe we just *thought* they were. Either way, we each ended up giving the other some space. And in that space, whatever potential we had for an actual romance was never revisited.

We did still fuck though, a good handful of times after that. It was always between boyfriends and girlfriends, and always when one or both of us was sure the other only wanted a hookup, and nothing more. Friends with benefits became sort of a safe place for us, but a dangerous one as well. And that's because we both made a solemn pact never to tell Axel or Tyler. This thing we'd created, whatever it was, would always remain our ultimate secret.

“Ariana...”

Zane's hands were on my hips again, driving into me with long, deep, desperate thrusts. Gasping through the last throes of my epic climax, I threw my hair back to look over my shoulder and directly into his eyes.

“*Come* in me.”

My words were all he needed to hear.

A change came over him; almost immediately. Zane's eyes unfocused, and his mouth dropped open in a perfect 'O'. Whatever last remnants of control he still maintained were instantly abandoned, obliterated by the direct permission to finally let go.

“*Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh...*”

He buried himself deep one final time, slamming his perfect body against the business end of my warm, naked ass. And then he was coming... exploding... detonating inside me.

Spewing like an angry volcano, as his thick shaft twitched and thumped and filled me from within.

I stood there happily, hands still on the window, grinding away. Rolling my ass in big, beautiful circles, to elicit every last ounce of pleasure from Zane's oversexed brain.

Fuck yes.

Eventually we stopped, still connected, still dripping and throbbing as one. The lovers down in the alley finished their affair. They rolled off each other, climbed into their respective cars, and drove off in opposite directions.

Eventually Zane gathered himself, pants, boxers and all. He snapped my torn G-string back into place between my cheeks, then gently patted my swollen mound for good measure.

I spun to face him, and his expression was none too innocent. He looked like the wolf that just swallowed the canary.

"That..." I whispered breathlessly, "goes right down on the list of things that *never* happened."

My top-secret friend-with-benefits only grinned. Looking me up and down, he raised a playful eyebrow.

"There's a list of things that never happened?"

"Oh yeah," I nodded slowly, still enjoying the pleasant throb between my legs. For some reason, it seemed better than ever.

"And it's getting longer every day."

TYLER

“Look, they keep crashing the net. And we keep letting them.”

I glanced back, looking to Zane for help. He still had his helmet on. His mouth was open, as he squeezed a stream from his water bottle right through his goalie mask and straight down his throat.

“They’ve been hanging on all night, and now they’re looking for this to go into a second overtime,” I growled. “But you know what? *Fuck* second overtime.”

The team was average at best, half-filled with has-beens and rife with players who could be dubbed ‘never was.’ Their goalie was halfway decent, and that was the only thing keeping them in the game. But they had a right-winger that could be dangerous. Mostly because he was totally unpredictable and took reckless chances.

“I want you to cheat up on him,” I told Blake. “And if you see an opportunity, make the play.”

Our forward tilted his mask upward a few inches and spat, laughing.

“Just like that, huh?”

I nodded. “Just like that.”

“And what if I botch the opportunity?”

“Then I’ll drop back and cover you.”

Blake didn't look so sure. Neither did Aaron, our other defenseman.

“And what if you can't—“

“You heard the man,” Axel took over, flashing his usual charismatic grin. “Make the damn play. And make it work, too, instead of worrying about what happens if you miss.”

I nodded my thanks, drawing everyone forward into a tight circle. Our faces were dripping sweat. Our bodies heaved, our lungs burning from having played three full periods with two men down.

“Calgary on three,” I shouted, getting ready to break. “One... two... three—“

“CALGARY!”

We skated away to our respective positions, and I reflected on how our whole season had come down to this one crucial moment. We were a single win from the playoffs. A single goal from taking the team into Canada for the international playoffs; a goal we'd set as a team four years back and still hadn't achieved yet.

The referee skated up, whistle in his mouth, puck in hand. This was it. This was our moment. This was the difference between going home with our tails between our legs, or sharpening our skates and packing for—

The puck left the referee's open hand, spinning end over end as gravity took over. The opposing center followed it with his steel blue eyes, stick ready, teeth clenched...

But Axel was quick on the drop.

He glued the puck to his stick, those strong legs propelling him forward as he deked left and shifted right. He got around the left-winger and shot straight down the boards, skating behind the goalie so fast, so quick, the guy's neck almost snapped clean off.

At the last second he let go of the puck and faked a quick wraparound goal. His trick worked. The goalie dove to

his right, pinning himself against the post, while the natural momentum carried the puck straight between the defenseman's legs and over to me.

We'd practiced the play a hundred times, maybe even five hundred. We'd been playing so long together it was impossible to tell, but when it worked...

I cradled the puck with the curve of my stick for a split second, and only a split second. Then, with a quick jerk of my wrist, I put it over the goalie's shoulder and deep into the right back corner of the net.

The light went on, and it was the most beautiful sight in the world. But my team was already screaming.

"FUCK YES, TYLER!"

There were two seconds of shock, and maybe another two of exultation. And then I was buried, tackled beneath my onrushing teammates. Crushed happily to the ice in a rain of bodies and gloves and sticks as they dog-piled me, cheering and screaming our victory.

When I finally got up and the guys peeled off, I looked to the stands. The place Lexus usually sat to watch us play was conspicuously empty. She hadn't come late to the game, or even at all.

Damn.

In the beginning she came all the time, watching my every shift, cheering alongside us. But lately she'd only come to some of our games. The ones she did, she only paid partial attention. Half the time her face was lit up by the glow of her phone.

I skated back and forth along the boards, hoping I'd missed her somehow. Surely she wouldn't miss a game *this* important! The crowd was already surging, some of them onto the ice. The other team's fans were already leaving, so maybe

"Hey!"

I turned, just as a pair of lips smacked themselves hard against my cheek. An arm slid around me. It gave me a squeeze.

“Hey baby! Did you see—“

I stopped mid-sentence to find Ariana blinking up at me.

“Of *course* I saw!” she practically screamed. “Tyler, that was amazing! You made the playoffs and you’re all going to Canada and—“

She stopped mid-sentence, searching my expression.

“Oh shit,” she chuckled, nodding in sudden acknowledgment. “You thought I was Lexus!”

I shook my head. “No, I—“

“Yes you did. I can see the disappointment in your eyes.”

I started to say something, but it only came out as a sigh. Seeing Ariana was always the furthest thing from disappointment. And unlike my so-called girlfriend, she’d made almost every game so far.

Besides, Ariana already knew all about my recent troubles. I’d emotionally unloaded on her the other night, when I was supposed to be taking her out on a practice date. I’d told her all about how Lexus had stopped all her clinginess and relationship suffocation, and for a while things had been great. Better than great, actually. But then the pendulum had continued to swing, and this time into new territory. She’d come around less and less, and even encouraged me to go out, without complaint. Which sure as hell wasn’t like her at all.

“Look, I’m sure Lexus is around here somewhere,” Ariana piped in. “Maybe she’s in the bathroom.”

I scoffed. “During overtime?”

“Umm... maybe?”

She bit her lip in that adorable way that always got to me. When we were kids, it made me want to chase her down and

tackle her, then tickle her. But now...

Now it still makes you feel like tackling her, the voice in my head teased. *But instead of—*

“Nice shot dickhead, that play was filthy!”

Zane’s compliment came with a brotherly smack to the back of my head. He skidded to a stop in front of Ariana and winked.

“We’re all going to the Shamrock; to celebrate,” said Zane, “if this asshole will ever stop bragging about his one-off.” He bumped her. “You coming?”

“Am I coming?” Ariana grinned. “Who do you think already called in the tables?”

Zane winked again and elbowed me this time. “That’s our girl.”

My friend was still riding high on our victory, coupled with the overwhelming relief at not having to block another shot. We were playoff bound, with a road trip on the horizon. Beyond all the bullshit with Lexus, I felt a growing excitement that had been years in the making.

“Wait by my truck,” Zane told Ariana. “Once I pry Axel free from those puck-bunnies, I’ll drive us over—“

“Are you kidding?” I cut in. “Think she’s gonna wait for your sweaty ass to get out from under all that goalie gear?”

I grabbed Ariana and pulled her snugly against me. Somewhere in the back of my mind, it felt much more right than it should’ve.

“She’s riding with me,” I said, interlacing my fingers with hers. Ariana gave my hand a squeeze back.

“Don’t worry, we’ll pour one for you,” I punched Zane so hard in the shoulder pads he actually glided backwards. “Just don’t let it get warm.”

ARIANA

The walk from my classes at the Gage Academy to the aroma-infused comfort of the coffee shop wasn't always a dry one. But it was always beautiful, even on days like today when it poured down rain.

I was in another great mood — the kind that not even a leaky umbrella I'd pulled from the 'borrowed' can at school could quell. I'd gotten fantastic reviews on my latest painting, and solid marks from my other classes as well. The boys had made the playoffs in the premier league. Already they were planning the drive up north.

And of course, it didn't hurt that I'd finally gotten spectacularly laid.

So yeah, I was dripping wet and even ten minutes late by the time I arrived at work. But the coffee shop was extra warm, extra cozy, and smelled absolutely heavenly. I always loved working on days like today, where the windows fogged up and everyone who came in for a cup of something hot and steaming was just grateful to be there.

"You're late again," Katie called from the back, as I tied on my apron. Somehow, without looking, she already knew I was here.

"Sorry boss," I promised. "I'll make it up to you."

She bounced through the doorway, carrying a full tray of chocolate chunk cookies. As she slid them into the case, I

pretended not to notice that two were missing.

“You’re not cheating anyone but yourself,” she admonished playfully. “And of course the good people of Seattle who you’ve deprived of your skills.”

I laughed, but in the back of my mind I knew there was a kernel of truth to what she said. My skills had actually brought in a ton of business last year, when the foam art on one of my lattes had inadvertently gone viral. I’d spent ten full minutes drawing an adorable lion, even making it 3-D by building up the foam to the point where it looked like the animal was crawling out of the cup. Katie had rolled her eyes that day, at the time I’d apparently wasted. But a few days later when a rush of people came in looking for me to draw them the same lion — and other animals as well — my fantasy artwork had brought in some *very* real profits.

The rush lasted for weeks, and brought in hundreds of brand new customers. One of them actually prompted me to start up an Instagram page, and things snowballed from there. I gained followers fast. I started taking themed requests and did ‘Freaky Friday’ posts every week, plus whatever else I could come up with. At Halloween I drew ghosts and ghouls and graveyards. At Christmas I drew holiday scenes so intricately beautiful people were reluctant to even drink them. They sat there staring and taking photos until the artwork dissolved, but with each satisfied customer my internet presence spread.

“Take over the front,” said Katie, pulling on her curls. “I’ve got croissants coming out of the oven, and a banana walnut pecan loaf that’s not even...”

She disappeared again, talking to herself. Which sucked, because I hadn’t even broken the news to her about needing a few days off.

“Ummm... HELLO?”

I whirled in surprise, to find a customer standing at the counter. Before I could say anything, my mouth dropped open in shock.

“Could somebody help me please? Because I’ve been waiting here like forever.”

The person standing at the counter with a hand on her hip was none other than Lexus, Tyler’s girlfriend. She was sharply-dressed for such a rainy day, with flawless makeup and gold rings on every finger. She also wore her standard perma-frown, which looked even more downturned than usual.

“What is it that I can—“

“My espresso macchiato is all wrong,” she announced, completely cutting me off. With one bejeweled hand she shoved her extra-large coffee forward, as if it were a cup of poison. All without even looking up at me.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I asked for milk *foam*,” Lexus huffed. “This is steamed milk.”

“SORRY!” Katie called again from the back room. Her bionic hearing really was ridiculous. “I was in a rush, and the timer went off while I was icing the lemon loaf, and then—“

“No problem at all,” I said, as Katie’s voice trailed off again. “I’ll just remake it for you.”

“Well I’m not going to drink *this* one,” Lexus answered snottily.

My mouth was still open as I took the cup back and poured it into the sink. Not only did Tyler’s girlfriend not recognize me, she hadn’t even looked up. Right now she’d already turned her attention back to her phone, where her well-manicured thumbs were deftly hammering away at the screen.

Unfuckingreal.

I couldn’t help but shake my head as I went about remaking her drink. In truth, Lexus probably forgot I even worked here. But that was how she always operated; anything outside of her own closed little world didn’t matter. If something didn’t affect her directly, she had total disregard for it. Even the people closest to her, Tyler included, generally

seemed to annoy her, unless they happened to be doing her bidding at any given moment.

“Here you go.”

By the time I handed the espresso back I was thoroughly disgusted. Lexus reached out for it, still clueless, still thankless, still punching buttons on her phone with her free hand. And that’s when I noticed the name scrawled on the side of the cup:

Malcolm

I blinked.

Wait... what?

The coffee wasn’t for Lexus, it was for someone else. In fact, she already *had* a coffee. I could see that now. A second cup stood on the counter beside her, this one with her own name written across it.

Who the hell is Malcolm?

Before I could ask or speak up or even think about what to do next, Lexus was already storming away. There wasn’t a ‘thank you’ or an acknowledgment, and there certainly wasn’t a tip. There was the jingle of bells as the door swung open and closed.

Malcolm...

“Katie?”

Her voice called distantly from somewhere in the kitchen. “What?”

“I’ll be right back!”

Whatever my boss said next fell on deaf ears; because I was already scrambling for the door. Luckily there was no one currently waiting on anything. Aside from a few customers sitting quietly at tables, Java Queen was practically empty.

The rain was still falling as I slipped outside, looking left and right for signs of my quarry. I didn't know why I was even chasing Lexus. Or what I would say if I caught up with her, or she saw me, or—

I stopped dead at the next corner. Lexus was getting into a steel-grey truck; one with an obnoxious lift kit and big knobby tires that put it several feet off the ground. She handed up both coffees, where a man in tinted sunglasses accepted them quickly, then hopped up using the step bar with the help of the man's extended hand.

Lexus leapt into the vehicle and bounced happily across the bench seat, embracing the driver. He was beginning to look strangely familiar to me. Like I should somehow know him, or I'd seen him before.

Then she kissed him right on the mouth.

HOLY SHIT!

I watched it all happen clear as day, right through the giant windshield. The guy leaned over and Lexus kissed him slowly, sensuously, for a good two or three seconds. Then the truck's motor started up with an ear-splitting roar, and it rumbled away on its comically tremendous tires.

I stood there for almost half a minute, totally heedless of the rain, before finally making my way back to the coffee shop. I was shocked. Dumbfounded. Totally soaked through.

And very, *very* fucking pissed off.

ARIANA

“Malcolm...” Tyler repeated again, murmuring the word like some forgotten mantra. He looked lost in thought now. Unnaturally calm, considering the circumstances.

“That was definitely the name on the cup,” I assured him. “Both orders were called in separately, according to Katie. But it was Lexus who came in and picked them both up.”

My stomach growled, prompting me to bite into my second slice of pizza. Tyler’s sat untouched on his side of my kitchen table, leeching grease onto the doubled-up paper plates I provided him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t find out more,” I apologized. “They left so fast, though. And I was just so surprised, I wasn’t thinking straight—“

“Malcolm *Newell*?” Tyler snapped his fingers. “From the Jagrbombers?”

I sat up a little straighter, rushing to swallow the bite in my mouth. “Umm... maybe?”

I’d spent the rest of the day agonizing over what to do, all the way up until ten o’clock at night. That’s when I called Tyler, urging him to come over because I had something important to tell him. It’s also when I realized I hadn’t eaten anything for the rest of the day.

Tyler showed up not twenty minutes later, bearing one the last cheese pizzas from Gio's, right before they shut down for the night. I tore into it immediately, as I glumly relayed the events of this afternoon.

“Do you remember when we played the Jagrbombers?” Tyler was asking.

“Not really,” I admitted. “You play so many teams throughout the season, though. And each one has so many players...”

I trailed off, watching as Tyler fumbled with his phone. He pulled up the Jagrbombers team website, clicked on the roster tab, and scrolled down a few spaces.

“Here,” he said, flipping the screen my way. “Is this him?”

The guy in the yellow-and-black jersey smiling back at me was unmistakable. Even without the sunglasses, I was totally sure.

“That’s him,” I confirmed. “One-hundred percent.”

Tyler sank back into his chair again. The hiss of air escaping the shitty cushion reminded me sharply that I needed a new dinette set.

“Lexus and Malcolm Newell,” he repeated numbly. “Wow.”

I’d felt terrible all day, but now I felt even worse. Good or bad, Tyler had been dating this girl for a very long time. He’d given her everything, and she’d done nothing but take him for granted in return. His time, his attention, even his limited resources; he’d dumped everything into this one-sided relationship, which was as unhealthy as they came.

Lexus on the other hand was an anchor to Tyler’s rising star. She took and took and never gave back, even going as far as to urge him to work less hours, simply so he could spend more time with her. She didn’t care about the money or opportunity Tyler would be losing out on, and that’s because Lexus was rich. Jobs were things for other people, not her.

Money, which her daddy apparently grew on trees, was inconsequential.

Worst of all, once we graduated and Tyler was away attending Michigan State, Lexus had been the singular reason he'd come home. When she wasn't distracting him from his schoolwork by flying him back to Seattle every other weekend, she was traveling to his campus to 'surprise' him for long stretches at a time. She encouraged him to ditch classes. Took him on off-campus getaways for days on end. When missed hockey practices finally put his starting position with the D1 team in jeopardy, Tyler tried buckling down and making his girlfriend more of a secondary focus in his life.

A few weeks later he was stepping off a plane, shoulders slumped, having dropped out of school.

No, Lexus was outright fucking poison from the very beginning and we all knew it. Everyone that is, except Tyler. Axel and Zane would give him occasional shit about it, and even drop hints here and there as to what an albatross his girlfriend truly was. But as a 'supportive' best friend, all I could do was sit and watch and occasionally listen. All while waiting for the inevitable end.

"Shit Tyler, I'm sorry."

I scooted closer and slid my arm around him, searching for a reaction in those big, soulful eyes. I expected to see a rush of anger at this cheating bitch's betrayal. The grim disappointment in knowing that something he'd put so much time, and so much effort into, had finally fizzled out.

Instead my friend appeared oddly tranquil, even relieved. His big shoulders weren't nearly as tightly coiled as when I'd rubbed them the other night. His mouth was even curled into something resembling a sinister smile.

He looked... free.

"Guess we owe Lexus a little visit, don't we?"

Tyler stood up and rubbed his hands together. He began looking around.

“We’ll have to make a quick stop at my place first, though.”

“We?” I squinted.

“Sure. You’re coming, aren’t you?”

It was dark, cold, rainy as hell. Damn near midnight, and I had work in the morning.

I couldn’t get out of my chair fast enough.

“Damn right I’m coming,” I replied excitedly, grabbing for my jacket.

TYLER

Malcolm's house was a tight little ranch just outside of town. It sported a tiny driveway that made the big truck Ariana had described look all the more ridiculous.

“Think somebody might be compensating for something?” she mused, as I killed the engine.

“Don't know, don't care,” I shrugged simply. “Let's go.”

I walked straight up to the door and banged on it, with Ariana close behind me. Under normal circumstances you wouldn't bang on a door at this hour. But these weren't normal circumstances.

A light blinked on. A few muffled footsteps later the door cracked open, and Malcolm stood there rubbing his eyes.

“Hey...” he squinted, sizing me up. “What are you doing, man?”

“Go wake her up.”

He looked exactly like I remembered him, from the couple of times we'd played his team. The guy wasn't big or small, he wasn't tall or short. He was about as average as you could be.

“Wake who up?”

“C’mon man,” I said with a sigh. “It’s late. We don’t wanna be here, you don’t want us here either. Let’s get this over with as quickly as possible, so we can all get on with our lives.”

Malcolm stood up a little straighter and dropped the tired act. Now he looked nervous.

“Look, I still don’t know what the *fuck* you’re talking about,” he grumbled threateningly. “But if I need to call the police—“

“If we don’t do this tonight we’ll do it tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after,” I cut him off. “Might as well get it over with now, while I’m in a good mood.”

Malcolm pondered for a few long seconds, his gaze swinging over at Ariana, then back to me. Eventually a decision was made. His shoulders slumped in resignation.

“Fine. Hang on.”

We waited as he slunk back inside. There was the sound of voices. They started off low but grew louder and more frantic until, finally, my girlfriend stepped into view.

Lexus had done her best to compose herself, but it really hadn’t helped much. She had sex hair, which I knew from experience was very different from her normal sleep hair. She still had her makeup on. On top of everything, she was wearing a Jagrbombers jersey that came down to her bare knees.

“Nice shirt.”

I could tell by the surprised look on her face she hadn’t realized what she was wearing. She tried covering it up by folding her arms across it.

“Tyler, go home,” she ordered, in her bossy, ‘I mean business’ voice. “This isn’t what you think.”

I laughed so hard it actually felt good. “It’s not?”

“No,” Lexus declared matter-of-factly. “I was at a bar, and I had too much to drink. We shared an Uber here because it was closer, and because I was exhausted, and—“

“Don’t be an asshole,” Ariana jumped in. “We found your car parked around the corner, two blocks over.”

Lexus flinched visibly. I could see by her expression she was torn between going back at Ariana or continuing her stream of made-up bullshit. Of course she chose the latter.

“I mean we *started* here,” she continued nervously, “with a whole bunch of people. Then we went to the bar, and then we—“

“I put my hand on the hood,” I told her. “The engine’s still warm.”

Those intense blue eyes flashed with anger, instead of shame. They really were beautiful eyes, too. The rest of her kind of sucked; an apparently well-known fact I was realizing just now. But her eyes were still pretty fucking amazing.

“And what about *you*?” Lexus demanded suddenly. “What the hell are you doing running around with *her* at midnight anyway?”

Jerking a thumb at Ariana, she suddenly didn’t look very sleepy anymore.

“Are you with her now, Tyler? Have you been fucking her the whole time, or—“

“Maybe he has,” Ariana snapped, stepping forward. The grin on my friend’s face wasn’t just evil now, it was almost demonic. “And I mean the *whole* time. Fucking, that is. Friends with benefits, since the very beginning. Is that what you want to hear? Because we sure as hell should’ve been.”

Lexus blinked back at us in shock and surprise. For the first time since she stepped outside, she actually looked rattled.

“Or maybe he hasn’t,” Ariana went on coyly. “Maybe this amazing, incredible guy who’s given up everything to be with you has been nothing but loyal for some stupid fucking reason none of us can quite understand.”

Holy shit! I was in total awe now. Completely in love with how smoothly and easily my best friend was dealing with my soon-to-be ex-girlfriend. I should’ve let this happen years

ago. I was certainly seeing years' worth of pent-up rage on Ariana's part, all being let out at once.

"So maybe you should stop deflecting, *Alexandra*," she went on. "And for fuck's sake, stop calling yourself 'Lexus.' That's not even a name. It's a car that rich people drive."

Lexus's mouth hung open through several long seconds of midnight silence. No one had spoken to her like this in years. Maybe even ever. Somewhere behind her, Malcolm shifted uncomfortably.

"But... I..." Lexus swallowed hard, and her brows knit together. "How the hell did you find me here, anyway?"

"Google," I shrugged. "I should've been able to track you, but since you upgraded your phone a couple months back you never accepted my tracking request. Which in retrospect should've told me something was up, but it wasn't a big deal to me, and I guess I wasn't looking for signs."

"Or he didn't really give much of a shit by that point," Ariana offered helpfully, smiling sweetly.

"Yeah," I agreed with a chuckle. "Or maybe that."

Lexus was staring back at me now, and I witnessed the exact moment her will was broken. Her apologetic blue eyes searched mine, perhaps trying to find a tiny kernel of what used to be there so long ago. But that ship had sailed, and we both knew it. We knew it without even having to say it.

"Tyler, I—"

"Hey, stop," I told her calmly. "Save it. You might not believe me when I say this, but trust me, it's all good." I went to smile at her one last time, but realized I was already smiling. "Better than good actually."

I turned to face Malcolm now, who looked totally unsure what to expect.

"You're not a bad guy, I don't think," I told him. "The truck is a little over the top, and I'll never understand the whole 'doing Jager Bombs for every goal you score'

tradition,” I admitted. “But you guys don’t score that many goals to begin with, so I guess it’s pretty harmless.”

Reaching down, I picked up the large canvas duffel bag that had been at my feet the whole time. Malcolm was shocked as hell when I shoved it into his chest.

“Tag, you’re it.”

He looked down at the bag and frowned. “Wait. What ___”

“That’s the Alexandra Carter dating starter kit,” I told him. “It contains every last ounce of stupid crap she’s ever left at my apartment.”

“But I—“

“You’ve got the ball now,” I smiled. “Have a blast.”

As I turned away, not even giving Lexus a last glance, I saw Ariana grin at Malcolm and wink.

“Hope you’ve got a lot of free time on your hands.”

ARIANA

We practically tumbled back into my kitchen, dripping wet, the rain driving down in sheets as I slammed the door behind us. The two of us were utterly drenched. Totally soaked through, in just the short sprint from the truck to the basement door of my little apartment.

“You were amazing,” Tyler breathed.

I laughed, just as we’d been laughing all the way back. Tyler hadn’t wanted to go home, and I hadn’t wanted him to either. We were too amped up. Too high on everything that just happened.

“You weren’t that bad yourself,” I giggled, peeling off my coat. “Did you see his face when you gave him the bag?”

“He looked like a deer caught in headlights,” smirked Tyler.

“More like the headlamp of a freight train.”

We stripped down on the way through the kitchen and into the living room, ridding ourselves of our waterlogged clothes. A shiver of cold joined my shivers of exultation, as I reached over and slid the thermostat up.

“That was incredible,” I went on.

“Better than incredible.”

“I feel fucking *fantastic*,” I beamed. “In fact—“

“Did you mean what you said back there?” Tyler asked abruptly. His voice was strange.

“About what?”

“About how I shouldn’t have stayed loyal to that asshole this whole time,” he answered. “About how you and I should’ve been fucking for years.”

Every nerve ending in my body felt like it was suddenly standing on end. My stomach did a flip-flop.

“I... uhh...”

Thunder crashed, saving me from whatever the hell I was about to say or not say. In the meantime, Tyler peeled off his shirt, then his undershirt. I was blown away by the sheer size of his chest and arms. Everything was so cut and sculpted and beautifully built, it almost didn’t seem real.

“What is it?” he chuckled.

He’d caught me looking and there was nothing I could do about it. I shook my head and blushed, trying not to gawk at the flawless surface of his skin, still glistening from the rain.

“Nothing. I uh... I think I might have something for you to wear inside.”

I nodded in the direction of the bedroom, still eying him sideways. My pulse quickened as he stepped out of his jeans.

“I’m almost positive one of you left a T-shirt here. And I can fire up the dryer for your—“

One second I was standing there talking, and the next Tyler was on me. His hands slid upward, cradling my face. They were strong and powerful and unexpectedly warm, but not nearly as hot as his lips, which crashed squarely against mine.

Ohmygod...

Tyler’s arms slid around me possessively, taking me captive, forcing me backward until we slammed into the nearest wall. I was kissing him back now, hungrily, eagerly.

Grabbing him in both hands and pulling his body even more tightly against me, as I writhed and squirmed and drove my tongue deep into his gorgeous, wonderful mouth.

Mmmmmm...

Kissing Tyler was like drinking from a cool, sweet fountain — yet one that could never slake the intensity of my thirst. Our tongues rolled, our lips churning as we became lost in each other's half-lidded eyes. His every breath was my breath, his every thought a soulful extension of my own lurid, twisted fantasies.

And yes, I most definitely entertained Tyler fantasies. I'd had them ever since the summer of middle school, when curiosity got the best of us and we decided to be each other's first kiss. Back then we'd done it just to get it out of the way, or at least, that's what we told ourselves. But we were best friends, and best friends didn't do those sorts of things. And so as amazing as it was, we never did it again...

That is, until now.

“Tyler...”

I breathed his name hotly into his mouth, just as he lifted my wet shirt over my head. My bra came with it. It was all fine by me.

“Holy *shit*, Tyler...”

Our hands were roaming now, and things were accelerating fast. Tyler was practically naked, save for his boxers. And they were soaked too, so...

Whoa. WOW.

My hand slid down his flat, rippled belly, then closed around something wonderfully warm and thick. My palm was cold in contrast, so I let out a soft but apologetic chuckle.

“Sorry!”

Still kissing me, Tyler closed his own hand over mine and kept it locked there. “Don't be.”

I was stroking him now, top to bottom, and he was unbuttoning me as well. Tyler rolled my wet bottoms down my thighs, panties too, then raised a foot to stomp them to the floor. I stepped out of them, just as his thick fingers slid delicately between my thighs. I jumped when they finally brushed my honeyed mound.

SSSSsssss!

My sharp intake of air was a hiss of extreme pleasure. That same air left my lungs slowly as Tyler's talented fingertips glided through warm, wet places that no friend's fingertips were ever meant to go.

This is crazy!

The thought fled my lust-obsessed mind just as quickly as it had popped into my head. This wasn't crazy. This wasn't wrong. Kissing this man was a living, breathing dream. The culmination of a lifetime of love, adoration, and respect, but also of heat and intimacy held tightly at bay.

And yet he was my *best friend*. A best friend who had his fingers now buried so deeply inside me, making me feel warm and wonderful as I cupped his gorgeous face and continued drinking from the fountain of his lips until the heat of my onrushing orgasm threatened to consume me like an unstoppable, inner fire.

"Tyler..."

I couldn't stop saying his name. Only now, I needed to see him.

"TYLER."

His eyes shifted upward, meeting mine. We were face to face now, the surface of our lips brushing so softly and hotly it was even *better* than kissing. At least for now.

"Tyler, I..."

His hazel orbs flared wildly as he plunged his fingers even deeper, thumbing my clit in slow, deliberate circles. My climax was a forgone conclusion. My wet mouth dropped

open even wider, and his hard body screwed even tighter against me.

“Hey,” he murmured.

I was delirious now, thoroughly consumed by lust. My brain floating happily in some neurochemical world between consciousness and reality.

“Ariana... look at me.”

Somehow I did. We were so close, pressed so tightly together, I could barely move. Barely breathe...

“Tyler!”

I was squirming, twisting, writhing around him. I wanted to screw my eyes shut again and just let everything go, but I also didn't want to disappoint him. I needed him to know how absolutely fucking incredible I thought he was. How much I'd always wanted him, and how much I needed him now.

And above everything else, how very much I *loved* him...

“Hey...”

He cradled my face again, both cheeks cupped in one strong but somehow gentle hand. The other hand, trapped snugly between my trembling thighs, brought me to nirvana.

“I *know*.”

Our eyes locked, and somehow I fell *into* his gaze. An all-new connection was made. One that was impossibly deep, irrevocably close. We were man to woman, flesh to flesh. Soul to soul.

OhmyfuckingsgodIcan't—

I screamed my way through my orgasm, as tears of joy and release streamed down both my cheeks. My body was no longer my own. It belonged to him as it came and convulsed and flooded those churning, magical fingers...

Tyler...

... and as the love I'd always felt for him flooded my heart, my best friend leaned forward ever so gently and kissed those tears away.

ARIANA

Tyler carried me into my bedroom, which was a good thing because my legs trembled so badly I couldn't even think about walking. Physically, I was drained. Mentally, my mind was wiped clean from the most intense, earth-shattering climax ever. But emotionally?

Emotionally I'd never felt more safe and happy, than with my cheek pressed against Tyler's hard, sculpted chest. Having him hold me like this felt good. It felt right. It felt...

Perfect?

My arms were slung over his boulder-like shoulders as Tyler dropped me onto my bed. I was staring up at him in the early morning shadows, searching his expression for some indication what we were about to do was still alright.

"The others..." I murmured, regretting even saying it. But it had to be said.

Tyler shushed me by pressing a finger gently against my lips.

"I don't want to talk about the others," he whispered. "Or Lexus. Or anything else. Not tonight. Tonight it's just you and me."

Thunder boomed angrily, somewhere off in the distance. The sound petered out as it rolled across the sky.

“And the rain,” he added with a smile. “But that’s all. Me, you, and the rain. Okay?”

I felt the relief of a burden being lifted. I nodded and smiled.

“Okay.”

We kissed again, and the heat of Tyler’s lips against mine melted every last remaining ounce of my resolve. This wasn’t wrong, it was a necessity. We weren’t violating rules or stealing anything, this was *owed* to us.

I let myself swoon for a while, riding high on the taste of Tyler’s hot skin as I dragged my lips down his stubbled face, his jaw, his neck. Eventually I grabbed his shoulders with both hands and shoved him down on the bed, straddling his naked body with mine. My hair hung down on all sides, framing our faces as we locked eyes again. Repositioning my hands on his chest, I gave him a sexy wink before pushing myself even further down his incredible body.

“My turn.”

For the next five minutes I took my time, kissing every square inch of Tyler’s hard chest and rippled stomach. I dragged my lips continually downward, planting hot kisses on each of the abdominals that made up his hard, quivering eight-pack. When that ran out I kissed even lower, dragging my tongue down the sexy ‘V’ of his lower stomach that came to an inevitable and delicious point just above his rapidly-thickening shaft.

My first good look at Tyler’s manhood more than matched my expectations. He was long and thick, with a perfectly-shaped head and an amazingly smooth shaft that I couldn’t wait to get my mouth around. I used my hand first, getting a feel for his girth while stroking him up and down. Then I stared up his body until we made eye-contact again, and promptly swallowed him whole.

“Oh, Ariana...”

He breathed my name in a long sigh of exultation, while sifting his hands through my hair. This had to be

overwhelming for him, too, I realized. Knowing me for our whole lives, perhaps even desiring me the same way I desired him. We'd both held back for so long. Together we built a friendship that was indestructible.

But this was something entirely different.

Mmmmmm....

I hummed my lips against Tyler's shaft as I went down on him, making him groan. Up and down I licked and sucked, gripping his thickness at the base. I could feel his arousal, building like a coiled spring. It was in the way his hands moved through my hair. The way his hips pushed upward, to drive himself as deep as possible into my throat...

I thought it might feel weird, doing this after all these years. Instead it felt natural. Giving pleasure to this friend I loved so much felt ridiculously good, maybe better than anything. And he was delicious. Every bit as amazing as I'd ever imagined, during the handful of times I'd allowed myself to indulge in the taboo pleasure of wondering what fucking my best friend Tyler might be like.

He moaned again, louder this time, then shifted his athlete's body so he could reach me with his two big arms. Sliding sideways, he lifted me easily, effortlessly, swinging one of my taut thighs over his head so he could bury his face in my warm, sopping wet pussy.

Oh my fucking GOD...

We dropped immediately into a full-blown sixty-nine, devouring each other like we'd been doing it our entire lives. Tyler drove his tongue achingly deep, his two big hands spreading my cheeks in a way that made me gasp with the exposure while moaning even louder around him. He was even bigger now, causing me to stretch my lips around him. Everything felt so awesome, yet so familiar. The comfort level was off the charts. Somehow, it felt like we'd been going down on each other for years.

I stopped to stroke him, burying my face in his balls and worshiping them with my mouth. In turn, Tyler's hot

tongue flicked over my swollen button. We drove each other crazy like that for a while, teasing and playing, before finally going back down on each other again.

Eventually I couldn't take it anymore. I scooted up over his chest and then reached back, taking control of him. Tyler interlaced his fingers behind his head as I slowly began dragging him through my folds. By now I was *dying* to have him inside of me! But I was having so much fun prolonging the moment...

Suddenly I felt Tyler's hand on mine. He had only to drive upward, to pierce me to the core. To fully consummate the last and most intimate level of our friendship that we'd held back on for so incredibly, frustratingly long.

But for some reason, he refused. Every time I went to screw back on him, to embed that pulsing shaft so deep inside me, Tyler would push back with those two big hands.

"Tyler, I *want* this," I gasped desperately. "We have to *do* this. We can't stop now, we've gone too fa—"

"Oh trust me, we're doing this," he cut me off. "And it's going to be the most incredible thing in the world."

Flipping my hair, I stared back at him over my shoulder, confused. "But?"

"But the first time you and I fuck, it sure as hell isn't going to be reverse cowgirl."

First time...

Those two little words made my stomach drop. It inferred there would be other times. Many, many other times.

Thank God.

Tyler's hands slid to my hips. Lifting me as easily as if I were weightless, he spun me around before setting me down again. I loved the way he took command, pulling my body against him. Pinning my bare breasts against the heat of his chest, until our lips were once again just barely touching.

"The first time I'm inside you," he whispered, "I need to look at that beautiful face."

He lifted his hips. I could feel him throbbing, right there at my entrance.

“I need to stare into those beautiful green eyes...”

His arms flexed, his hands lowering me with ease until my dripping womanhood hovered just over him. Our eyes locked, and I felt the head slide through, parting my folds.

Oh my God...

I was trembling all over, lost in the gravity of his gaze. Staring deep, deep down through his eyes, to the place where this moment would forever live in his memory.

“And I need you to know...” Tyler murmured, as he surged forward and buried himself so beautifully deep I wanted to scream.

“... how very much I love you.”

ARIANA

Screwing Tyler was every bit as incredible as I'd always imagined it would be. Even so, I'd underestimated the intimacy involved. Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined how intense it would be just to ride him. To splay my hands across that perfect chest and stare into his eyes as he thrusted upward, buried inside me, connecting our friendship not only through physical contact, but also on levels that brought us even closer, soul to soul.

There was sex and there was love, but this was sex with love. It had all the tingles and jittery excitement of being with someone new, but all the familiarity and comfort of giving yourself to someone you admired, trusted, and loved.

Tyler and I stared at each other for a long time, bucking and screwing and smiling our secret smile. I reveled in his thickness, and how incredibly it filled me up. I let my hands wander freely over his muscle-bound body, thrilled that it was finally mine, and I could touch it, feel it, do anything I wanted to it—

Ohhhhhh...

I sighed happily as Tyler pulled me down again, burying his face in my breasts. My tits had always been one of my better features. He and the others had stared in appreciation over the years and even dropped comments about them, but I'd never minded. After all, they *were* men. Hell,

growing up together I would've been more offended if they *hadn't* noticed.

But now they were finally in Tyler's hands, and for him that had to be surreal. I fed them eagerly to his hungry, greedy mouth, as his tongue rolled and he switched back and forth from left to right. He was overwhelmed by them, I knew. Too excited to pick just one, and so I giggled as he made do with both at once.

"Easy, baby."

Baby. I'd never called him that before. Suddenly this expression reserved for boyfriends and lovers seemed perfectly okay. It felt good, even.

"Easy?" he joked. "You know how much I've always wanted to—"

I laughed, pulling his face into the valley between my tits until the rest of his sentence was lost there.

"I know."

Tyler responded by surging upward, driving himself so deep inside me I had to bite my lip. I couldn't wait to come on him. Climaxing on his fingers had been amazing, but I longed to buck and roll and really screw his brains out. I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut, throw my head back, and just seriously let go.

Apparently though, Tyler had other plans.

"Oh!"

His two strong arms lifted me again, shoving me backwards and rolling me onto my stomach. Before I knew what was happening, Tyler mounted me from behind. His long, steel-like body covered me completely. His arms locked at the elbows on either side of me as he slid his face alongside mine, kissing me over the shoulder as he pushed inside me inch by glorious inch.

"Oh, *fuck* yes..."

The weight of his body felt incredible as he began screwing me into the bed. Tyler went deeper and faster now,

using his weight to drive himself all the way to my core. I whimpered and moaned, panting through hot, wet kisses as our bodies began picking up speed. Every inch of him felt absolutely amazing.

You've got to be kidding...

For a while I let him have me, using me any way he wanted to. But as the heat and pressure built in my core, I started fucking back against him. Soon we were bucking wildly, the both of us working in rhythm with his long, deep thrusts. I was so utterly drenched, the sounds of our bodies quickly became obscene.

But I didn't care. The thunder rolled and the rain pattered against my basement window and the two of us kept fucking like animals, rutting atop the sex-soaked sheets of my little bed. Tyler's body moved like a machine, surging forward and back as he pistoned in and out of me, bringing me to another toe-curling orgasm that had me screaming into the near-darkness.

Halfway through Tyler shoved a pillow beneath me. Quickly I buried my face in it. He kept drilling away as I screamed and convulsed and flooded around him, milking his hard shaft tightly as wave after wave of warm euphoria crashed over my brain.

I went limp not long afterward, my mind and body totally spent. But the strong hands attached to Tyler's deliciously-corded arms worked their magic again. He rolled me onto my back this time, nudging my thighs apart. I could only gasp as he threw my legs over his shoulders and buried himself to the hilt, pumping me just as fast and hard as before.

Fuuuuuck!

I reached out with hands that trembled and grabbed onto him, holding on tightly as he gave me the ride of my life. Every stroke was deeper and better than the last. Each time he bottomed out it touched me in new places, causing me to fall a little deeper in love with this man, this friend, who'd been such a tremendous part of my life for so long.

Between the rain and the sweat and our frenzied fucking, the room smelled like pure, distilled sex. My hair was plastered against the sides of my face. Tyler was still buried deep, chewing my shoulder, kissing my neck. He pounded me over and over until I felt I might break, until I was gasping and breathless and desperate for him to come.

I was so very close to tapping out. Mere seconds away from giving in against the relentless onslaught that I knew was years and decades' worth of repressed fantasies and sexual frustration. But then Tyler's eyes glazed over. His hands clutched me tightly for a second, and I saw his whole body go suddenly rigid...

“Yes,” I breathed. “*Baby...*”

And then he was coming like it was the end of the world. Tyler's hands clamped tightly down on my thighs as he threw his head back and roared with the thunder, erupting again and again. I could feel him all the way up inside me, pulsing thickly, deeply, filling me with his warm, wonderful seed.

GOD...

I held him tightly by the wrists, squeezing them in rhythm to every throb, every twitch, every thump of his beautiful shaft as it danced against my innermost of places. His climax seemed to go on forever. When it finally wound down and he opened his eyes again, he found me staring up at him with a smile.

“Holy *shit*, Ariana...”

Tyler knelt between my outstretched thighs, heart pounding, still inside me. His hair looked like mine. His whole body was covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

The smile was gone from his face, though.

“What's wrong?” I panicked. The expression he wore was one I'd never seen before. “Are... are you upset that we did this?”

“Fuck no,” he smiled, regaining his breath. Reaching out with one arm, he gently ran a thumb down the side of my

face.

“I’m just pissed that we waited this long.”

ARIANA

My alarm was a dagger in my sleep-deprived brain, blaring like a siren through the dim morning haze. I woke up slowly, extracting myself from beneath the giant, naked bulk of a slumbering Tyler. He barely even moved as I picked out my clothes and headed for the shower.

Did you screw him to death?

I supposed it was possible, but it seemed more likely the other way around. After our first time together Tyler and I had fucked again and again, waking up so many times during the course of the night to plunder each other, I legitimately lost count. I purred like a kitten as he nudged me awake, pushing assertively between my thighs to drive his never-ending erection deep into my never-ending wetness. In the wee hours of the morning we fucked sleepily, lazily, screwing our warm bodies together as we listened to the rain. I had vague recollections of Tyler holding my face in his hands as he rocked me gently. Staring into my eyes and kissing me so deeply and slowly it felt like my heart might explode.

Somewhere just before dawn he took me for the final time, pulling me backwards into a kneeling position and fucking me doggie-style while I made soft, whimpering noises into my pillow. That orgasm had somehow spun me off into blissful unconsciousness, because when I woke several minutes later, still leaking and swollen, Tyler was beside me, snoring away.

In the shower, I wondered what it might've been like if we'd been doing this the whole time. If we'd been friends with benefits all these years, rather than me being the girl next door. Last night's marathon seemed like we were trying to make up for lost time. Or more simply, we just couldn't get enough of each other. And that could be...

Dangerous?

By the time I got to the coffee shop I was still on cloud nine. I shoved aside the list of perils of fucking your best friend's brains out that I'd been making, and went about pouring myself the biggest, strongest coffee in all of Seattle, possibly even the universe. As I drank it down, I realized that maybe one shower wasn't enough. There were times when I swore I could still smell the scent of Tyler, vaguely, on my skin. Or maybe it was just my imagination.

Either way, I wasn't the slightest bit mad about it. I wiped down the counter then leaned back against it with my legs crossed, pleasantly sore. Still feeling the excited tingle of last night's events, I went over the fonder highlights that I wanted to emblazon into my happy, sated brain.

Then the front doors opened, and all hell broke loose.

The morning rush was hard, but I powered through it. Everyone got caffeinated correctly and efficiently, and I made it a point to upsell more baked goods than normal. When Katie was two brownies in and in an exceptionally good mood, I broke the news to her that I would need a few days off. Calgary was coming up. I couldn't make all of the boys' games, but I would drive up late and be there for the tail end.

Katie and I were in the home stretch when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

“Hey, Houdini.”

I turned to find Zane standing there, arms folded. He was wearing the jumpsuit from the garage he worked at, but the name was all wrong now since it changed hands.

“What's up, greasy monkey?” I smiled. “You have coffee yet?”

“No.”

I got to work making his latte, and Zane went back to staring at my ass. It was a trade-off I was used to by now. But after what happened last night with Tyler, I felt sort of...

Guilty?

No, not exactly.

Are you sure?

Okay, maybe a little bit. But truth be told, Zane and I never had anything concrete. He had girlfriends, I had boyfriends, and sometimes, when the planets aligned, we both happened to be single. I could count on two hands the number of times we'd gotten together as anything but friends.

“Why Houdini?” I asked, dragging a sharp metal toothpick through milk foam.

“Because you disappeared yesterday,” he replied. “No call, no show.”

I stopped mid-stride, on my way to the squeeze bottles. “Wait, what?”

“We were supposed to go birthday shopping, remember?”

There was a second or two of confusion, then my mouth dropped open. A shudder of cold disappointment ran down my spine.

“Oh Zane, I'm so sorry!” I gasped. “I totally forgot!”

I was supposed to help him go shopping for his mother's birthday! And instead—

“No worries,” he shrugged. “I figured something came —”

“No no no!” I cut him off. “No, I totally spaced out. Damn, I'm the worst fucking friend. I'm the biggest asshole in the world.”

“Well, not the biggest,” he chuckled. “You're up there, though.”

Glumly I went back to working on his latte, but my heart wasn't in it anymore. I knew Zane had already forgiven me; he'd always been like that. But I still felt terrible.

"Look, we'll go tonight," I suggested. "How about that?"

He shook his head. "Can't go tonight. I'm working the rink."

"How late?"

"Until closing."

I sighed and reached for the cinnamon sugar. Zane's mother lived alone, and his four older siblings had all but flown the coop. They were off in different states, living their own lives, while he worked two jobs just to throw her some cash. But it was time, not money, that she valued when it came to her son.

"We still have time," I told him. "We'll go next week, after Calgary. Whatever day you want."

Zane unfolded his arms and peeked over at his latte, which was almost done. "Okay."

I slid the mug to him carefully, being careful not to disrupt the scene. Within it, two foamed-milk people were kissing through the windshield of a steamed milk car.

"Is that you and me?" he asked, staring down at it.

"What, us?" I balked. "No! Of course not."

I leaned in confidentially, looking over my shoulder for signs of Katie.

"It's the people we saw in the alley," I practically whispered. "The other night."

Zane rubbed at his jaw contemplatively for a moment. "You should've made them fucking then," he said. "Because there wasn't much kissing."

"Oh yeah?" I challenged. I handed him an empty mug. "*You* try making latte art of a parked car with two people fucking in it."

He laughed, and I felt suddenly better about standing him up. Zane and I were always good like that. No grudges, no problems. It was one of the reasons I think we ultimately hooked up.

“You wanna take a photo of this before I drink it?” he asked. “You know, for your Instagram?”

“Nah,” I shook my head. “That was a rush job. I’ll do a better one later on and post it.”

Zane nodded and took a sip of his free latte. Katie was still in the back room, but she’d given up the battle of me handing out free lattes to my friends long ago.

“Maybe forget the car altogether,” he suggested, leaning in so close his lips were against my ear. “And draw some really cute girl getting fucked in the window of some guy’s apartment.”

His voice was raspy now, deep and masculine. It gave me the shivers.

“Maybe she’s got her hands on the window,” Zane breathed. “And she’s getting plowed from behind. I mean really *fucked*, Ariana. Deep and hard. Know what I mean?”

My mouth was abruptly dry. I nodded mechanically, still in a daze. Feeling his voice more than hearing it, as Zane finally leaned back to his side of the counter.

And then, without even thinking, I blurted:

“How come we never dated?”

ZANE

The question came out of left field, like a fly ball to the face. There was no catching it. No waving it off.

Shit, by the look on her face I think it surprised her too.

“Wha—” I began stupidly, trying to buy time. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you and me as a couple. Together.” She glanced down at her hands. “We’ve hooked up a few times, but we never, you know...”

I took a long sip of my coffee, probably to buy more time as I considered the question. Eventually I found myself scratching at the side of my cheek.

“Well for one, Tyler and Axel would break my arms and legs,” I replied. “In fact—“

“*Other* than them,” she cut me off. “There was a time when they were both away at school, both out of town. It was just you and I and nobody else. We could’ve done anything.”

“We *did* do anything,” I grinned back at her.

“Oh, I know,” she said, returning my smirk. “But we never really dated, and I want to know why.”

Ariana leaned forward, plopping an elbow on the counter. As casual as our relationship had been, it was

suddenly obvious she'd thought about this for a long while. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her feelings.

"In that case, I guess it was timing," I conceded.

"Timing."

"Yeah."

The answer was weak as shit, and I knew it. Ariana knew it too.

"Alright, maybe it was more than that," I agreed. "Timing *was* always bad for us, though. We dated on opposite schedules."

Her cute little eyebrows crashed together. It was just one of a hundred adorable things she did.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Whenever I was single, you had a boyfriend," I explained. "And then when I'd get a girlfriend, you were suddenly single again. Over and over again, we were on opposite schedules. The timing was never right for us. We kept missing our window."

She nodded blankly, thinking back. "I... I guess that's true."

"*Should* there have been a window?" I inquired.

I honestly didn't know what kind of answer to expect from her. Ariana was moving her arm busily, wiping down the same little square of counter for the tenth or twelfth time. She was almost out of breath from the exertion. Her skin was flushed pink.

"Hey..." I said, laying a hand over hers. She stopped scrubbing. "Look at me."

Finally, she did. There was confusion in her eyes.

"Did you *want* something more?" I asked gently. "Because if so, you never let on. What we had together was fragile, delicate, like feeding a baby deer. I didn't want to spook you away. I didn't want to lose it."

Begrudgingly she shrugged a shoulder. “I didn’t want to lose it either.”

“And you never gave me any indication that—“

“Remember when the others were away at college,” she interjected abruptly, “and you played sit-in goalie for all those bottom division dek hockey teams?”

Now it was my eyebrows that knit together. “Of course,” I answered. “Sometimes, when someone’s goalie doesn’t show up, I still do.”

“Right,” she went on. “And remember that game when you were shutting out the other team until the very end? And then all of a sudden a rabbit jumped onto the dek?”

It took less than a second to call up the memory. My face broke into a smile.

“That was against the Malakas. The rabbit distracted me, and I gave up a lucky slapshot before the ref saw it and blew the whistle.” My eyes narrowed. “We had to go to overtime, and we lost. All because of a stupid—“

“Remember being so pissed that you threw your helmet?”

Ariana and I were staring at each other again, eye to eye. I blinked.

“Wait... you were *there*?”

I couldn’t believe it. The dek I subbed at was clear on the other side of town. It was old and decrepit and falling apart even worse than GreatSkates. There was no heat. No air conditioning. No running water.

“Actually, I came to a lot of those games,” she finally admitted. “But that day you threw your helmet, you looked so furious I just took off. I didn’t want you to think I was spying on you, so I drove away.”

“Holy shit!” I exclaimed. “Why would you—“

“Because I came to the game that night to tell you I *liked* you.”

It took an extended moment or two for her words to sink in. When they did, I froze up like I'd been hit with a stun gun.

"I came to tell you that I wanted something more," she went on. "That I wanted you and I to get together. To maybe try..."

"YOU DID?"

Ariana's words stunned me to the core. I leaned on the counter in shocked silence.

"Yes," she acknowledged quietly. "But I left before I could say anything."

I thought back to the night in question. I saw the rabbit, skidding across the surface of the dek. I saw my helmet; flying end over end, as I screamed at the ref.

She was there!

I had no idea. No clue. Because if I had—

"I wish you would've stayed," I told her. "I wish my anger didn't scare you away."

"Yeah," she chuckled. "But on the other hand..."

I squinted. "On the other hand, what?"

She paused and raised an eyebrow.

"Want the truth?"

"Of course."

Ariana's already pink hue deepened to an almost crimson color. But it was too late to go back.

"All that rage," she began slowly. "All that passion and fierceness I saw in you, as you flung your helmet across the dek..."

She shrugged sheepishly.

"It made me really fucking hot."

A pair of new customers entered the shop just then, and headed for the counter. But damn, there was more to say. So

much I wanted to admit to her, and maybe even to myself.

It would all have to wait, though.

Instead I pointed to the scene in my mug, which by now was a scrambled mess of whites and browns and dark chocolate swirls. You couldn't even tell what it was supposed to be anymore.

"These people will be back in the alley again this coming Friday," I told her, "doing the same thing they do every week." My insinuations came with a knowing smirk. "You know, just in case you wanted to see that show again."

Ariana's fierce green eyes met mine. She was in total control again, I knew.

"You'll be in Canada this Friday, remember?" she countered. "Playoffs."

It was another noncommittal answer, especially since I knew she'd be spending part of the weekend up in Calgary with us. I faded back as the customers approached the counter, but not before toasting her with my coffee.

"There's *always* another Friday," I winked.

ARIANA

There was snow and there was Canadian snow. Storms and then blizzards. But a Canadian blizzard, mixed with sleet coming down sideways due to 45-mph winds? Well, that took the cake.

“We missed the turn, I’m sure of it.”

I glanced over at Axel, who was peering through my windshield with such intense concentration he might as well have been trying to solve a Rubik’s Cube. For some reason he’d insisted on driving. For some reason I’d let him. Right now, the backwoods roads outside of Pinatan Lake all looked the same. Which made our decision to get off the main highway all the more stupid, in retrospect.

“Relax,” Axel assured me again. “We got this.”

Our Quest for Coffee had been a dismal failure, and we should’ve known this from the start. For one, it was late as hell. Even if we were lucky to stumble across a diner or coffee shop, it wasn’t likely to be open. And so far, since departing the highway we’d seen very little in the way of civilization. The signs had outright fucking lied.

“You sure you don’t want me to drive?” I asked for the fifth time.

“No,” he smiled. “Of course not.”

“I mean, it *is* my car.”

Axel shrugged. “So?”

“So I know things about it that you don’t,” I explained.

“Like?”

“Well for one, the windshield wipers can go one notch faster than what they’re set at now.”

Axel reached down, rotated the dial, and the wiper blades sped up a little. It didn’t do much in the grand scheme of things, but in a storm like this, every bit helped.

“I *do* appreciate you jumping in with me,” I added quickly. “I mean, I thought for sure you’d ride back with Sherry and Denise.”

I hadn’t been able to get off on Friday or Saturday, but I was able to meet the boys in Calgary for their final two playoff games. They’d done well until the finals, where they lost on a heartbreaking, shorthanded goal.

It was funny how something so quick, so sudden, could send one team cheering in exultation and the other skating dejectedly back to the bench. The team’s mood was sullen, despite a fantastic effort. And rather than stay the extra night to celebrate as planned, everyone decided to drive back and commiserate at home.

Blake, Aaron, Nathan — they packed into Kevin’s van and took off before we even reached the lot. Kyle Spinelli immediately offered to ride with me, but knowing Kyle’s track record, Tyler and Zane had shoved him away.

“I’ll take her back,” Axel had stepped up, plucking the keys from between my fingers. Before any of us could say anything he slung his gear straight into my back seat. “You guys have been bogarting our girl lately, anyway.”

And so the long drive back had been a game of catch-up between Axel and me. For a while I tried keeping up with his rock star-like dating life, and in lieu of my non-existent one, I regaled him with my craziest and most entertaining tales from the coffee shop.

Halfway home, the lure of caffeine had struck. We'd been baited into the apparent wilderness on the promise of some sort of rest stop, and after turning around, we'd apparently missed the on-ramp.

“What made you think I'd ever ride back with Sherry and Denise?”

“Are you kidding?” I laughed. “They're absolutely gorgeous. Not to mention they rode all the way to Calgary to see you play hockey.”

“To see *us* play hockey,” he corrected me.

I rolled my eyes dramatically. While the rest of the team — including Kyle Spinelli — did well with the ladies, Axel knew full well who the majority of the puck-bunnies came to see. His denials never came off as facetious, though. They were almost annoyingly humble.

“If you rode back with those girls,” I pointed out, “you'd be having a *lot* more fun than this,” I smirked, gesturing to the shadowy rows of snow-whipped pines on either side of the road. “We're talking about take-an-extra-day-to-get-home fun. Threesome with two cousins type of fun.”

With his long arm still resting casually on the wheel, Axel shot me a wounded glance.

“Sherry and Denise aren't cousins.”

“No,” I conceded. “But those two girls from last year sure were.”

Axel continued staring at me for a moment, before returning his eyes to the road. “That's nothing but a rumor.”

“A true rumor?” I pressed.

It had been common knowledge, at least back then, that Axel had taken home two girls who'd turned out to be cousins, and spent the weekend with them. Down at the rinks, the story had cemented his already near-legendary status.

Back then I'd been curious. Like everyone else though, I'd always assumed the rumor to be true. And right now, his silence certainly wasn't changing my mind.

“Hey, no judgment here” I said, poking him. “More power to you. But you know you could tell me, right? I mean, I *am* one of your closest friends.”

“Closest?” he said, sounding legitimately wounded. “Try more like *best* friends.”

“Fine. Best friends.”

“You’re goddamn right,” he nodded.

He drove us on through the darkness, plunging my little car though the endless black corridor of swiftly-falling snow. I noticed absently he had two hands on the wheel now. And they were *big* hands. Strong, manly hands, attached to a pair of long, powerful arms. Arms that had always felt good around my waist, or over my shoulders, or—

Easy.

Visions floated to mind; recollections of our ‘date.’ The feeling of Axel’s body pressed against mine wasn’t something I’d forgotten about. Nor had I even tried.

Stop it, Ariana.

I’d noticed my friend a thousand times of course, but maybe I hadn’t *looked* looked. Physically he was a complete and total specimen. Axel had everything going for him: athleticism, genetics, and heartbreaking good looks. Those blue eyes alone would explain the crowds of women pouring in to see him. Not to mention those broad, steel-like shoulders. That chiseled, stubbled jaw...

“Anyway,” I kept going, “in that case you *could* tell me. About the cousins, I mean. Because best friends can always kiss and tell.”

“Right,” Axel smirked again. Inhaling slowly, he let out a sigh. “They just don’t kiss.”

“What?”

“Best friends never kiss,” he explained simply, adding the wave of one big hand. “They—“

“AXEL LOOK OUT!”

The corridor of darkness had been pierced by something swift and brown and—

A deer. It's a deer...

—moving so quickly there was barely any time to react. But Axel *did* react. He'd made a career out of reacting, and his reaction time was unimaginably good.

“HANG ON!”

An arm shot across the car, pinning me to my seat, and then suddenly we were skidding, spinning, falling backwards. Rolling off the road and beyond the embankment and down a steep, steep hill.

AXEL—

I didn't have time to call his name, only to think it. There was an explosion and a rush of air, as suddenly everything was coming at us, from all sides at once.

And there wasn't even enough time to scream.

ARIANA

Speed, noise chaos — those things disappeared altogether, leaving us utterly and completely alone. We sat motionless in our seats, which were somehow on a strange angle now. Our world blanketed by an unnerving silence.

“ARE YOU OKAY?”

There was panic in Axel’s voice. I reached out and found his hand.

“Yeah, I’m good. Just... rattled.”

He swept me into his arms, crushing me against his chest. I could feel the immensity of his relief, flowing through his body. For several important seconds, we just held each other in the darkness. It was the kind of hug you’d get at an airport, from a lover who’s been away for weeks or months.

Holy shit.

There was the strange smell of burnt rubber, or maybe fabric, as the airbags slowly deflated. But my car was screwed. The windshield had cracked from the impact, which had been from the rear, and there was glass everywhere. Most of the windows were shattered.

“At least you saved that deer family,” I coughed.

“There was more than one?”

“Yeah.”

Axel let out a deep breath and shook his head. “Fuck, Ariana,” he swore. “All I saw were trees.”

We both reached for our phones at the same time. Neither of us had had a signal for miles now, but we still had to check. Our shoulders slumped.

“Thank God for that snowbank,” Axel murmured, glancing over his shoulder and through my broken back window. “If we hadn’t skidded into it...”

“Things would be a lot worse,” I agreed.

I hugged him again. I could tell he needed the comfort as much as I did. As grateful as I was that we were both alive and okay, the level of concern on Axel’s face was melting my heart.

“Sweet *fuck* it’s cold,” I shivered.

It was snowing *into* the car now, and the wind was picking up. Already the windshield was covered in thick, heavy flakes. Between that and the spider-webbed glass, I could barely see through it.

Axel wriggled out of his jacket. Before I could say anything he’d draped it over my shoulders and began pulling my arms through.

“Axel—“

“No arguments,” he told me. I could see his breath now. The temperature was dropping fast. “We need to get going.”

“Going?” I swallowed. “Where are we going?”

“Anywhere but here.”

The doors of my poor car creaked open on both sides, but noisily and under protest. Important metal parts had twisted. Things would never be the same.

“I saw a strip of something back that way,” Axel pointed up the embankment and back the way we came. The wind was screaming now, trying to swallow his words. “About a mile, maybe.”

“I saw it too,” I agreed. “A gas station that was closed, and then a few other... I dunno, a garage maybe?”

“Maybe,” he nodded. “Whatever’s there, at least it’ll be shelter. And people can’t be far.”

He extended a hand to help me up the embankment, which was steep and uneven and choked with sleet and ice. Together we managed to make our way up, eventually reaching the road.

The sky was moonless and obscured, making everything so dark it was nearly pitch black. If not for the subdued glow reflecting from the fallen snow, just following the road would be a task in and of itself.

“Don’t let go,” Axel called back, squeezing my hand.

He forged his way forward, step by step, and I huddled against him. Normally I would’ve led, but with the wind roaring along the valley of the roadway, I could’ve easily been blown right over. As it was, Axel had to lean into every step. I was grateful for the relief his hulking body provided me, shielding me from the brunt of the sleet and ice and whatever else the sky was dumping down on us.

We could easily freeze to death.

If we were walking the wrong way, sure. But we were both fairly certain we’d gone off the right side of the road, which meant walking left was the way back. Or so we hoped.

We walked for what felt like a mile, and then another mile after that. It was impossible to tell, because in the darkness, distance lost all meaning. There were only footfalls, our progress measured step by step. My hands and feet had gone numb a thousand footsteps ago. I could barely feel my face.

“There!”

Axel shouted the word into the howling wind, and I could still only barely hear it. But when I looked around him again, I could see lights. Not very many of them, but enough to make out what looked to be a long, low-slung building with many, many doors.

A motel.

ARIANA

“Quick, get in here!”

Axel half-yanked, half-shoved me through the doorway, as the freezing wind blew sleet against our backs. It protested violently as he tried closing the door behind us, and only when he’d applied the full weight of his body was he able to finally get the latch to click.

Warmth, heat, light — these things washed over us as we tumbled into our little motel room. We embraced them with all the happiness of Christmas morning, as I sank backwards onto the rickety bed.

“THANK. GOD.”

We’d been lucky to have found this place, and doubly lucky that it was one of those 24-hour ones. Back in the motel’s office we rang a tiny brass bell that looked like every bell in every motel horror movie I’d ever seen. A full minute and a half later, a sleep-deprived woman in four layers of clothing had emerged from the back room.

We’d considered using her phone to call for help, but the weather made it obvious any help would have to wait until morning. Axel allowed her to extract three colorful bills from his wad of Canadian cash, and we were given the key to room twenty-two... the very last room at the end of the row.

“There’s no one else here,” Axel sighed, tossing the key to our room down. The plastic chit reading ‘22’ rattled

onto a worn, beaten up dresser. “Why not give us the key to room one?”

“Because that woman’s a sadist!” I cried, rubbing my hands together. My fingers were bright pink except at the knuckles. “It’s the only explanation.”

Axel crossed the room to where a decades-old heater rested below a tiny window covered by mustard-colored curtains. They looked like they hadn’t been vacuumed since the Vietnam war.

“This place is—“

“The dump of all dumps?” I mused.

“I was going to say perfect,” Axel grinned, as he flipped the switch on the heater. It rattled angrily, stirred, and then finally kicked on. He sighed in relief.

“We have everything we need here,” he declared. “Just you, me, and some...”

Holding his hand out over the vent, he frowned. My heart sank.

“Some what?”

“Lukewarm air,” Axel sighed.

The room felt toasty when we first entered, but that was in relation to the craziness outside. Right now my body was getting colder by the moment. Everything we were wearing was soaked through. The snow in my hair was melting.

“We need to get out of these clothes.”

As usual he’d read my mind, and we began peeling off layers, one by one. Axel wore his sweatshirt *over* his hockey jersey, until we were both down to underclothes. Thanks to the ferocity of the storm, they were drenched too.

“Towels?” I asked hopefully.

He dipped into the tiny bathroom and emerged with two of the saddest, most threadbare excuses for towels I’d ever

seen. He tossed me one, while doing a forensic examination of the other. He shook his head.

“One more thing left to try.”

I gulped as Axel peeled off his undershirt, and his bare body came into view. His chest was smooth and hairless and slick from melted snow, all the way down to his flat, rippled stomach. His square jaw and ridiculous good looks went perfectly with a body that seemed chiseled from a block of marble.

Axel stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I could still partially see him though. The bathroom was that small. I’d seen him bare-chested over a dozen summers while growing up, of course. In swimming pools. At the beach. But this was different. This was *alone*. Alone at a motel in the middle of nowhere, with none of the others around to—

“Ahhh, JACKPOT!”

An arm came out, and Axel threw a pair of soaking wet boxers into the room. They plopped to the floor and I heard the water change as he stepped into the shower.

“The water’s scalding hot!” he cried lustily, his voice echoing from within the tiny enclosure. “We might be able to get warm after all!”

Heavy splashes mixed with the sound of the storm outside, as Axel showered off layers of cold. I should’ve been more excited about the hot water. My core temperature had dropped to the point where I’d peeled everything off and was standing in my underwear, shivering, with my arms crossed over my chest.

But all I could think about—

“I’d call you in here to join me,” he called out lustily. “But there’s not nearly enough room!”

Steam was rolling out now, made even heavier and thicker as it mixed with the colder air of our motel room. I could hear Axel singing, now. Humming something I should

probably know, only I was too busy staring at his discarded boxers to figure it out.

“Better get in,” he said. “Who knows how long the hot water will last.”

He stepped out, and I pretended not to watch. Only I *did* watch, because not watching was almost impossible.

Axel faced away from me as he stepped out of the steaming spray, giving me a full view of his naked ass as he ‘toweled’ off. It would’ve been comical; like drying the rippled statue of some handsome Greek god with a washcloth. Only his ass was too perfect, too round. Too magnificent to focus on anything else.

“Grab me those?”

He pointed back to his boxers. By the time I’d plucked them from the floor he had the towel wrapped around his waist. It was so small on him, it looked like the tiniest miniskirt. He had to hold it from the back with one beautifully-flexed arm, to keep it from falling off.

“Thanks.” He jerked his head toward the still-running shower. “Better hurry while it lasts.”

I slipped past him, and in the tiny bathroom our bodies skidded against one another’s. Axel’s big, sculpted thighs felt impossibly warm against my cold, wet skin.

“Oh my God...” I sighed excitedly. “You’ve gotta be kidding!”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Go ahead.”

The room was warm already, the shower steam feeling incredible as it kissed my body. I hesitated for a moment, before stepping out of my clothes.

Will he watch me? I wondered, with a strange thrill.
The way I watched him?

There was a tiny click and I turned around. Like a true gentleman Axel had closed the door behind him.

I felt relief for the privacy. Anticipation for the heat of the shower. And... well...

Disappointment?

I shook it off. Disappointment? Really? I'd walked away from a car wreck, and avoided freezing to death in a blizzard. Most of all I had Axel with me, to share this adventure. To keep me safe and unscathed and—

Finally naked, I stepped beneath the blessedly hot, beautiful shower spray.

And all other thoughts melted instantly away.

ARIANA

FUCK. YES.

It was one of those life-changing showers, where the rest of the world could fall to ruin around you and you wouldn't even notice. The spray was hot and surprisingly powerful. The heat soaked through me, into me, warming me from within. It eradicated the cold that had insidiously seeped into my very bones, driving it from my body like an exorcism.

By the time I'd stepped out andtoweled off, I felt like a new woman. But there was no fucking way I was getting back into my wet clothes.

“Axel?” I asked, cracking the door.

“Yo!”

I poked my head out. He was already in the bed, legs under the covers. But he was sitting up, two striated arms crossed over his perfect chest. Somehow, he was eating a candy bar.

“Where'd you get *that?!?*” I gasped.

“Vendingmachine,” he mumbled as one word, through a mouthful of chocolate. “We passed it halfway down the row on the way here, remember?”

I remembered. Shoved just beneath the building's awning, the machine looked dark and broken and half-covered in drifts of snow.

“It was unplugged,” he went on. “I couldn’t find an outlet and it was freezing and I was wearing a towel, so...”

“So you broke into it?”

“Hey, hey,” Axel protested. “Why use such harsh language?” He chuckled and took another bite. “Let’s just say I *negotiated* with it.”

He pulled back a pillow, revealing a half-dozen more snacks he’d pirated. There were chips, pretzels, and something that looked like a granola bar. My stomach rumbled.

“And, ummm... exactly what are you wearing?” I asked, still hiding behind the door.

“Under here?” he grinned, plucking at the blankets. “Not much. But you...” he nodded at my predicament. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered.”

Reaching back with one arm he tossed me something I recognized immediately. I caught it.

“Your jersey?”

“Sure, it wicks water,” he explained. “I hung it over the heater and it’s already dry.”

I couldn’t believe it but he was right. The slick mesh fabric was almost even warm, too.

“A lot better than putting wet clothes back on,” Axel mused.

I popped back into the bathroom and slipped it over my head. The big jersey came all the way down to my knees. I was swimming in it of course, and had to roll up the sleeves three or four times before I could see my hands again. It was a hell of a lot better than wearing towels.

But it also *smelled* like him, and the smell was far from unpleasant. I brought an arm to my nose and inhaled the sweet, heady scent of Axels’ body; his musk, his sweat, even the deodorant he’d put on before the game. Altogether, the combination was strangely intoxicating. And with his jersey clinging to every curve of my naked body, it was all around me.

When I stepped out again, Axel was crunching on Sun Chips. His eyes moved unabashedly up and down my body as he let out a long whistle.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing,” Axel shrugged. He pointed at me with a chip. “But I’d be lying if I said you didn’t look sexy as hell in that.”

“Sexy...” I stretched my arms to let the fabric dangle. “In your hockey jersey?”

“Do you have any idea how sexy it is when a girl’s wearing your jersey and *nothing* else?”

I chuckled. “No. I guess not.”

“Well it’s a good thing we’re friends then,” he sighed wistfully. “Because otherwise...”

He left the sentence tantalizingly unfinished, as I bounced onto the bed. The room was warmer than before, but still chilly. Already I missed the steam of the shower.

“Hey,” I admonished, slapping his hand playfully as he reached for a bag of chips. “Quit hogging all the snacks!”

We feasted together, devouring everything Axel had ‘negotiated’ until only torn, crinkled wrappers were left. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. After the last game we’d skipped out before dinner, and lunch seemed half a lifetime ago.

Eventually I crawled beneath the blankets, which were warm from his body heat. Our legs touched, and I wondered if he were still wearing his towel...

“I keep trying to reach the others,” Axel said, tapping his phone’s screen. “But no service. Think they’ll be worried about us?”

“Nah,” I shook my head. “They won’t be home for hours yet. And when they get there, they won’t even notice we didn’t make it back. They’ll probably go straight to bed.”

“True enough,” Axel agreed. He set the phone back on the night table. “The last thing they’d expect is that we stopped to crawl half-naked under the blankets in some seedy motel room.”

I flipped over to face him in the bed. Axel was already laughing.

“That is *not* what we did,” I protested.

“But that’s exactly what we did.”

My first instinct was to roll my eyes at him. But he had a point.

“Okay, maybe *technically*,” I agreed. “But—“

“But what?”

I stopped talking, and for several moments we just stared at each other in the almost-silence. The wind still howled, and the sleet clicked noisily against our room’s window. But other than that, it was just us, face to face, huddled for warmth beneath the blankets. Like two friends having a sleepover.

Still, I couldn’t help thinking about Axel’s ‘sexy’ comment. My whole body smelled like him now, even more so under the covers. Silently I wondered how many other girls had worn his jersey, and nothing else.

“Well, I guess we should get some sleep,” I finally sighed.

“Yeah. Guess so.”

“So how are we gonna work this?”

His gorgeous blue eyes narrowed in confusion. “Work what?”

“Should we build a pillow wall between us?” I smirked. “I mean, it’s an awfully small bed.”

Axel’s expression was one of mild amusement. “Want a pillow wall? Go for it.”

God, he was so fucking *gorgeous!* His cheekbones, his mouth, his lips... I'd never realized how symmetrically flawless his face actually was. I mean, obviously he was well beyond handsome. But as his friend, I'd simply never picked these things out before.

"Better make it high though," he added. "And I don't think you have enough pillows."

I'd seen women literally melt around him, and beautiful women, too. They'd go right up to him coolly confident, then transform into nervous wrecks in the face of his intimidating good looks. I'd watched them walk away, stammering, having made complete fools of themselves.

And I never really understood it until now.

"Still, if I wanted to break our little 'barrier' here," Axel went on, drawing an imaginary line on the bed between us. "Do you really think a pillow wall would stop me?"

"Who said it would stop *you?*" I insinuated, going right back at him. "Maybe I'm the one who needs stopping."

Axel's handsome grin continued growing wider, until he looked up at the ceiling and laughed. He wasn't used to this, I realized. He was accustomed to being the one in the control.

"Besides, we're just friends," I told him. "And it's cold. And friends spoon when they're cold."

With that I twisted around, giving him my back. A second passed. Three seconds...

And then I was letting out a sigh of happiness, as his beautifully-warm body molded itself tightly against mine.

YES.

Axel's arm slid over me, then tightened itself around my waist. I could feel the transfer of heat from his body to mine. It felt damn-near orgasmic, like sinking into a hot tub on a cold winter day.

"You're the best big spoon ever," I purred. "You know that?"

He squeezed tighter and I squirmed into him, without thinking twice. It had been a long, hard day. An even colder, harder night. And now here we were, Axel and I, making the best of a bad situation. Finally deriving some comfort in the warmth provided by each other's bodies; two friends against the world, the elements, huddled down in some strange place, in a foreign—

I halted mid-thought, as something shifted into my lower back. It grew even larger as I continued to do nothing, expanding slowly until I could feel a warm knot just above the crack of my ass.

“Sorry,” I heard Axel mumble.

For a second or two I lay there in shock. Then I giggled.

“It's alright,” I conceded. “I... uh, I guess it's flattering.”

“It is?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Sure,” I told him. “I mean, the alternative is worse, right? If you didn't get... *that*... what would it say about my sex-appeal?”

I lifted his arm and twisted, repositioning my body so that were face to face again. The breathing room it gave us down below avoided the whole ‘incidental contact’ thing. At least for now.

“Besides,” I sighed, “you already told me you found me sexy in your hockey jersey.”

My statement was met with silence from Axel's side of the bed. Those ocean blue eyes shifted with tiny, precise movements, scanning different areas of my face.

“I think you're sexy even without my jersey,” he finally murmured.

My pulse picked up speed. “You mean—“

“No, I don't mean naked,” Axel flushed red. “I meant you'd be sexy in anything, really. Not just my hockey jersey.”

Our eyes kept searching, dancing, flirting. And somehow, pillow to pillow, our bodies kept shifting. Moving...

Drifting us inexorably closer together.

“So I wouldn’t be sexy naked?” I pressed, enjoying the color he was now turning.

“I wouldn’t know,” he shrugged. “I’ve never seen you —“

“But you’ve pictured it before, right?”

“Pictured what?”

“Me. Naked.”

I was playing with fire now. Alarms were flashing wildly, somewhere in the back of my mind.

“I mean sure,” Axel finally admitted. “I’m a guy, aren’t I?”

I allowed my eyes to flit playfully and intentionally lower for a second, before returning to his.

“I’m pretty sure I can vouch for that,” I chuckled. “As of five minutes ago, at least.”

Down below, our bodies were somehow touching again as one of my legs had scissored its way between his. The feeling of skin-on-skin felt warm and welcome and delicious.

“But you know, being *friends* and all,” Axel pressed. “It sort of puts limits on what I can and can’t think about.”

I bit my lip playfully. “Why?”

“Because...” He studied me more intently now. “Well...”

I smiled openly now, watching him struggle. The heat of our bodies was making the world beneath the blankets toasty warm. And our faces were floating again, moving closer together.

“Friends can’t think about friends like that,” Axel said simply. “Not outwardly, anyway.”

“But inwardly?”

I knew full well I shouldn't be doing what I was doing, but I was powerless to stop it. We were nose to nose again, just like during our date, when I'd fallen off the couch. Only this time I hadn't fallen. This time everything was on purpose.

“After all, we're *just* friends, right?”

Axel nodded his agreement. “Sure.”

“And friends...”

I was lost in his eyes now. Overwhelmed by his beauty.

“Friends...”

In that moment I knew the powerlessness felt by dozens of other women. The complete surrender of will.

“They can't—“

Axel's lips crashed into mine, swallowing the useless sentence I could never possibly complete. The kiss was slow. Thunderous. It stole my breath and obliterated my inhibitions, as the rest of the world beyond our blankets dissolved completely away.

And nothing else existed but *us*.

ARIANA

I don't know how long we lay there making out before the touching started, but it had to be a record. I think we were both afraid, really. Each worried that the spell might be broken and the other might want to stop.

And so we kissed and kissed, our jaws rotating slowly as we writhed beneath the blankets and our tongues explored. Over time our breathing grew quicker and more frenzied, as our libidos ramped up speed. Yet our hands and fingertips remained frozen in silent outrage, wondering why our brains hadn't yet given them permission to go utterly and completely fucking crazy.

I couldn't tell you who blinked first, him or me. But suddenly Axel's hand was on my leg, slowly lifting his hockey jersey. Gliding toward that special place where I was so fucking wet I could feel my thighs sliding together.

Ohhhhhh...

Likewise, I was groping him, touching him everywhere. Reaching between us I stroked his impressive hardness in my eager palm, as we stared deep into each other's eyes.

“What are we doing?” he whispered.

I didn't answer. There *was* no answer. Besides, I was still marveling at his size.

“Best friends never kiss. Remember?”

I kissed him in response, simultaneously giving him a firm but gentle squeeze.

“They do *sometimes*, don’t they?” I asked coyly.

I broke eye contact to kiss and nuzzle his neck for a while. Eventually I trapped his earlobe between my teeth and whispered:

“Maybe in a romcom, where they’re experimenting?” I hissed. “Or one of them’s trying to teach the other how to kiss, so they... you know...”

I rolled him onto his back. Axel stared down at me as I began kissing his neck, his chest, his stomach. I pulled the blankets down with me around my shoulders as I explored even lower.

His hands found my hair, his fingers embedding themselves deeply. Then he moaned, in a way I’d never heard him before.

Was that a push?

I felt it for sure: a slight downward nudge, urging me along. Giving me his permission to keep dragging my tongue past places friendship could never, ever send us.

My lips continued kissing their way over that smooth, unblemished skin. My tongue sailed dreamily through a sea of hard, quivering abdominals. They were all so beautiful, so perfect...

But not nearly as perfect as what came next.

Oh my God...

I shifted lower, and Axel’s manhood sprang into view. It was easily the largest one I’d ever seen. Thick and hard and curving distinctly to the right, it was pulsing gently up and down with his every heartbeat. I had to gasp before I could speak.

“Holy fuck, Axel...”

If all men were created with good traits to make up for bad ones, the joke was on everyone else. Axel had been granted the blessings of being smart, funny, *and* unfathomably good-looking. Now, on top of everything else, I learned he'd been gifted with... well, this.

“Ari. C'mere.”

He pulled me upward effortlessly, lying me across his chest. Our gazes locked. Our foreheads touched.

“We should probably stop while we still can,” he murmured softly. His eyes were still wanton and feral, but behind that lay a look of concern. Concern for me.

“Shouldn't we?” he pleaded.

For a moment I managed to shove my own desire to the side. I bit my lip in contemplation.

“Axel, I...”

For a moment I considered not sleeping with him, and keeping our relationship platonic and pure. But then I thought of the others. I thought of how hurtful it might be if Axel ever found out, and how it would seem like he'd been rejected in some way. That I'd somehow played favorites, when that wasn't the case at all.

With Zane, I had history. With Tyler I had the irresistible pull of feelings built up slowly, over a long period of time. And yet just like Axel, they were my friends. Friends who'd been there throughout my life; men who I'd confided in, grown up with, and loved like family. And now they were also men who I'd given myself to, in every possible way.

In the end, sleeping with some and not all of them seemed wholly wrong. Almost like I was being deceiving, or cheating all four of us in some way.

Beyond all that though, was a more brutally undeniable honesty:

I really *really* wanted to fuck him.

“Hey...”

I murmured the word into his mouth as I straddled him. There was no going back after this. Nothing would ever be strictly platonic again.

Good.

“I want this,” I whispered, kissing his nose, his cheeks, his lips. “I want it because I’ve *always* wanted it. And because you’ve always wanted it, too.”

I shifted lower, until I could feel his enormity pressing against my entrance. I could feel him throbbing there, ready to impale me like some great, thick spear. I was so wet it was ridiculous.

“So let’s take it,” I said, kissing him some more. “Let this be *ours*, Axel. Right here. Right now...”

I whimpered the last part into his mouth as I rolled my hips downward, consummating our friendship as I took him all the way inside me. It was only a thrust. A single yet beautiful movement that locked us together, man and woman, lover to lover, forever changed.

It was a connection so emotionally and physically deep I wanted to scream.

AXEL

Holy shit you're fucking Ari.

I glanced up into her half-lidded eyes. Slid my hands from the cute curve of her waist up to those full, bouncing breasts. It didn't feel real. The whole thing felt like it *had* to be a dream.

And yet I was still inside her, thrusting away. Grinding myself tantalizingly upward, to drill her so deeply and fully that those beautiful green eyes screwed shut.

No way!

My brain was steadfastly refusing the connection to the rest of my body.

No way you're actually doing this!

I could feel the intensity of her heat. The insane constriction of her wet, glistening flower wrapped so snugly around me as I pistoned in and out of her. But it was her porcelain face I couldn't stop staring at. She wore an expression of rapture that mirrored mine, lending me hope that everything we were doing was still okay.

God, I'd wanted her forever! But I never said it outright, and I could never let on. Ariana was like our little sister, one grade lower than us. We protected her, nurtured her, guided her. But as we grew to adolescence, she began

providing far more for us — mostly in the ways of womanly wisdom — than we could ever do for her.

As adults, we of course recognized that our childhood friend had blossomed into a beautiful woman. But there was an unspoken pact. An understanding between my Tyler, Zane and myself that no matter what we did, or who we ran with, none of us would go down that forbidden road.

And that's because, above all else, none of us *ever* wanted to hurt her.

Right now I was breaking that pact, violating our unspoken covenant. And yet for some reasons I didn't feel guilty about it. I felt like, after these years, after all the mutual love and affection and even hints of attraction we'd felt for each other, that maybe this was ours to begin with. That maybe we were always meant to do this.

I'd feel that guilt later maybe, when I would have to lie by omission to the others. I'd tuck this night away and hide it forever, except in the most cherished recesses of my memory. But before I did I would live out every last glorious moment. I'd fulfill every last Ariana fantasy I'd ever had; the loving ones where we rocked in one another's arms for hours, staring into each other's eyes. The hot ones. The fast ones. But the down and dirty ones too, where we threw away all our inhibitions and went totally crazy on each other in all the filthiest, most wicked ways.

All of these things were ours, tonight, one night only. We could do anything and everything all alone, in this strange, remote place.

And I sure as fuck wasn't going to miss a single second.

I reached out and pulled her down now, kissing her hotly, missing the intimacy of her full lips against mine. A charge hung in the air between us — a magnetic attraction and sexual hunger that seemed too insatiable to ever be fulfilled. But I never stopped pumping. I never broke the slow, beautiful rhythm our bodies had developed without so much as a single

word, as we fucked and grinded and screwed each other deep into our tiny motel bed.

You're fucking ARI.

I still couldn't believe it, not even while buried all the way to the hilt in her warmth and wetness. This woman I'd fantasized about all my life was just as eager for me, too. She was practically gushing around me, drenching the bed. Everything from her thighs to my balls were slick with her juices, and the cute little noises coming out of her throat with every upthrust was making me crazy.

"Ari."

She was screwing me even harder now, hands on my stomach, fingers splayed wide. Her body rocked in circles as she rode me like a bucking bronco. And *damn* did she know what she was doing.

"Ariana..."

Lost in a hazy half-trance of pre-orgasmic euphoria, she somehow managed to open her eyes. They were fully glossed over. Swimming with lust.

"I need you to know you were right," I smiled up at her.

My best girl friend in the world moaned at a particularly deep thrust, then swallowed dryly. "Right... about... what?"

"I've *always* wanted this."

The words did the trick. Or maybe the eye contact. Or maybe it was the way I dragged my palms ever so gently over her beautiful pink nipples, only barely touching them, as I rolled my hips in time to her own.

Whichever it was, it was enough to push her over the edge.

"Axel—"

"Go on," I urged, squeezing her through another moan. "Go ahead and let it go."

She shivered, stiffened, then clawed me as her climax ripped through her. The eye contact was insane, though. Throughout the entirety of her shrieking, thrashing orgasm, she never once looked away.

Wow...

I saw the love in her eyes. I felt the love in her *heart*. That love was fully reciprocated and always had been; Ariana knew this without me having to say it or show it. But now there was something else between us, too. Something way beyond friendship, beyond even this hot new physical connection we'd just forged together; in the fires of inescapable mutual attraction.

“Axel...”

There was adoration. Adulation. A connection of her heart to mine, her mind to my own. We were on all the same wavelengths now. We had all new bonds that I knew could never be broken.

A lump formed in my throat. I'd had sex so many times, with so many beautiful women I'd lost count. But I'd never once had a real relationship. One that didn't feel hollow, or shallow, or that I was simply going through the motions to keep someone *else* happy. I realized in one tremendous, mind-blowing epiphany that I'd never had a relationship that went beyond the physical. Nothing like *this*.

Holy fuck.

I tried to swallow, couldn't do it, then tried again. And through it all, Ariana was holding me. She'd wrapped those beautiful legs around me and was clutching me against her, chest to chest, face to face, her arms behind me, cradling me close.

“Come for me...” she gasped breathlessly. “Please. Axel...”

“For you?” My heart was pounding a mile a minute. “Or *in* you?”

“Both.”

I wanted to let go so badly! But it was too soon, too quick. I'd waited so long for this, and now I wanted to stay inside her forever. I never wanted to leave.

"Let it go," she smiled, using my own line against me. Those emerald eyes that had been so glazed over only a minute ago were full of mischief again. They flashed wickedly.

"But—"

"But what?" she chuckled. "You don't think this is the only time we're doing this tonight, do you?"

It was all I needed to hear.

I reached down, grabbed her ass in both hands, and pulled her so tightly against me I actually bottomed out on something. Ariana let out a yelp of surprise, then began kissing me wildly, holding my face in her hands.

Our eyes locked one last time, and a whole world of information passed between us...

And then I was flooding her. Filling her. Emptying myself so fully inside her that all we could do was hold each other in a strange mixture of shock and triumph.

"Ariana..."

I breathed her beautiful name against her lips, kissing her more softly now as my deeply-buried shaft twitched and pulsed. It was the only movement between us. The only movement in the whole world, really. The wind and sleet and everything else stayed frozen in time, our bodies tightly locked chest to chest, as I rode out the most intensely beautiful orgasm of my entire life... all while staring into the eyes of this gorgeous woman I'd loved for so very, very long.

Incredible.

I lowered my head in awe and reverence, shuddering through every exquisite spasm of pure, unadulterated joy. And throughout it all, Ariana held me against those warm, supple breasts. Her thundering heartbeat was the only music as I

slowly floated back to earth, and only when my senses fully returned could I finally return her proud smile.

Eventually we slumped back together, curling up beneath the blankets and holding each other closer than we'd ever held each other before.

“Give me about ten minutes,” I boasted. “Fifteen tops.”

Ariana laughed and cuddled into me. In the silence I wondered what she was thinking, how she was processing what had just happened. The room was back, and so was the sleet, the wind, and the storm outside. The shitty heater still rattled as it blew lukewarm air through the tiny motel room, but now everything smelled like sex.

“I'm sorry about your car,” I murmured, pinning her soft body against mine. I was still stroking her hair when she let out a long, satisfied sigh.

“I'm not,” she chuckled.

ARIANA

“Thanks again for coming!” I said, hugging my cousin tightly. “It’s so good to see you!”

Claudette’s embrace was stronger than most women’s, but just like her it was quick and efficient. She gave me a quick smile and a perfunctory nod, before retreating to her side of the little booth in the back of the Cantonese restaurant.

“I have to say I was surprised to hear from you,” Claudette said. “I thought maybe you’d moved away to join your parents.”

“Yeah, right,” I rolled my eyes. “Your mother and my father are cut from the same mold. Think you could live with them as an adult?”

“I could barely stand being a teenager,” Claudette agreed. She set her hat down on the table. “In fact, I counted the days until I could legally enlist.”

My cousin was in her dress blues, which meant she’d come straight from work. Her dirty blonde hair was pulled tightly and symmetrically back over her head, where her bun game was strong. Even before she’d joined the Navy, it always had been.

“So what do I owe the pleasure?” Claudette asked, picking up a complementary fried noodle.

I had a thousand things to tell her, but I couldn't do it all at once. For one, it would probably overwhelm her. More importantly though, I didn't want her to judge me. Looking into her blue-green eyes, I shrugged.

"I just thought we should finally catch up," I lied.

"Yeah, right."

I felt bad. We'd been close once, a long time ago. Almost sisters, in a way. But then we'd gone to different schools, found different friends, and went our separate ways once we graduated. I stuck around to pursue my own dreams of an art career, and she'd joined the Navy as a weapons specialist on a guided-missile destroyer.

When you looked at it like that, we couldn't have picked more opposite career paths.

"So how've you been?" I asked, handing her a menu.

Claudette's lips went a little tighter. "Do you really want to know?"

"Actually, yes."

She nodded again. "Alright, well I've been put in charge of a team of people," she began, "most of which couldn't find their own head if it were up their own ass."

I chuckled at the image. My cousin always did have a way with words.

"Every day I chase tiny bugs in an outdated weapon system, hoping to improve firing response time," bemoaned Claudette. "We're talking milliseconds here, Ari. But when you need to slam a harpoon missile into the side of a cruiser who may or may not have a lock on you, milliseconds are pretty fucking important."

I knew enough not to say anything, at least not yet. Any such intrusion would be considered an interruption, and so I spent time looking Claudette over and imagining her as a child again. A smiling, carefree little girl who liked to play Uno with me, or sometimes even Clue or Monopoly if we could drag her older brothers downstairs as well.

“We can’t bother recoding any subroutines because testing and roll-out would take too long. And we can’t sit around waiting for the *new* system, because it’s still about two years away. Give or take six months.”

Claudette stopped for a moment, which apparently was my cue.

“So what the hell do you they want to do?” I asked.

“Honestly, I don’t even know,” she sighed, letting her shoulders slump. “There are little tweaks I can make, quick fixes here and there that improve things without changing the system outright. But damn, cuz. Everyone around me is content to sit on their hands. Everyone wants to do their time, collect their checks, and not make waves.”

“Wouldn’t waves be bad anyway?” I tried to joke. “I mean... after all you *are* on a boat—“

“A *ship*,” my cousin corrected instantly. “I serve on a ship.”

“Ah.”

“And no, I think it’s time for waves. Everyone is so complacent these days. No one has any ambition, or drive, or imagination.” She shook her head in disgust. “And I’m in charge of so many of these zombies now. Sometimes I wish I were an octopus so I could slap eight people at once.”

I laughed, and for those few seconds of laughter I was unfettered by guilt or regret. It had been a very distracted week for me. Ever since getting back from Calgary, I’d been going through the motions, spinning my wheels. Showing up to work and class, without even really being there.

And it was all because I hadn’t heard much from the guys.

My night with Axel had been absolutely wild, and had lasted until morning. We’d screwed like animals until the shitty motel bed threatened to fly apart, then toned it down and spent the rest of the time slowly, lazily making love. We kissed for *hours* just grinding against each other, into each other, our

hands finally free to roam every inch of one another's body. It was warm. It was beautiful. And it was over too soon.

We slept in. There was no 'late checkout' at a place like that, and so we woke in the afternoon to find the storm over and a dozen or more text-messages from Tyler and Zane. When they found out what happened they both offered to come pick us up, but Axel placed a call to Sherry and Denise, who'd stayed an extra night in Calgary and were already on the way back.

It was an easy thing for them to stop and pick us up, but an awkward ride for me though. I had to sit there in my still-damp clothes, enduring jealous, questionable stares from Sherry in the rear-view mirror, while Denise constantly doted on Axel. When we stopped at my poor, half-buried car to get a few things, the women gasped. The rest of the ride was dedicated to making sure Axel was 'okay,' and whether or not he needed anything.

Since getting back however, the guys had, for the most part, left me oddly alone. Aside from a few text-messages here and there, I felt like a complete stranger. There weren't any phone calls or visits, and not one of them had stopped in the coffee shop all week. It made me feel awful. Like somehow I'd done something, or—

“Cuz?”

I broke my trance to find Claudette staring back at me, somewhat amused.

“I'm sorry,” I apologized quickly. “What were you saying?”

“I said, so what about you?”

I stared down at the table. Now I felt even more guilty, summoning her here for selfish reasons. Sure we talked every couple of weeks, and kept up through text messages as much as we could. But rather than catch up on life, I'd invited her here purely to vent my troubles.

“Forget about me,” I said glumly. “I'm a mess right now. And I didn't mean to invite you here just to dump on

you.” I rolled my eyes. “Okay, maybe I *did*, but I’m changing my mind now.”

“Cuz.”

She reached out and laid a hand over mine. It was a strong hand. A reassuring hand.

“It’s okay,” Claudette smiled. “Really, it is. I’m just glad to be here.”

That smile melted my heart. It took me instantly back to all those nights we’d stayed up outrageously late, talking about life, about boys, about anything and everything. In that moment I realized how much I truly missed her. In the face of our history together, all my excuses about being busy with work and school seemed suddenly insignificant and lame.

“Besides,” my cousin chuckled, picking up the menu. “You *did* say you’re buying lunch, right?”

“I did,” I agreed, clearing my throat. “I mean, I am.”

Claudette shrugged. “Then I’m your sounding board. It’s gonna cost you some salt-and-pepper shrimp though,” she added, skimming the menu. “And these pot-stickers for sure. And maybe some creamed corn soup—“

“I slept with Tyler,” I blurted abruptly.

My cousin didn’t even flinch. She kept perusing the menu, her pretty eyes shifting from one item to the next.

“Good for you,” she finally replied. “I figured you guys would eventually do it, after all the damn time you’ve spent together growing up. Besides, I love Tyler. He’ll be good for you—“

“And Zane.”

Claudette’s eyes stopped moving. They remained fixed now, somewhere in the center of the menu.

“Alright,” she shrugged. “No biggie. I mean you’ve *always* liked Zane. They’re friends though, so that’s bound to get a little sticky, but this kind of shit happens,” Claudette

allowed. “For example, I once slept with an ensign, right after dating his—“

“And Axel.”

My cousin’s eyes flitted to me so quickly it almost looked robotic. She dropped the menu with both hands.

“You did *what?*”

I had no reply. It was a question I’d been trying to answer myself, for the entire week.

“Alright then,” she relented. “You’re going to need to tell me everything. But first...”

Claudette called the waiter over and ordered us both a pair of stiff drinks. Then she reached up with practiced ease and deftly pulled out her bun.

“Boy,” she grinned, shaking her hair free with both hands. “When the dam breaks, I guess the dam *breaks.*”

TYLER

“Alright then, what about this one?”

Axel pointed at the screen, where a forest green Jeep sat at the ass-end of some crowded used car lot. He’d pointed a hundred times already over the last hour, at a hundred different vehicles. Apparently, he wasn’t picky.

“Are you kidding?” Zane smirked. “That one doesn’t even have doors.”

“Of course it has doors!”

“Why aren’t they in the photos, then?” Zane grunted.

I clicked through the pics in the listing, showing the Jeep from every angle. Amusingly, there weren’t doors in any of them.

“Maybe they took them off for the summer?” Axel shrugged.

“In *Seattle*?” I laughed. “Where it rains every day?”

My friend shrugged. “Maybe it was sunny that day.”

Zane clapped him on the back, then shoved him sideways. “If you had a Jeep with doors, you would put them on before taking the photos,” he declared. “Unless you were some kind of asshole.”

He stepped in to take Axel’s place beside me, in front of the monitor. “C’mon,” he nodded back at the screen. “Let’s

get serious.”

I watched as Axel wandered glumly back to the other side of the loft, where he grabbed the last slice of pizza. I actually felt a little bad for him. Our friend still held himself responsible for wrecking Ari’s car, even though she’d completely absolved him of it. After hearing about the deer, Zane and I hadn’t given him too much grief either. For the most part, anyway.

“How much money do we have again?”

“Thirty-three hundred,” I sniffed. “And that’s before we sell my guitar.”

“You’re *not* selling your guitar,” Axel called over.

“Hell yeah I am,” I shot back. Turning over my shoulder, I looked at Zane. “I never did learn to play that thing anyway.”

“Thank God,” Zane agreed.

We’d been at it for a better part of the week; trying to find a decent set of wheels to replace Ariana’s vehicle. The insurance company would total it out over the next couple of days, but without any collision coverage she wouldn’t be getting a check.

Eventually I motioned Axel back over. “Look, if we’re going to surprise her we need to do this now,” I urged. He still didn’t seem himself, though. Zane seemed on edge, too. The whole thing was strange.

Shit, the whole week had been strange, actually.

Our playoff loss was devastating, so that could definitely be a part of it. Still, in playing as well as we did we’d qualified for a semi-pro tournament. One that could even have bigger implications, should we perform well as a team.

But I knew in my heart it was weird for another reason, at least for me: *Ariana*.

Sleeping with my best friend hadn’t been awkward at all; it had been the most natural and amazing thing in the

world. I loved it so much that it frightened me. Mostly because I was terrified of it being a one-shot deal.

Every part of my inner dialogue was screaming at me to pursue her further. And yet I couldn't. Not until I'd come clean with Zane and Axel; a conversation which could literally destroy our friendship.

And of course, I also wanted to talk to Ariana again. More than anything else, I needed to find out where she stood. At the same time, I was terrified of scaring her away, which was why I'd pretty much left her alone all week. But leaving her alone was driving me even *more* crazy. At this point I needed to know if there were any way we could—

“I— I have to tell you guys something,” Axel said abruptly.

His voice was strange. The usual confidence and bravado had been replaced by nervousness and uncertainty.

“There's something... well...” He shook his head, stopped, then started again. “Something happened.”

Axel stood there numbly, a pizza crust dangling from one long arm. He wasn't looking at us, though. He was staring down at his feet.

“It's something bad,” he eventually continued. “Well, not bad. It's good, actually. I mean, I *think* it's good. I just want you to understand that I never intended—”

“Just spit it out, man,” Zane growled.

Axel finally glanced up, and I saw it in his eyes. I saw it before he even said it.

“I slept with Ariana.”

The words were big. Huge. Tremendous. They shattered the silence of the loft.

“It happened in that hotel,” he added quickly. “I guess the two of us were still shaken up from the accident. We were cold and alone, and without any clothes, and the storm was raging outside, and there was this bed, and...”

He kept talking faster and faster, as if getting the whole thing out quickly would somehow lessen the impact. It didn't work.

“And I guess we just—“

“I slept with her too.”

Somehow, the words had just dropped from my lips. I'd said them aloud, without even thinking.

“Y—You *did*?” Axel breathed, somewhat relieved.

I nodded slowly. “It happened the night Lexus and I broke up. We... we just had these *feelings* for one another.”

The others were staring back at me now, utterly dumbstruck. Somehow I kept going.

“It's not like these feelings just happened, either,” I attempted to explain. “It's just... well, we've always been so close. Friends for so fucking long. And she was consoling me, and we just looked at each other, and, well...”

“You rolled with it,” Axel offered helpfully. His words were solemn. There was no judgment in them.

“Yes,” I nodded numbly.

At this point the both of us turned to face Zane. He'd risen from the chair and now stood there in his sleeveless T-shirt, chest puffed out, arms dangling. His hands were clenching and unclenching into fists.

Oh shit.

Zane walked up to me first, staring me right in the eyes. It was everything I could do not to look away.

“I'm sorry, bro.”

His brown eyes searched mine, all hard and dangerous, and bravely I looked back. I expected disappointment. Betrayal. Maybe even hurt.

Instead there was nothing, as he turned to regard Axel instead.

“You...”

Slowly he raised one clenched fist, not stopping until it was level with Axel's chin. As I silently calculated what it would take to physically stop him, Zane made a quick punching motion, expecting our friend to flinch. He looked disappointed when he didn't.

"Can't do it," Zane spat, much to my relief. His fist uncurled and he patted Axel on the cheek with an open hand. "Wouldn't want to screw up something *this* pretty."

Zane abandoned the computer and crossed over to the couch. He sighed heavily as he dropped into his spot.

"Can't blame either of you, really," he said. "Ari's amazing, but she's also beautiful. Especially after junior year, when she just sort of..."

"Blossomed?" Axel offered helpfully.

"Yeah, that's one way to put it."

Zane's eyes were softer now. His shoulders didn't carry as much weight, either.

"Besides, I guess I deserve it," he added. "She's been our friend for so long, and we've always kept it that way. On the surface, anyway."

"I know," I started in. "Still, you don't deserve—"

"But man, you guys *left*," Zane continued, uttering that last word with infinite sadness. "You both went to college, and it was just me and her for a while. I guess we were lonely. The two of us took comfort in each other. One night she came over, and... well..."

It took a few seconds for me to realize what he was implying. My jaw dropped open.

"Are you saying—"

Zane folded his hands behind his neck and nodded. "We've been doing it for years, off and on," he said. "More off than on, really. But—"

"Holy SHIT!" Axel and I cried simultaneously.

Our friend simply shrugged. Zane was still staring at us, but now one corner of his mouth was curled into a half-smile.

“Can you blame me?” he asked. “I don’t blame you. All three of us did the same thing. I just happened to do it first.”

“Wait a minute,” squinted Axel. “When we left for school, Ariana hadn’t even had a steady boyfriend yet.”

“Thanks mostly to us always being around her,” Zane countered, “but yeah.”

Axel blinked. “So she was still... I mean, wasn’t she...”

“Yes. She was.”

My eyes went wide with the sudden revelation. Jealousy struck like a thunderclap.

“And so you...”

“Yes. I did.”

“ZANE!” Axel shouted. “You broke our pact!”

“We *all* broke the pact!” Zane boomed back. “All of us except Ari. She never made any pact. She was off-limits as far as we were concerned, but she’s always been free to make her own choices.”

The jealousy began eating away at me. It didn’t make him any less wrong, though.

“And now you’re saying she chose you,” I insinuated.

“Not at all,” Zane countered. He stared back at us for a long moment before I realized he was smirking.

“It looks like she chose all of us.”

ARIANA

“Wouldn’t you rather have a bigger place?” my landlord asked again. “A better place?”

The man stood in the doorway, his glasses resting crookedly on his already unsymmetrical face. He’d broken those glasses, I knew. One of his kids had sat on them over a month ago, and he’d fixed them with a 2-part epoxy he found on a shelf in the back of the shed. It was the same epoxy my father had used to glue the reflector on my bike after I’d snapped it off jumping ramps. The same epoxy he’d left behind, when my parents moved away.

“I mean, just look at the lighting in here,” he said, leaning inside and looking around. “It’s terrible.”

“So change it,” I challenged him. “I could definitely use some better lighting.”

“I’m talking about *natural* lighting,” he corrected himself. “These are basement windows, so they’re just... tiny.” He shrugged. “Must be like living in a dungeon, no?”

He was being as tactful as he could, for someone who’d brought this subject up so many times before. There were times when he’d come to collect the rent and simply drop hints. Other times when he’d get his wife to do it for him. The hints had been subtle at first, but now the people who’d bought my childhood home were abandoning all pretense. They wanted one thing, and one thing only:

For me to move out.

“So what do you plan to do with the basement once I’m gone?” I finally sighed.

The man looked at me, and I saw pity in his tired eyes. I hated pity. Pity was for the weak, and I was anything but that. Even so, he wasn’t a bad guy. He was hard-working, honest, and from what I could see from way down here, a better than average husband and father.

“Well, my wife wants her living room back,” he admitted. “We plan to finish it for the kids. Make it into a game room, or a ruckus room, or whatever it takes to give them their own space.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, remembering what it was like to be a kid in this same house. “I got it.”

He looked suddenly hopeful. “So you’ll look for a new place?”

A part of me still wanted to fight, but in my heart, I knew it was time. Past time, really.

“Sure.”

“Holy shit!” he breathed. My landlord quickly blushed. “Crap, sorry! I didn’t mean it like that. I mean...”

“I know what you mean,” I chuckled. “And it’s alright. Just give me a little time, okay? You guys have been giving me a good deal on the rent down here—“

“A damn good deal,” he agreed.

“Exactly,” I countered. “Which makes it all the more difficult for me to find something comparable. It’s going to be tough finding anything even close to this. Not that I can afford, anyway.”

He nodded some more, looking thoroughly relieved. “I completely understand. And if there’s anything we can do to help...”

“I’ll let you know,” I smiled.

He took the rent check from the counter and slipped it into his front shirt pocket. Absently, I wondered how much longer front shirt pockets were going to be a thing. Halfway to turning and leaving however, he abruptly stopped.

“Where’s your car, by the way?”

“It’s in the shop,” I said, without missing a beat.

Technically, I wasn’t lying. It *was* in a shop. Someone in Canada’s shop, anyway. It was just never getting out.

“Oh. Nothing serious, I hope?”

The story was long, sad, and very drawn out. Rather than garner more pity, I told another white lie.

“It’s getting an inspection.”

My landlord smiled and left, and I closed the door behind him. That left me all alone, in my dungeon with the tiny windows and the shitty lighting. Lighting my father had put up himself, with his own hands, in an effort to get rental income from this very basement apartment.

“Add one more to the list,” I sighed.

It was bad enough I’d been relying on the bus to get me in and out of town, but now I had to add something else to the list of things that sucked: my impending relocation. The move wouldn’t necessarily happen soon, but I’d need to begin looking right away if I wanted to get something decent.

And it would be even tougher looking for apartments without a car.

On top of everything my school had a show coming up, and coming up fast. One in which promising students like myself could sell select pieces of artwork to mitigate the cost of tuition. Or housing. Or driving expenses.

BZZZT!

My phone crawled almost an inch across my desk on its vibrate setting, which was apparently set to ‘overly aggressive’. I chased it down and picked it up, only to be surprised with a group text from the guys.

All of the guys.

My heart lurched. At the same time, my stomach dropped into my feet.

Ari, we need to talk.

I hadn't heard from them all week, and now this? It was a bad text for sure. Maybe even the king of all bad texts. Especially since it came from all three of them.

I spent a full minute just staring at it before writing them back:

A good talk? Or a bad talk?

I already knew the answer, but I had to ask.

**Neither, really.
But there are a few things
we need to go over.**

Well fuck, I thought to myself. If it were something good they would've said so, which meant there had to be something seriously wrong. And if all three of them needed to see me, then that could only mean...

Don't even say it.

I sank into the nearest of my shitty kitchen chairs without even looking. Hell, I almost missed it.

Come by. We're all at the loft.

They couldn't possibly know! Could they? And if they did, who would've said anything? Nothing made sense as I typed out a response:

I don't know. It sure sounds bad.

It all made sense now; the lack of communication, the non-visits... the entire week of being pretty much ignored. They'd found out. They *knew*.

I felt suddenly very dizzy.

Trust us. This isn't as bad as you think.

Relief washed over me as I read the words; a least a little bit, anyway. As I hammered out a response, I was becoming more intrigued than nervous.

Fine. But there'd better be wine.

Slowly, I forced myself to calm down. The best defense was a good offense, and if this was what I *thought* it was, I planned on going on the offensive. Especially since I hadn't done anything even remotely wrong.

Emboldened by my innocence, I added one more message before reaching for my keys.

**And there'd better be more
than one bottle, too.**

ARIANA

I'd had the chance for a fresh start when my parents first moved to California. They offered me a free room; a place to stay and save money. The opportunity to begin an all new life, in a place where opportunity was apparently everywhere.

And yet here I still was in Seattle, quite *literally* living in the past.

I made a thousand excuses not to go. I liked my job too much, and I was good at it. More likely I was just too comfortable, but in my eyes that comfort was a bonus too.

There was school to consider as well, and that was a slightly bigger one. The Gage Academy was an amazing art institution, and I enjoyed it very much. But I'd be lying to myself if I said there wasn't an equal, if not greater, opportunity down in the San Bernardino valley.

I hadn't stayed because I loved the neighborhood, even though I had. And I hadn't stayed simply because I couldn't bear to leave my childhood home, even though I'd never lived anywhere else.

No, I'd stayed in Seattle for a single, solitary reason. Which, in actuality, were three very distinct reasons:

The boys.

Tyler, Axel, Zane. These three men were everything to me. They were my friends, my confidants, my teammates in

life. They'd shared my successes, picked me up from my failures. I'd been their coach, their cheerleader, their number-one fan. I'd screamed them on, through the dozen or more hockey teams they'd played with. And I'd been there to nurse their wounds when they lost, in every single aspect of their lives.

They were my best friends, yes. But now they were my lovers, too. I'd given myself to them; taken each of them on, in the most intimate of all possible ways. And perhaps only now, with our friendships finally at stake, was I realizing that I'd gone too far.

Shit.

All of these things joined a maelstrom of other random thoughts, screaming through my tired brain. They became background noise as I stepped from my Uber, thanked the driver, and pushed them to the rear of my mind.

The loft had always been a fun, cozy place for me. Right now it looked menacing against the evening sky, maybe because there was a chance it might be my last time climbing these stairs.

Oh don't be so dramatic.

I was an eternal optimist at heart, which meant doom and gloom had never been my thing. But these were my most cherished friendships hanging in the balance. To lose them now, right when I needed them most, would hit hard enough to change me forever.

“Hey, Ari.”

Axel ushered me inside, licking something that looked like icing from his fingers. He wore his usual smile and his usual dress; a tightly-fitted muscle shirt that hugged his incredible body, right down to his loose-fitting, string-tie sweat shorts.

I entered the loft to the unmistakable smell of cake, or cookies, or something equally incredible that came straight out of the oven. Working the coffee shop, I was usually immune to

such heavenly scents. Right now though, they made my stomach growl hungrily.

“Thanks for coming.”

Tyler kissed me on the cheek — the cheek, for fuck’s sake — as he swept in and took my coat. Zane nodded and smiled from the other side of the kitchen counter. I noticed he was popping something that looked like the letter ‘M’ out of a cake pan.

“What the hell *is* that?” I asked, licking my lips.

“Baker’s edge brownie pan,” he shot back. He held it up to show me the design. “It bakes edges only, with no middle. Nothing but chewy, chocolatey goodness.”

I was half-astonished, half turned-on. Reaching out, I went to grab one, but he slapped my wrist.

“They’re not ready yet — still too hot. Besides, we have to talk first.”

I frowned. “Talk first, eat later, huh?”

The guys nodded in unison. All my life I knew them to be a team, but right now I felt a little ganged up on.

“Alright,” I conceded, leaning back against the counter. “Let’s hear it, then.”

Tyler took my hand and led me into the living area, and the others followed. I could hear soft music playing from distant speakers; some woman singing in a haunting but beautiful voice. Concrete Blonde, maybe. Or Nina Simone.

What the—

There were scented candles lit also — two of them, in fact — filling the air with the warm fragrance of pumpkin and spice. I recognized them as candles I’d brought over to the loft last autumn.

“Okay, what the hell’s going on?”

“With what?” asked Axel.

“The music. The candles. You’re baking *brownies*...”

“What?” Tyler demanded. “We can’t invite you over and do something nice for you?”

My gaze shifted suspiciously to each of them. “You invited me over to talk, remember?”

“And we are talking,” Axel pointed out.

I sighed. “Yeah, but we were supposed to talk about...”

“What?” Zane asked abruptly.

He handed me a generously-poured glass of wine. The timing was perfect, because I was about to say something foolish.

Instead I sat down in my usual spot and took a long, wonderful sip. I recognized it immediately as my favorite Merlot. They really *had* gone all out. Maybe this wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.

Or maybe they don’t know at all, I thought to myself. Maybe they haven’t figured out—

“So as you already suspect, we *know*,” said Tyler, matter-of-factly.

I’d expected it, but of course I wasn’t prepared. There was no way I could be. I felt like I was sinking into the couch.

“Know what?” I tried, feebly.

They all dropped into their spots now, the couch cushions hissing beneath their weight. They did it coolly, casually. Like this was any other night, and not the night they all found out I’d been having sex with all of them.

“Fine,” I conceded. “I guess you got me.”

I tilted my glass back and took an extraordinarily long sip, observing each of them over the silky, burgundy liquid. They didn’t seem mad. They weren’t gloating in triumph at having found out, either.

“So who ended up spilling the beans?” I asked coyly. I genuinely wanted to know.

“That... would be me,” replied Axel, after a few uncomfortable seconds of silence. He stared down at the floor. “I— I guess I just felt guilty, not telling the others.”

“Well you shouldn’t have,” I told him, curling my mouth in amusement. “After all, I slept with you last.”

Axel looked up at me hopefully now, with those blazing blue eyes. My smile widened.

“These other two didn’t feel guilty enough to tell you, did they?”

He glanced left and right. “No,” he replied. “They didn’t.”

“Then why feel guilty at all?” I shrugged. “I sure don’t.”

My words seemed to land unexpectedly among them. Maybe they expected me to be more defensive, or more apologetic, and that simply wasn’t going to happen. Instead, I slid a pillow behind my back to get even more comfortable, then crossed my ankles over the arm of the couch.

“Look, this wasn’t something I planned,” I said plainly, waving my wine glass around. “It’s not like I pursued any of you or anything. It just sort of... happened.”

“Happened?” snorted Tyler.

“Yes.”

“With *one* of us, maybe,” he went on. “But all three of us? A hat trick?”

“*Hat trick?*” I laughed, and rolled my eyes. “Really? The three of you are going to crack hockey jokes now?”

Off to my left came the hiss of a bottle-cap being twisted off.

“Maybe,” Zane allowed.

“Go on then,” I said, crossing my arms. “No, seriously. Go ahead, let’s hear them. Give me your best.”

The loft fell utterly silent as the boys said nothing. I laughed some more.

“No stick-handling jokes?” I smiled. “No talk about penetrating my crease?”

Axel chuckled outright. The others simply smiled.

“No one wants to take a five-minute penalty in my box?”

“Oh, I could go a *lot* longer than five minutes in there,” Zane chimed in.

“There ya go,” I egged him on. “Good. Now you’re talking.”

The tension, what little there was of it anyway, was broken. All that was left was the scent of the candles, and the sound of the music. The warmth of my wine. The rich, chocolatey smell of freshly-baked brownies...

“Look, you were the ones who suggested we go on practice dates,” I told them. “Considering how close we all are, and how much physical attraction we’ve historically admitted to... well, I guess we were all pushing the envelope. Playing with fire.”

Tyler considered my words. He nodded slowly. “That might be true,” he admitted. “But you and Zane...”

My gaze shifted to the gorgeous Italian hunk on my left. He was leaning back wordlessly, sipping a beer.

“Zane and I hooked up at our loneliest,” I explained, “after you’d both gone away. We were missing the hell out of you guys. We only had each other.”

“When we found out he’d taken your V-card, we beat the shit out of him,” said Axel.

I sat up a little. “You did not!”

“No,” Tyler admitted. “But we sure as fuck wanted to.”

“But why?” I asked.

“What do you mean why? Isn’t it obviou—”

“Would you rather I lost my virginity to someone else?” I demanded of them. “Someone clumsy or careless who I didn’t even like? Someone who didn’t respect me? Maybe a perfect stranger, or someone like Garth?”

The guys didn’t move, or speak, or say anything else. The candles flickered. The song changed.

“Isn’t it better I had that experience with someone I know and love?”

Love. The word was so heavy, so full of meaning. And yet we all knew it fit.

“The three of you made a hands-off agreement, right? A pact not to pursue me. And you were all okay with it.”

I paused, setting my feet on the floor. One by one they looked my way.

“But did you ever stop to wonder what it was like for *me*?”

With that I got up, drained the rest of my wine, and headed into the kitchen for more. I was tempted to bring the bottle back, but settled for another half glass.

“There were times when I wanted you, you know,” I said, making sure my gaze flitted to each of them in turn. “Times when I imagined being with you, or telling you, or just... I dunno, just going for it.”

“So why didn’t you?” asked Tyler.

“Because there are three of you!” I practically shouted. “Imagine having three hot guys as friends, and you’re overwhelmingly attracted to *all* of them! And they’re bonded like brothers. Bound by a loyalty that other people could only ever dream about having.”

I stood over them now, exasperated, my face flush from the wine. Frustrated that someone like me, who’d never even had siblings for fuck’s sake, could somehow understand these connections better than they could.

“Think I’d ever risk coming between that?” I went on. “Hell no! And so I could never even dream of—“

And with that, everything I was about to say became null and void; forgotten entirely in the wake of three men shooting up from their seats, all at once...

And *kissing* me.

ARIANA

I floated through a sea of rock-hard arms, being passed from body to body, chest to chest. And through it all, the kissing; so dreamy and beautiful and swelteringly hot... soft lips and thrusting tongues, stealing the very breath from my lungs as they traded me off between them.

There was nothing to do, nothing to fight. I don't think I could've resisted even if I'd wanted to, which of course I didn't. And so in the absence of all rational thought I kissed them back, letting my mind spin into blissful oblivion. Giving myself fully and completely to the sheer debauchery of this sinful act, while wondering distantly if it were even sinful at all.

Strong hands pressed themselves into the small of my back. Calloused fingers caressed the surface of my skin, in ways so gentle and graceful they could only be attached to lovers who knew me so well.

I don't know how many times my lips were traded between them, I only knew when it finally stopped. I was left standing in the midst of their little circle, all dizzy and breathless. My legs were jelly. My mind, still reeling from the fires of remembrance.

"You just said you couldn't possibly choose between us," breathed Tyler.

Breaking the trance, I swallowed and shook my head.
“No. Never.”

“We called you here tonight to tell you: you don’t have to choose.”

I stared at them all, one by one, wholly confused. Searching for an answer.

“You don’t have to choose, because we have a proposition for you.”

They weren’t making any sense! I needed more of my wine, but the stem of the glass was no longer between my fingers. In the warm maelstrom of kissing and touching, someone had taken it.

“W—What do you mean?”

“Well, we already know Zane’s not giving up what the two of you have had all these years,” said Tyler.

In affirmation, Zane shook his head. For the next sentence Tyler leaned in, bringing his lips against my ear.

“And now that Axel and I have had a taste,” he murmured, “we’re sure as hell not going back either.”

Not going back.

I was trembling. Breathless. Wet. My brain had stopped working fifty kisses ago.

Back where? To what?

“We’ve always *had* this between us Ari,” I heard Axel say. “The four of us. We’re always together, never apart. Even the short time the two of us were away at school, we couldn’t wait to come back.”

I was still faint, but my senses were slowly coming back. I could feel the heat of them now. The reassuring presence of their bodies surrounding me, supporting me.

“Our lives have never been separate,” Axel finished. “It’s almost like... like...”

“Like we’re in a relationship already,” Zane finished for him.

A hand slid up my leg, to rest on my hip. The touch was electric. It made me gasp, especially not knowing whose it was.

But the hot mouth that closed over my neck sent me into a whole different world.

Oh my GOD...

Their circle closed, and a pair of arms slid around me from behind. Tyler was chewing my shoulder. Axel was nuzzling my ear. Zane was cradling my face, kissing me again, as I stared into the ice-blue fire that burned in his eyes.

“This whole thing can go back to being platonic, if that’s what you want,” he breathed. “We’d respect that decision. Even if we—“

“No...” I whispered quickly, shaking my head. To my shock and surprise, I didn’t even have to think about it. “Not a chance.”

Zane’s handsome face broke into a grin. His lips brushed mine, all hot and wet, as one hand slid familiarly between my legs.

Ohhhhhh...

With the other, he pulled his shirt smoothly over his head, then dropped it to the floor. The others did the same.

Holy fuck, this is happening, I thought to myself distantly.

Six powerful hands began roaming my body. They moved freely and without limits, touching me everywhere like they already owned it.

Which I knew in my heart they did.

This is really happening...

Together they peeled my clothes off, piece by piece, until I was gloriously and spectacularly naked before them. And then they closed on me, kissing me everywhere. Slowly

dragging their lips, tongues, and fingertips, over places I'd always secretly wanted them to.

I was only dimly aware of the short jerk of Axel's head, as he indicated the nearest bed. Strong arms lifted me, carrying me away. Bringing all four of us to the one place we hadn't been yet in our whole closed little world.

The place where they would make me *theirs*.

ARIANA

It was beyond incredible, fucking them all at once. Being pinned between three gorgeous men I loved and adored; their long, beautiful cocks gliding in and out of my body from both ends.

They traded places often, and usually just before I was about to come. At first I thought maybe they were teasing me. More likely though, as I could see by the looks of drunken lust in their eyes, the thrill of sharing me was so great that they were each stopping short of their own release.

I'd always had fantasies of being taken like this, of course. Was there a girl on the planet who hadn't? But now here I was, living out every wild, wicked dream of being double-penetrated I'd ever had. And not just taking on two guys at once, but actually three. And not just doing it with any random men, but taking on my very best friends.

That part made it all the more filthy and taboo, I think. These men had been like brothers to me, only right now they most certainly weren't. They'd been hot and off limits; men who looked so physically fucking amazing, I'd inwardly wanted to eat them alive throughout our friendship. Every twisted fantasy I'd ever had of screwing or being dominated by them had been so butterfly-inducingly forbidden I'd had to tuck it away, pretending it didn't exist, in the face of our ever-platonic friendship.

And now that platonic barrier had been shattered to splinters, and those pent-up fantasies were rushing out of me all at once. Our friendship was still there of course, but it was no longer an obstacle. The long years of closeness and connection were ever-present through this wonderful, beautiful act, which made it all the more meaningful as they plundered me together, as a team, as they'd always done everything else.

“Turn her over.”

Strong hands manipulated my body before I could even react, flipping me onto my stomach with a strangled gasp. And that was the hottest part, really: the letting go of control. The total surrender of giving my body over to whatever they wanted to do to me, combined with the complete and utter trust that made it so exquisitely good.

Two strong hands settled into the curve of my hips, pressing me into the bed as Axel entered me from behind. He grabbed my ass firmly, enjoying the feel as he pumped me slowly in and out. In time he drilled me harder and deeper as I whimpered around Zane, who was holding me gently by the chin... as he fucked my face.

Oh my God...

I was wetter than I'd ever been. Drenched to the point it was dripping down my thighs. Each time they changed places it made me even hotter, especially when I'd close my eyes to live in the moment, and lose track of who was where.

This is unreal.

I still couldn't believe it. Not even now, as I rocked forward and back, trying to develop a perfect rhythm that would allowed me to take one lover deep in my throat, while the other pushed into me at the same time.

“Relax,” I heard Zane say. “Stay still and let us work the rest out.”

I did as I was told, and things got instantly easier. Rather than three people trying to coordinate movements, there were only two. Zane and Axel worked in tandem, spitroasting me hotly between their surging bodies. Each time

they bottomed out I was wracked with all new shudders of excitement, as the warmth of an impending orgasm began gathering in my belly.

I honestly thought they'd be mad. I figured Tyler would be jealous of what I had with Zane, and Axel would be disappointed in me with having left him out. Apparently though, they were okay with sharing me. And I figured maybe that was because, throughout their lives, these particular three men had shared just about everything else.

Axel withdrew and Tyler moved in to take his place. He lifted one of my legs and straddled it, scissoring into me sideways so he could lower his mouth over one exposed breast. The feeling of his tongue wetly circling my nipple was driving me absolutely crazy. But it was staring up into their eyes — while both of them were fucking me at once — that really drove home the sheer sexual insanity of what we were doing.

This is amazing.

Tyler wasn't just screwing me, he was grinding now too. And Zane was holding himself by the root, pushing and pulling the entire length of his manhood through different parts of my willing, hungry mouth.

"She loves this," he growled, in a voice that sounded so very much unlike his own. "Look at her."

Axel wasn't just watching now, he was touching me everywhere, feeling me up. And Tyler had begun rolling his hips in a slow circle at the end of every thrust. I'd never felt hotter for anyone; never felt so utterly lost in my own sexual delirium. Somehow I held it together. Somehow I staved off my climax long enough to play it up for them, batting my eyelashes, sticking my tongue out obscenely, so Zane could slap the head against it when he was smearing his sticky pre-come all over my lips.

Why? I thought wildly. *Why haven't we done this until now?*

Just thinking about it made me frustrated — angry at all the wasted time! We could've been fucking right from the start, the four of us pleasuring each other for years, now. I thought of all the trips we'd taken together, where they could've traded off and taken turns on me. All the movie nights we could've screwed the couch apart. I thought of all the holidays we missed, all the birthdays I could've met each of them at the door in my sluttiest lingerie, to both literally and figuratively blow their minds.

For years I'd shielded them from my raunchier side, out of fear of what they might think of me. And now here they were, pushing into me from every angle. Tapping each other impatiently on the shoulder when it was time to trade places, so each of them could have equal time buried deeply between my outstretched thighs.

Finally I came, exploding around Tyler while shoving my tongue down his throat, whimpering and moaning and grinding him deep. It made me so hot to think about how much I loved him. And even hotter to be looking deep into his eyes as, just as abruptly, Zane pulled my mouth back over the head of his own glistening manhood.

In the end they rolled me fully onto my back, screwing me missionary, thighs spread wide, as I lolled my head left and right. With two men kneeling on either side of my head, I alternated between stroking one and blowing the other... as whoever was between my legs at the time kept pumping away.

There were no more barriers, no more limits. I didn't care how I looked, or how things seemed, or what tomorrow might be like after this whole crazy thing was over. All I wanted was to take them, one by one, and to give myself back. To consummate this one last, forbidden part of friendship in the most equal way possible, by giving all three of my boys exactly the same amounts of love and attention.

It was Zane who came first. He pulled himself from my churning, grinding entrance mid-thrust and spilled himself all over my chest and stomach. The raw heat of his heavy load shocked me; it rained down in long, thick ropes all over my smooth, quivering skin. Tyler went next, desperate to come.

The act of watching his friend shoot all over me must've pushed him over the edge, because after fucking me only ten or twelve strokes he was doing the same.

By the time Axel plunged back into me I was splattered and drenched, covered in Zane and Tyler's warm, wonderful seed. But Axel shot even further than the others. He pulled out at the last second and stroked himself to completion, erupting all over my face, my neck, my chin... as well as adding to the hot mess splattered across my breasts and stomach.

And at long last there we were: four lifelong friends heaving through our shared, post-orgasmic bliss. My sperm-dappled chest rose and fell with every breath. My stomach quivered as their combined loads pooled against my sweaty skin. I felt gloriously used. Deliciously dirty, and filthy, and sated. The feelings motivated me to drag a slow finger through their combined handiwork, while the three of them looked on, transfixed.

"You *can* come in my pussy you know," I chuckled. "I'm on birth control."

The guys just knelt there catching their breath, too busy staring at my glistening body to respond.

"Not to mention all three of you have already done so."

Their eyes shifted, glancing to one another. They each looked slightly guilty, which made me laugh.

"Oh, you boys and your competitive spirit," I finally sighed, shaking my head as I stared down at my come-drenched body. With all three of them still watching my finger, I licked it clean and winked.

"Not that I'm complaining, of course."

ARIANA

“These waffles are soggy. You screwed up the batter again.”

Zane pointed his fork at Axel, who promptly flipped him off. I was helping myself to bacon. Tyler was pouring me a steaming mug of coffee, although I really had no intention of drinking it.

“She’s not going to drink that,” Zane laughed, reading my mind.

Tyler looked wounded. “Why not? It’s Colombian.”

“It’s mud, and she knows it.”

Tyler finished pouring and sniffed the coffee pot. He shrugged.

“It’s not your coffee, it’s your coffee maker,” I chuckled, pushing my fork through a piece of scrambled egg. I added some bacon on top before popping it in my mouth.

“When’s the last time you de-scaled it?”

All three of them looked confused and adorable. Not to mention hot as hell, sitting around the little kitchen in their boxer-briefs with their shirts off.

“Look, why don’t you boys follow me to Java Queen?” I said, with all the casualness of not having spent the previous night screwing them until I passed out. “I’ll make you a real cup of coffee to start the day.”

Zane was the only one who looked hopeful. Both Axel and Tyler were shaking their heads.

“Can’t,” said Axel. He glanced up at a cheap plastic wall clock. “If I’m not at the lumberyard in the next thirty-eight minutes, Rocky’s going to kick my ass.”

“Same deal, different job,” Tyler lamented. He nodded toward Zane. “But you guys should go.”

They went back to eating, and I went back to examining them for any indication that *anything* in our friendship had changed. Miraculously, it hadn’t. This breakfast was no different than any of the dozens of other breakfasts we’d had together. The only difference is I’d woken up naked in bed with them, rather than fully-clothed on their couch.

“We need to talk about something before you go,” Tyler finally spoke up. “If that’s okay.”

All three of them had been eating voraciously, like someone was coming to take the food away if they stopped. But at Tyler’s statement, their movements slowed.

“Alright,” I said, patting my mouth with a paper napkin. “Shoot.”

My choice of words elicited a round of instant smirks. I rolled my eyes.

“Holy shit, it’s going to be all innuendo and sex jokes from now on, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Axel agreed, still grinning. “It sure is.”

“Get used to it,” Zane nodded.

“Anyway...” Tyler butted in, eager to get back on track. “We never got around to... talking last night.”

I chuckled as I spread butter on my toast. “Talking.”

“Yeah.”

“But I thought we did that,” I said. “I figured we, you know, straightened everything out?”

“We did,” said Tyler. “But remember, there was a reason we asked you over.”

“*Two* reasons,” Zane added slyly.

I thought for a moment, then nodded. “Ah. Your proposition.”

“Exactly.”

I’d thought they’d invited me over to clear the air; to let me know the cat was out of the proverbial bag, and there were no more secrets between any of us. The fact that we’d all fallen into bed together seemed secondary. Legendary, of course. Inevitable, maybe. But the main reason—

“We want you to be our girlfriend.”

I literally dropped the butter knife. It clanged loudly against the plate and then flipped onto the floor.

But not one pair of eyes followed it.

“Your *girlfriend*,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

I was confused. Maybe they meant in the way of sex. They *had* to mean in the way of sex.

“I suppose I was your girlfriend last night,” I said slowly. Now that we were talking about it instead of ignoring it, the butterflies were back again. “But right now, everything’s back to—“

“No, not like that,” Zane interjected. “This isn’t about *just* last night.”

I stared at them for a long moment and blinked.

“You want to do it again,” I stated flatly.

“No,” Axel protested quickly. Frowning adorably, he corrected himself. “I mean, yes, of course we do. And we will...”

Thank God, a little voice in the back of my head breathed.

“But no, not in the way you’re thinking,” he continued. “We were thinking more like...”

“You’re thinking we should be friends with benefits,” I guessed. “That if we were all open about it, and if we kept things cool enough, we could do stuff like last night from time to time.”

I felt my face flush red. I didn’t want to blush, but I couldn’t help it.

“No, not like friends with benefits at all,” said Tyler. “This isn’t about sex.”

“Not *just* sex, anyway,” Zane corrected.

“No, this about you being our *girl*.”

Absently I ran one hand through my sex-tangled mop of hair. I still didn’t get it.

“But I *am* your girl,” I said, letting out a broken laugh. “I’ve always been your girl. You guys say it all the time.”

“You are,” said Tyler. “But hear us out.”

He shifted his chair a little closer, and took my hand. The look in his eyes was serious, betraying the roguish smile on his handsome face.

“We’ve already had Ariana the friend, Ariana the neighbor, Ariana the cuddle-buddy,” said Tyler.

“Ariana the absolute bad-ass,” added Axel with a wink. “Down on the ice, when the puck-bunnies get out of control.”

“We’ve had Ariana who makes us laugh,” said Zane. “Ariana who makes us crazy...”

“Ariana who burns the popcorn on movie night,” Axel jumped in.

“Burns the popcorn!” I said defensively. “That wasn’t me, it was—“

“Our point is, we’ve already discussed this,” said Tyler, cutting me off. “All three of us. In depth.”

He squeezed my hand, forcing me to look at him. The others nodded.

“But what we want more than anything else, is the one thing we’ve always been missing.”

I tried to swallow past the knot in my throat. “A—And what’s that?”

“Ariana the *girlfriend*.”

Girlfriend. There was that word again. It didn’t fit. It still didn’t make sense.

Unless—

“We already know you love us,” said Axel. “You’ve always taken care of us. Through anything. Through everything.”

He paused, appearing to be waiting on some sort of affirmation. I nodded slowly.

“I... I do,” I stammered softly. “Of *course* I love you.”

“And you have to know that we love you,” Tyler continued. “With every ounce of all three of our hearts.”

Girlfriend.

Visions flashed through my brain. In those brief moments I saw everything we’d ever done together; school, work, play — all of it. I saw every laugh we’d ever had. Every in-depth conversation we’d ever been involved in, from our funniest talks to the most heartfelt.

GIRLFRIEND.

My stomach did a triple somersault.

“You’re being serious,” I challenged them gently. “You actually want to date me.”

“Yes,” said Axel.

“*All* of you.”

“Yes,” said Zane.

“The three of you together. At once. Like... like last night.”

“Exactly like last night,” said Tyler. “Only that’ll be every night. And every day. Not just the sex, but the love. The respect. The support. The taking care of each other, like we have always have.”

“And of course the friendship,” added Axel. “That’s something that would never change. But yeah. Now we want everything else.”

My head was spinning. I tried shaking it clear.

“You just broke up with Lexus,” I prodded Tyler. “You’re ready for another girlfriend?”

“Lexus and I were never going to work out,” he shrugged. “I think I always knew it, I just wouldn’t admit it to myself.”

“We *all* knew it,” smirked Zane.

“Besides, the whole time we were dating, I was comparing her to you,” Tyler confessed. “I *wished* she could be you, Ari. I’ve loved you since childhood.”

“Same here,” said Axel. “You know how many times I’ve wanted to take you out on a *date* date?”

My mind was blown. I had no idea. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” Axel chuckled. “But I never knew how you felt, and I didn’t want to screw up the friendship. And of course, I also knew these two would probably kick my ass.”

“Probably?” swore Tyler.

“I didn’t try to date you for a lot of the same reasons,” said Zane. “Maybe our attraction seemed purely sexual, but it wasn’t that way for me. Whenever we got together I kicked myself for not pushing for more. I caught feelings each time.” He shook his head bitterly. “It hurt to even look at you, afterward.”

My mouth dropped open. “And that’s why you always disappeared?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn’t you—“

“Because I couldn’t!” Zane swore. “What would I tell the others?”

“I... I...”

“Being with you was amazing, but it sucked knowing I couldn’t *have* you,” he finished. “Not in the way I truly wanted.”

I sat there stunned, unable to speak, not even reacting as they began cleaning up breakfast. It was obvious they’d had this conversation already. They’d talked about it before. They knew what they wanted.

And what they wanted, apparently, was me.

HOLY.

SHIT.

I was flattered, frightened, confused. Terrified out of my wits, yet insanely turned on beyond anything I’d felt before.

“Look, we’re probably not selling this right,” said Zane, “so let me make it totally clear. We’ve had girlfriends, all three of us, and none of them have really worked out. And the reason for that is probably because of *you*.”

“Me...” I repeated, numb.

“That’s right,” said Tyler. “Nobody could live up to you. Ever.”

“And because of that,” Zane went on, “the only woman we’re going to be happy with is the one we already love.”

They were serious. Holy shit they were actually serious.

So yeah, you’re going to have to date us,” Axel finished. “All three of us. And in turn, we’re going to solve your going-through-boyfriends problem by giving you the only three men in the world who’ll never let you down. Us.”

I was overwhelmed, mentally and emotionally. Physically I'd never needed coffee more in my life.

All three of us.

Axel and Zane left the room together, but not before giving me a kiss me goodbye. These weren't our traditional kisses on the cheek, or quick pecks on the lips. They were soft and slow, even a little bit sensual. These were *girlfriend* kisses. Open-ended, and full of promise.

Even lost in limbo, I kissed them back.

"Look, we know this a lot to process," said Tyler when we were finally alone. "So take some time to think about this whole thing." His hazel eyes glinted in the cold, morning sunlight. "But yeah, Ari, we've decided we want it all. Every last amazing bit of you."

Cradling my face, he leaned in and kissed me like the lovers we now were. It didn't feel strange in the slightest. Actually, it felt totally perfect.

"And if you'll let us," he winked, spinning away as he took my plate. "We're going to make you a very, *very* happy girl."

ZANE

She looked a little older, a little sadder each time I came around. Her hair used to be coal-black, streaked with gray. Now it was mostly gray, streaked with wisps of black.

“Happy birthday, mom.”

My mother smiled wanly through her thin, bloodless lips. I could barely remember a time when her mouth wasn't downturned, but there definitely had been one. It seemed very long ago, though.

“Thanks, honey.”

Long ago when my father was still alive.

“Help me open it?”

Ariana was already at her side, smiling happily as she plucked the corners of the wrapping paper with her nimble fingers. Together they pulled it open. The whole ordeal seemed pointless, considering we'd only wrapped it fifteen minutes ago.

“What is it?” my mother blinked.

Ariana and I looked at each other for a concerned few moments.

“It's a window-planter,” Ari told her cheerfully. “And a whole set of new gardening tools.”

My mother's manufactured smile widened a little more. Her excitement was perfunctory.

"Oh, how nice!"

"This comes with the promise that we'll clear the backyard," I added, "once the weather gets warmer."

Ariana nodded. "We'll clear a path to your shed again, come spring. You can plant seeds again. Grow all your pretty flowers, like you used to."

My mother nodded mechanically, but it was clear she'd already lost interest. I watched as she set the box down at the side of her chair, and folded her hands back in her lap.

"The TV's broken," she said, matter-of-factly.

I followed her gaze. The new flat screen I'd bought for her last year sat squarely in front of her, a thin layer of dust resting across the narrow edge at the top. The new technology looked wholly out of place against the dated backdrop of the rest of the house.

"It's not broken ma," I told her. "You keep trying to use the old remote."

I plucked the ancient cable remote from her hand.

"This is a smart TV, remember? Everything's updated. You can use the new TV remote over there," I pointed, "but we downloaded the remote app on your phone, so you can—"

"Did you know the kitchen smells?"

Ariana and I exchanged another look. It wasn't a good one.

"What does it smell like?" she asked.

"Like... like... sour."

"Did something go bad?"

My mother shook her head. "No. No, I throw everything out. Everything. All of the time."

That part was true. Most of my mother's idiosyncrasies were getting worse with old age, but none were as bad as her

wastefulness. She'd been known to take the first spoon of peanut-butter from a fresh jar to make a sandwich, then throw away the rest of it. We'd tried buying single-serving packages, but she wouldn't have them.

"No, it smells like sweat," she went on. "Or like your hockey bag, when you always used to leave it open in the back of the car. Do you remember that smell?"

I walked into the kitchen just to placate her, but it turned out she was right. The dank, musty smell washed over me instantly like a punch to the face. I looked up... and my heart sank.

"Ariana?"

"Yes?"

"Could you come in here a minute?"

She patted my mother's hand — the one gesture she actually seemed to appreciate — then ducked through the archway and into the kitchen. I pointed, and her mouth dropped

"Holy shit, Zane."

I couldn't believe it. There was a damp spot on the ceiling about four-feet wide, bowed out a few inches with water. It looked like the ceiling was pregnant. All around the 'belly,' a dark, sinister-looking mold was spreading outward.

"Ma!" I cried, loud enough to be heard from the other room. "How long's the ceiling been like this?"

My mother took a few long seconds to answer. "The ceiling?"

"Yeah. Did you not *see* this?"

Again, no answer. At the sound of the television turning on, I put my hands on my hips and let out a long, hopeless sigh.

"Well at least she figured that one out," Ariana said, trying to look on the bright side.

But there was no bright side. There was only the leaking roof, the sagging ceiling, and the peeling yellow wallpaper that my father had put up the weekend of my sister's Holy Communion. Their once-cherished silver spoon collection hung crookedly in its wooden case, forever half-full. With each spoon representing a place my parents had visited together, the empty half represented all the adventures they hadn't had. I only saw the places they'd been robbed of, with my father's sudden passing.

Select parts of the house reminded me of happier times, mostly involving my older siblings on the few occasions they'd had the patience to include me in their fun. But in general, I only saw the sad, empty mess of the childhood home I'd grown up in. A home which was falling down around my mother's shoulders, whether she noticed it or not.

“So, can we fix it?”

Ariana's pretty chin was still turned toward the ruined ceiling. Her use of the word 'we' made me love her just a little bit more, if that were possible.

“Yeah. I'll get Tyler over here one night next week. We need to cut this whole piece out and replace it, but first we need to find and fix the leak.”

Even that was the tip of a much bigger iceberg, I knew. In all likelihood the entire roof would need to be ripped down to the plywood, then patched and re-shingled. The gutters were filled with acorns, because the trees encroaching on the house hadn't been trimmed in decades. The original windows were shot. The entire house was cold and drafty.

And these were just the things I could think of off the top of my head.

“What's she doing now?” I nodded toward the living room.

Ariana peeked. “She's watching TV.”

“Alright. Come with me.”

We walked into the hallway, passing the table where we'd left my mother's birthday cake still in the white bakery box. She'd refuse it politely as she always did, and promise to eat a slice of it later. Either way, the whole cake would end up in the garbage by the time she went to bed.

"Wanna look at the roof now?" Ariana asked. "While we're here?"

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"Because she threw out all my father's tools," I muttered. "The ladder included."

I wanted to tell her it was all for nothing, that no matter how many things we fixed, the repairs on the house would never end. My mother would never appreciate them, either. She'd been walking around a dirty, leaky kitchen without complaint, probably because her mind never registered there was anything wrong.

I wanted to tell Ari that my mother would never garden again. That no matter how beautiful we made the yard look come spring, she'd barely go outside. We could clean and repaint her planting shed, and show up with seeds and soil. She'd only smile and tell us how 'nice' everything was, then walk straight back inside without another word.

"Look at you," Ariana snickered, pointing to one of the photos that lined the walls. "You were the chubbiest little baby in the world."

I glanced up at the family photo. In it, my parents looked bright and happy — like entirely different people. My four siblings were all ten to eighteen years older than me. My sister held me in her arms, looking like some proud, teenage mother holding a toddler.

I was the accident. The "whoopsie." My parents thought they were done having children, but suddenly there I was, kicking and screaming, destroying whatever chances they had of an early parental release. By the time I was in the fourth grade my siblings had moved out, and it was like growing up

alone. My father had passed a few years earlier. Even now, the memories I had of him were fading, though I fought hard to keep them. One by one I could feel them slipping away, making him more of a stranger with each passing year.

Damn.

Looking at him in photos like this hurt my heart. But the guilt from not looking was even worse.

Ariana stepped past, grabbed my hand, and led me into my childhood bedroom. My old comforter was still stretched over the bed. The walls were lined with hockey sticks and pads, the shelves pregnant with all the medals and trophies I hadn't taken with me.

“You mom loves the shit out of you, you know that right?” said Ari. “You're her favorite.”

“And how do you figure that?”

“Because she hasn't thrown any of this out yet,” she explained, gesturing to the organized mess. “This is one place in the whole house that's still cluttered.”

She was right, of course. I'd inherited my oldest brother Andrew's room when he took off for Ohio State, but the rooms my other siblings had grown up in were now empty.

“You also got a whole room to yourself,” Ariana pointed out. “Your brothers and sisters had to share bedrooms. But you were the favorite.”

“I was last. That's the difference.”

She flopped onto the bed with a sigh, staring up at the ceiling as she folded her hands across her belly. There were still tape-marks there from a Wayne Gretzky poster I'd put up a hundred years ago.

“Remember all the fun we used to have in here?” Ariana lamented.

For the first time all day I actually smiled. “Not as much as we *could've* had.”

She rolled onto her side and returned my grin. “True enough. But damn, this place was our high-school hangout. I remember all the times the four of us sat here talking after school, after games, all night long. And your mom used to love feeding us. She’d cook her ass off all night, complaining about it the whole time. But she loved that we were here.”

“She did,” I agreed solemnly. “Even during those times Axel would eat us out of house and home.”

“Which was most of the time,” Ariana pointed out.

We laughed together, and somehow the laughter made everything better. I tried not to look at the peeling paint, or the broken door, or the cracks near the ceiling where the house had settled so much it actually left a half-inch gap.

Ari sat up and pulled me down onto the bed beside her. Sliding a slender arm up my back, she began playing with the hair at the nape of my neck.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

I nodded. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

“Because I know how hard it is, chasing ghosts around the house you grew up in.”

Although I didn’t actually live here anymore, what she said made a lot of sense. Especially coming from her.

“I’m not worried about the ghosts,” I sighed, jerking a thumb. “I’m worried about her.”

Ariana nodded. “Mom will be okay. After all, she has you.”

“Yeah, but she should have *all* of us,” I grumbled, growing frustrated and angry. “Jackson calls once a week, but he’s all the way on Long Island. Andrew hardly calls at all, and he’s even closer.”

I thought about my sisters, too. Both had married boyfriends they’d met in college and settled down clear on the other side of the country. Annie was a teacher down in Savannah, who visited once a year, tops. Lillian was a lawyer in Connecticut, and while she sometimes sent money to help

with the bills, she never wanted anything to do with the logistics of taking care of mom.

None of this would matter if I could just convince my mother to move in with her sister. My aunt Janet had been begging her to come down to Florida for years now, but my mother never wanted to leave. She and my father had gotten married, raised children, and built a life in this house. Abandoning it now would be like ‘leaving a piece of him behind,’ as she so succinctly put it.

When I thought about it that way, it seemed a whole lot less silly. In fact, I respected her for it.

“You sure you don’t want me to call them and kick their asses for you?” Ariana asked. “Lillian hates me anyway.”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “She sure does.”

“And Jackson loves me enough to do whatever I tell him,” she went on. “In fact...”

I stood up and made my way to the closet. The object of my search was right there, on the top left shelf. When I pulled it down, Ariana gasped.

“What are you doing with *that*?”

I turned the object over in my hands a few times, then blew the dust off it. It looked every bit as beautiful as I remembered.

“Taking it out of retirement.”

“Your championship goalie mask?”

“Yup.”

We both knew that when I took this thing off a few years ago, I vowed never to put it on again. I’d shut out almost every team in the division that year, throughout the playoffs. It was a performance that could never be matched.

But for what I was about to do, I needed the luck.

“Actually, I should be asking how *you* feel,” I told Ari, turning to face her. “And not the other way around.”

“Me?”

“Yes. After what we kind of... sprung on you.”

Ariana tossed her hair, then looked up at me and smiled coyly. “Are you talking about what you boys sprung on me the other night? Or what you sprung on me the morning after?”

Damn, she looked adorable on my bed — more sexy and sensual than ever before. Thoughts of jumping her came immediately to mind, but of course that was impossible. At least for the moment.

“Anyway, I’m fine,” she said sweetly, in answer to my question. “But thanks for asking.”

I studied her expression. “We just didn’t want you to be overwhelmed.”

Ari shook her head slowly and let out a low whistle. “If I was, it was a good overwhelmed.”

“Yeah, still...”

She stood up abruptly and bounced over to me, not stopping until we were toe to toe. Her eyes gleamed as she tilted her chin upward. Her dark hair danced around her perfect face.

“It’s a lot to think about,” she admitted, her voice going low. “A lot to process. Whatever happens, I just don’t want to fuck up what we’ve always had, you know?”

Setting the goalie mask down, I slid my arms around her and crushed her gently against my chest. I’d probably hugged her like this a thousand times. It just never felt this good before. This... right.

“That’s something we could never fuck up,” I said, kissing her softly on the forehead. “Not in million years.”

AXEL

THWACK!

The slapshot slammed into the boards so hard it made a dent, one of thousands exactly like it. The puck spun away in a weird sort of slow-motion, flipping end over end. Tiny paint chips fell like snow.

Just watching the whole thing made me feel a tiny bit better.

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

Again and I again I wound back and took shots, until the last in the line of pucks were gone. Not one of them had gone into the net. But I wasn't aiming for the net.

Damn.

Nervousness. Frustration. These feelings were foreign to me. I'd led a generally charmed life, a happy existence. One that grew even happier as time went on, as I was surrounded by more friends, more fans, more people who loved and adored me.

But none as much as Ariana.

I exploded forward, launching myself down the ice as fast as my legs would take me. My knees came up, my thighs pumping hard as I soared down the right-hand boards, skated a tight 'U' behind the net, and slingshotted myself up the opposite side.

This place had always been my second home. Ever since that Saturday morning my stepfather had taken us as boys, I knew I was destined to spend the bulk of my time here. Back then, GreatSkates was still in its heyday. I was overwhelmed by the sheer awesomeness of everything that surrounded me, from the incredible food to the flashing arcade, to the laser-tag extension where I grew up zapping my stepbrothers with invisible beams of light.

Right now that extension was a pile of rubble shoved up against the side of the building, having collapsed when I was barely a teenager. Gone was the arcade, where we used to scrounge up quarters to play Street Fighter II. Likewise gone was the happy little food court, along with the rich, heady scent of popcorn and funnel cakes, having been converted into a locker room long ago.

My stepfather had paid for lessons, and those first few years with my stepbrothers were magical ones. Ryan, Jamie and I joined so many teams we barely left the ice. We'd be dropped off by my mother only to be picked up right around closing time, and each day was filled with fun, excitement, and what felt like limitless amounts of laughter.

But even that only lasted so long. My mother and stepfather eventually went their separate ways. My stepbrothers moved back east, never to return.

And I learned the hard lesson that nothing gold can stay.

As soul-crushing as the whole ordeal was, my mother was determined not to let me wallow in self-pity. She worked long hours at different jobs, always finding just enough money to keep me playing as much as before. I didn't realize her level of sacrifice until I got older, but now I remember her wearing the same clothes all the time. Buying her makeup at the dollar store. We always had just enough to scrape by, just enough to eat. And thought it all, she never stopped smiling.

THWACK!

I slapped away one of the pucks that had stopped at center ice and skidded to an abrupt halt. As the snow from my

blades finished billowing outward, an eerie silence fell over the place. I stood for a moment just leaning on my stick, soaking in the history of the ancient building. I sniffed the air, trying to conjure the familiar smells of the food court. I cocked an ear, listening for the machines from the arcade again, as they cycled through their—

“Hey, stud.”

I whirled, just in time to find someone stepping out of the darkness. I was so startled my heart skipped a beat, but now I could feel it working double time.

“Is that a stick in your hand, or are you just happy to see me?”

Ariana stepped out of the shadows and into the overhead lights. They were the only things on in the whole building.

“Holy shit, you scared the fuck out of me!”

I skated over, hopped the boards, and pulled her into a hug. She giggled and pulled back.

“Yuck. You’re all wet.”

“Yeah,” I huffed. “I guess I’ve been going pretty hard.” My eyes narrowed. “Wait. How’d you get in here?”

She held up a whole set of keys. “Zane told me you were closing up, but that you’d probably lock the doors and stay late. So he gave me his keys. His truck too, actually.”

My smile widened as I hugged her again. I’d been so worried. It had been a few days since... well...

“You came here just for me?”

Ariana laughed. “Well I didn’t come to go ice skating.”

I’d spent the past few days working out, skating hard, and deleting text-messages. I’d ignored calls. Turned down every groupie and puck-bunny who had the courage to approach me. And of course, I spent the whole time thinking about Ariana. Hoping against hope that what we’d done together hadn’t frightened her off for good.

Zane had let me close the place down more than once this week, even though it meant he'd have to run the Zamboni in the morning. But it helped me get things straight in my mind. It cleared my head.

“Wanna sit down?”

Ariana gestured and together we plopped into the bleachers. Immediately my legs thanked me. I realized it had been hours since I was off my feet.

“The others are worried,” she smiled. “They tell me you've been here for days.”

“Off and on,” I agreed. “But yeah. I guess so.”

“You missed a game over at Inline the other night,” she pointed out. “And you never miss games.”

I looked down at the floor. Unlike the new Inline rinks, which were sleek and modernized, this one was covered with the stink of old carpet.

“The team was fine without me,” I told her. “It's not like they—“

“Axel, what's going on?”

A warm hand closed over mine, as Ari put her head on my shoulder. The proximity of her body felt nice. She smelled absolutely amazing.

“This place is almost over,” I sighed wistfully, looking around. “Its days are numbered.”

She nodded against me. “And that's depressing to you?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Very.”

“Liminal spaces,” she murmured.

“What?”

“The uncertain transition between where you're going and where you've been,” explained Ari. “This place is about to be something else, and there's a sadness to that. A nostalgia.”

The reminder that everything moves forward, even when you don't want it to."

"*Especially* when I don't want it to," I agreed.

"Yes. But that's life."

I looked up at the exit and saw my mother, waving goodbye as she dropped us off all those years ago. I saw Ryan; lacing up my skates before he taught me how to do it myself. Jamie, bringing back a fistful of candy bars from the vending machine that used to stand in the corner. These and other forgotten ghosts faded in and out, as I scanned my way across the big empty space.

"I have such fantastic memories of this place," I sighed. The nostalgia was a bowling ball, sitting on my chest. "Of doing things that I'll never do again."

"I know," Ari commiserated. "It sucks."

"It does."

"But you'll do other things, in other places," she went on. "You'll make new memories — bigger and brighter ones. And know what the best part is?"

"What?"

"That this place will always be. It'll live in your memory forever. Or for as long as you're around, anyway."

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. But I'm still gonna miss it."

She bumped me playfully. "Don't frown that it's over —"

"Smile because it happened?"

"Exactly," she grinned. "Now get to smiling, and let's get the hell out of here."

We stood together, and for the next five minutes I cleaned up and shut the place down. With a mesh bag full of pucks slung over my shoulder, I flipped all but one breaker to the off position, and led the way toward the door.

“By the way,” I said, in the relative darkness. “If you think this place has been the only thing on my mind, you’re dead wrong.”

“Oh no?” Ari chuckled.

She bumped into me from behind. Whether intentional or on purpose, it didn’t matter. I turned around and my hands found her waist. I let them slide backward a little, until they settled right above the curve of her perfectly rounded bubble-butt.

“Where are we going anyway?” I asked, not moving an inch.

“Back to the loft,” she said. “Zane and Tyler are already there.”

She leaned into me, just enough to bring us together. The electricity was palpable as our bodies touched.

“There are still a few things I need to go over with you boys,” she murmured, delivering a soft, sensual, open-mouthed kiss. “If I’m actually going to be your girlfriend.”

ARIANA

“So first, how *exactly* would this work? Tell me everything.”

I poured the wine with a trembling hand, so fast that I almost spilled it. Watching it nearly slosh over the side of the glass seemed symbolic of something, although I didn't know what.

“It would work exactly as any other relationship you've ever been in,” said Tyler. “Except that instead of having one boyfriend, you'd have three.”

“And the three of you would only have one girlfriend,” I said pointedly. “Me.”

“Yes.”

“Exclusively,” I reiterated, looking them in the eye one by one.

“Of course.”

I still couldn't believe it. It didn't seem possible.

“And you...” I said, turning to face Axel. “You're okay with that? Giving up all your groupies, all your puck-bunnies? All those women who—”

“Yes.”

Axel flexed his big arms by leaning back against the kitchen counter. His skin was still flush from a shower that had seemed to take an eternity as we waited for him to finish. But

if we were going to do this, I needed us all to be on the same page.

“Ariana, I’ve dated a lot of women,” he went on. “And yeah, some were wild. Some crazy. But you know me well enough to know that pretty much everything’s been physical and superficial.” He shrugged. “The connections might be hot at first, sure. But when the heat dissipates, I’m left with nothing.”

In my heart I knew my friend was being genuine. After all, I’d had a front row seat to his relationships for our entire dating lives.

“And you’re *sure* there wouldn’t be any jealousy?” I asked, my heartbeat picking up speed. “It’s not like we’d have a set schedule where one of you would get me one day, and the other the next, or—“

“Fuck no,” Zane jumped in. “That’s not what we want.”

“No, not even close,” agreed Tyler.

“And what about dates?”

Axel shrugged. “What about them?”

“I mean, I just want to make sure—“

“Whoever takes you out, takes you out,” Zane went on. “It’s that simple. No jealousy, no turns, no limits.”

“Exactly,” Tyler nodded, flinging open the fridge. “None of that bullshit.”

He ducked inside and came back holding three beers in one big hand. The others accepted theirs gladly. They twisted the caps off, then tapped the bottles together before gulping them down.

Holy hell.

Three tremendous biceps flexed as they drank together, their Adam’s apples bobbing sexily as the cool liquid slid down their collective throats. A prickly heat spread over my lower belly just watching them.

“And... sex?”

I had to ask, of course. It was the last important piece of the whole crazy puzzle.

“If you’re asking how that works, it’s easy,” said Tyler. “You’re *ours*. Always. All three of us.”

Axel wiped a forearm across his lips and nodded. “Which means we take you whenever and wherever we want you, even if you’re already with someone else.”

My skin was on fire now. I bit my lip.

“So...”

“So it’s always open season,” said Zane, sliding closer. His slipped one giant hand over my ass and squeezed possessively. “On *this*.”

The touch of his fingertips nearly sent me over the edge. It was so strange to think of these longtime friends of mine, touching me in places that they’d never touched before.

But it also made me so very, very wet.

“Two at a time, three at a time... whatever happens, happens,” Tyler went on. “We’re not big planners, Ari. If I get horny at two in the morning, I’m walking over and plucking your naked ass right out of Axel’s bed.”

Axel laughed and nodded his approval. “Same.”

“And if you’re over at my place,” added Zane, “or if we happen to be at yours... it’s the same open door policy. Everyone’s got equal access. Twenty-four seven.”

I gulped. “Twenty-four seven.”

“That’s right.”

I laughed nervously. “Doesn’t sound like I’d be getting much in the way of sleep.”

Zane shrugged. “Honey, we all have to make sacrifices.”

It couldn’t believe they were so into this! And yet somehow, I actually could. I’d watched them grow up sharing

everything together, without exception. Why should sharing a girlfriend be any different?

“Look, this whole thing works both ways,” Axel added with a chuckle. “You get the three of us twenty-four seven, as well. However and wherever you want us.”

“And in whatever order or combination you want, too,” Tyler winked.

Somehow I forced myself to calm down, and a serene happiness washed over me. It split my attention between my pounding heart, which was swollen with love for these men, and the heat gathering between my legs. And that’s when I realized that my decision had already been made days ago.

Before I told them however, my smile turned into a smirk.

“So... three times the fighting over the remote, three times the dishes...” I mused smartly.

Tyler rolled his eyes. Axel laughed.

“Three times the toilet seat being left up,” I went on.

“Hey, that one’s non-negotiable,” Zane grunted.

“Three times the—“

“Three times the foot-rubs,” Tyler interjected. “After a long, hard day.”

“Backrubs too,” said Axel. “Among other places.”

“Three times the help opening a stuck jar, or getting something from a high shelf, or—“

“Three times the *sex*. ”

Zane whispered that last one into my ear, with his hand still on my ass. He was right, though. My previously desolate sex life was about to explode in all new directions. I’d have the girlfriend responsibility of satisfying *three* incredible men, each more competitive than the last, all of whom were already oversexed.

And sometimes, the wicked voice in my head reminded me, more than one at a time.

“Face it,” said Tyler at last. “We want you. The only question is, could you be happy with *us*?”

My whole body tingled like it was on fire, but in a wonderful way. The anticipation and excitement were just too much.

“I’ve loved you boys almost all my life,” I admitted. Just saying the words out loud felt ridiculously liberating. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for any of you. Including this.”

Axel took another sip of his beer. He raised an eyebrow. “So it’s settled?”

Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy—

“Well I guess there’s only one thing left to do, then.”

Slowly, teasingly, I pulled my shirt over my head and dropped it to the floor. Three pairs of eyes were glued to my fingers as I unzipped my jeans, rolled them down my naked thighs, and stepped out of them.

Standing there in my matching bra and panties, I reached back and let my hand close firmly over the bulge in Zane’s sweatpants. I gave it a quick squeeze and then spun away, grabbing Tyler and Axel by the hand so I could lead them in the direction of the nearest bed.

“Um... before we do *that*,” said Zane, clearing his throat, “we have something else to show you.”

The three of them closed around me, guiding me to a window. Their multiple hands felt so perfect against my skin it gave me goosebumps.

“What is it?” I breathed.

“There. Down in the street.”

I followed Tyler’s pointing finger, but only halfheartedly. By now I was sopping wet. Beyond horny. The last thing I wanted was to—“

“That one,” said Axel. “The green Jeep.”

I squinted into the dimly-lit street, wondering what they meant. I couldn't imagine how someone *else* could be fucking in another vehicle, in another part of the city. But the Jeep was empty. I could see it from here.

“Sorry about the doors,” Zane grumbled. “We had to hit up a junkyard for those, and the color selection wasn't exactly—“

“Wait...” I cut him off. “Are you saying—“

“It's all yours,” said Tyler proudly. “Beige doors and everything.”

My hand went over my mouth. Tears filled my eyes.

“Y—You bought me a *car*?”

“A Jeep,” said Axel. “But yes.”

“Zane felt bad about wrecking your last one,” Tyler joked. “So...”

I was glassy-eyed, now. Totally overwhelmed with joy, pride, love.

“You shouldn't have—“

“Yes we should've,” said Zane. “And we did. And you're going to love it. But not tonight. Wait until morning, and we'll take you down and give you the full tour.”

“Maybe we'll let you take us to breakfast,” smiled Axel.

I sniffed, wondering how I could possibly love any three people any more than this. I couldn't ask for three better friends. But now, being their girlfriend...

... that was going to be absolutely fucking amazing.

“C'mon,” Tyler urged. A set of hands began tugging me away from the window. “Let's not get distracted from—“

“Hang on,” I said, getting an idea. Smiling to myself, I bent at the waist, arched my back, and leaned all the way forward against the window sill. “I... want to look it at it some more.”

Nonchalantly, I reached down with one hand and ran my fingers through my thigh gap, dragging them over my panty-covered slit. It turned me on knowing they were watching, all three of them. I wished I could see their faces.

“Do you boys see anything *you’d* like to look at?” I purred softly. “You know. While you’re waiting.”

The shuffle of movement was so quick it made me chuckle out loud. Fingertips brushed me, tracing my body, causing me to sigh and coo and bend over even further. Eagerly, one of them pulled my already-drenched thong over one globe of my bubble-shaped ass.

“All my thongs are gonna get stretched out from you guys pulling them off the side,” I chuckled.

“Hey,” Axel protested. “They’re in the way.”

“Still...”

“Maybe you should just stop wearing underwear,” I heard Tyler say.

“Screw that,” Zane countered. “I love her underwear. It’s sexy as fuck.”

“Then you’re going to owe me a trip to Victoria’s Secret,” I sighed happily.

“To get more panties and lingerie? Sounds like win-win.”

I dropped my chin against my folded forearms, getting comfortable as I continued staring down into the street. My ass was high in the air, now. I let it sway back and forth seductively, until a pair of hands settled over my hips.

Ohhhhhh...

Someone dragged themselves through my dripping entrance, his shaft long and thick and rock fucking hard. Peeking back over my shoulder I saw Axel’s gorgeous face hovering near mine. I pursed my lips, desperate to kiss him, but he pulled playfully away.

“Sorry,” he whispered, smiling deviously. “Best friends never kiss. Remember?”

He thrust into me halfway. Reaching back, I grabbed his ass and clawed it so hard he jumped forward... impaling me totally to the hilt on his giant, banana-shaped member.

“No, I guess not,” I chuckled wickedly, squeezing him tightly from the inside. A moment later we were screwing hard, moving fast and furious. Our lips brushing tantalizingly against one another’s as we picked up speed.

“But sometimes, they fuck like demons.”

ARIANA

It was thrilling. Hectic. Amazing as hell. Totally overwhelming, but in the most magnificent of ways. At times it was outright crazy, but I think I enjoyed those days the most. Because the nights, oh my God the nights...

Well, the nights were endlessly, unspeakably hot.

Having three boyfriends was all of these things, but it was also far, far more. For one, I'd totally underestimated how busy I'd be. There wasn't a moment of free time I actually had to myself, at least not at first. But once the guys understood my need to carve out some time between work and school, they eased back on the throttle just enough.

I was never bored, though. Never alone, when I didn't want to be. I was walked through town, paraded and cuddled. I flung my arms around them, or held hands with two men at once. The looks I got were worth every bit of the initial discomfort, until I was embracing the onlookers, which were usually women, by smiling and blowing kisses until they turned away.

I absolutely *loved* my new Jeep, beige doors, faded interior and everything. Each time I got in and started it up I was reminded of how sweet and thoughtful a gift it was, and it made me love the three of them just a tiny bit more.

We went out to lunch sometimes, or even dinner, but most of the time we took turns cooking for each other and

sharing our meals around a table. The loft had the most space, so we did big things like pasta nights there, but generally ordered out when staying at my apartment, or Zane's.

But it was our couch time I loved the most. Leaning back into those big, warm bodies was wholly different now that we were more than just friends. I loved all the playing and touching beneath the blankets, without a single look or jealous stare. And that's because each man knew they'd eventually be getting their own turn, doing the exact same things.

The sex, of course, was totally off the charts. The boys fucked me at my place, at Zane's place, or all over the loft. They traded me back and forth from bed to bed, or just screwed me on the couch, right in the middle of watching shows and movies together. Best of all, they did it in front of each other. Egging each other on. At times even showing off or challenging each other, as they took me in new ways, new positions, and new combinations that drove whoever happened to be watching — or awaiting their own turn — absolutely crazy.

I especially loved being their girlfriend, and belonging to them. Our emotional connection had grown ten times stronger, just with the addition of the physical. And physically? I fell in love with the strength and power of the way they handled me around each other. The rough, yet still gentle way the guys totally ravaged me, whenever and wherever they wanted.

For example, I kept using the all-edges brownie pan, night after night. I was addicted to the cursed thing, sneaking into the kitchen for a midnight snack until one night when I felt my panties being pulled down, and two rough hands bent me over the kitchen counter. I obliged happily, wriggling my ass backward as Tyler drilled me and filled me, smacking my ass before handing it over to Zane, who'd gotten up for a glass of water. He took over next, ramming me until my brownie-choked giggles turned to sighs. Fucking me so deeply that I actually put down the milk, braced my hands against the kitchen wall tile, and started thrusting back.

It was times like these when I really enjoyed the advantages of having three boyfriends. Of having three raging libidos working together to satisfy my ever-horny yearnings, spreading my legs and digging me out until I was happy, sated, and thrillingly sore. But I was obsessed with more than just the all-edge brownies. I was addicted to them, too. I couldn't stop fucking them, couldn't get enough of the fact they couldn't get enough of me. And so I gave myself to them every chance I got, throwing myself at them, jumping them in the shower. Slipping from bed to bed each night, crossing the loft only to wake them long enough to screw them back into unconsciousness, as my mind kept spinning, keeping me awake most nights with every wonderful, filthy thought.

So yes, I was a lucky, lucky girl. One who was living out every last fantasy no matter how delicious, how depraved, how utterly greedy it seemed.

And my fantasies were oh so *very* greedy these days.

In just a few short weeks my greatest fears were dispelled. The boys and I didn't grow apart, we grew closer. The introduction of a sexual element didn't make things weird between us, it actually made our friendship even stronger, our relationship more comfortable. I already loved them, but with each passing day I could feel myself falling *in* love with them, too. There was nothing I wouldn't do for these men. Nothing I wouldn't risk, for the sake of keeping whatever this thing was that we had. This amazing foundation it seemed the four of us were constantly building on.

Yet in the back of my mind, I still worried. It was all too good, too perfect. Too incredible for something this good to last this long. I tried voicing this to the others, but they always laughed me off. They were in too deep, as well. Too invested not to laugh and wave my concerns away, before kissing me until my knees buckled and carrying me off to one of my many, many beds.

I just kept waiting for the other shoe to drop.

ARIANA

“Ummm... miss?”

“Yes?”

“There’s a problem with my coffee.”

Standing behind the counter, I licked milk foam from my fingers and looked down.

“Oh? What seems to be—“

“There’s a dick in my latte.”

I chuckled. So did Axel.

“Actually, there’s two dicks,” Tyler corrected himself. “Two *spurting* dicks.”

I glanced into his mug. As far as my coffee art went, this one really was a masterpiece. I’d taken a couple good photos, just in case I wanted to post one to my account later.

“So what’s wrong with two dicks?” I asked innocently.

“Nothing, normally,” Tyler played along. “But these two are touching.”

“Hmmm...” I scanned the surface of the steaming beverage. “Looks a lot like last night, actually. Especially with the squirting, and the copious amounts of—”

“I can see the copious amounts,” said Tyler.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The problem is we never crossed swords.”

I batted my eyelashes at them, trying to not break out laughing. It wasn't easy.

“Are you *sure*?”

“Oh we're sure,” Axel chimed in. “Last night was many, many things. But there wasn't any sword-crossing.”

“That's right,” Tyler agreed. “Crossed swords leads to friendly fire.”

Though I'd never heard the term in relation to sex, an image came to mind immediately. I giggled.

“Friendly fire,” I repeated.

“Yes,” Tyler agreed. “We don't cross swords.”

Picking a fresh toothpick from my apron pocket, I sliced a line through the foam that connected the two beautiful yet obscene shafts that graced the surface of Tyler's coffee.

“There. Is that better?”

Tyler couldn't hold it together. He broke out laughing. “Not really. Now it looks like my dick is broken.”

“And do you know that's *your* dick?” I asked matter-of-factly. I nodded to Axel. “It could be his dick.”

Axel squinted down. “Mine's not that straight.”

“Or it could be Zane's,” I said, letting my voice go low and sultry. “I mean, this doesn't have to be a scene from *last* night. It could be from the night before. Or last week, when you boys decided to see which of you could make me—”

The door to the shop opened just then, the ringing bells heralding the end to our fun but filthy little conversation. Tyler and Axel stepped to the side as two new customers placed orders, followed by a third and fourth just afterward. The boys eventually sat down as the place got busy, and for the next twenty minutes I could only watch as my two hot boyfriends enjoyed their coffee, talking in low tones and smiling from time to time.

They're all mine, I thought proudly to myself. *Both of them.*

It still didn't seem real. There were times when I'd wake up wondering if my new life were just a dream. If so, I was going to be cataclysmically fucking disappointed when I finally woke up.

"Hey..."

Eventually I'd cleared the line just long enough for them to step back up to the counter, but I could already see new customers approaching from the street outside. They were blowing into their hands. It looked cold as hell out there.

"We should probably let you get back to work," nodded Tyler. He slid me his mug, which was now empty except for some milk foam clinging to the sides. "Thanks for the dicks though."

"They were good, right?"

"Delicious. Best I ever had."

The door's bells rang again. I wiped my hands on my apron.

"So what's on the agenda this week?" I asked quickly.

"Well, we have a practice tonight, a game tomorrow. On Friday, Zane's got that thing again."

"That thing again..."

"Yeah."

I squinted a bit skeptically. "I haven't asked him outright," I told them, "but whatever it is he's been kinda secretive about it, don't you think?"

Axel shrugged. "He does shit like this. We stopped asking long ago."

"Yeah," Tyler agreed. "Last time he pulled a disappearing act it turned out to be something with his mom. She's probably got some other issue at the house."

"So why wouldn't he—"

“Because he’s Zane, that’s why,” said Axel. “If he can do something himself, he does. Besides, after all that time we spent fixing the roof, he probably doesn’t want to ask.”

As the customers made it to the counter they gave me two quick kisses — both of them, right on the lips. It was something we did, as boyfriends and girlfriend. It never occurred to us that we should hide it.

“And Saturday...” I called after them as they walked away. “Don’t forget about Saturday.”

Tyler laughed. “C’mon. You think you have to remind us about your show?”

Halfway through the door Axel turned and blew me another kiss.

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world, baby.”

AXEL

“YOOOOO!”

Rocky’s voice boomed through the tall metal enclosure, reverberating off the corrugated aluminum walls. It rose easily over the noise of my forklift. Rolling the steering wheel ball in my palm, I swung it deftly around to face him.

“Kid, what the fuck happened this morning!?” he demanded. “Half the delivery is missing!”

I shot forward and turned ninety-degrees, lowering the banded stack of lumber onto the pallets I’d previously arranged to receive it. I hated leaving any weight on the fork, even for a few minutes. On a machine this old, it screwed with the hydraulics.

And Rocky rarely took less than a few minutes.

“We’re missing untreated studs,” he said, looking down at his purchase order. “Deck boards aren’t here. Six-inch *and* eight-inch pressure treated should’ve been on that truck. Not to mention—“

“It was all delivered.”

Rocky blinked. “It *was*?”

“Sure.”

He scratched angrily at his scraggly, salt-and-pepper beard. “So why the fuck didn’t you—“

“Because most of the stuff on the truck this morning looked like *that*.”

I pointed, and Rocky followed my gaze to the other side of the lumberyard. His bloodshot eyes went so wide I thought they’d fall out of his head.

“What in the—“

“I know.”

The stack in question was so bowed, so crooked, each board looked like a giant banana. They were frayed and delaminated, dry as a bone. The pressure treating had long since worn out of them.

“We didn’t pay for these two-by-sixteens!” he roared. “Did we? Because if they think I’m—“

“Hell no,” I cut him off quickly. “Are you kidding? I refused to sign that invoice the second I saw them.”

With that revelation, he seemed to take it down a notch. “Then why are they here?”

“Because I can cut the middle out of a few of them,” I explained. “Maybe make a couple of eight or ten footers. Plus they were free.”

My boss bit his mustached lip. “Free is good.”

“Yeah.”

“Still,” he grumbled, “we were counting on that delivery. We’re already behind with KD Carpentry, and the Campo Brothers have jobs waiting on—“

“I already took care of the Campo Brothers,” I cut him off. “Dee’s Building Supply is gonna cover that order, and we’re going to square up with them once we’re back in stock.”

“Shit,” said Rocky. “That’s awesome.”

“Yeah, Dee owes me a favor, anyway. I also talked Kenny from KD off the ledge. His plumbing inspection is running behind anyway, so he’s good with next week.”

A truck rumbled by, off in the distance. I heard the rattle of its empty bed as it crossed the overpass.

“Finally, talked to a different supplier — one we stopped using years ago. They’re under new ownership, and might be able to get us what we need. Cheaper too, which is the best part.”

Rocky unfolded his hairy arms. Slowly, he placed them on his hips.

“Well... fuck.”

“Fuck?”

“Yeah. Jump down from that thing, and follow me into my office.”

Warily I took off my gloves, set them on my seat, and followed him into the little shack my father had built so long ago. Once inside, Rocky slid into his high-backed chair. Bending down, he opened a mini-fridge and pulled out an electric-blue energy drink.

“Want one?”

I had to stifle a laugh. “No, but thanks.”

“Coffee then?”

He gestured to the tiny shelf behind me, where a half-pot of five-hour old coffee congealed on the burner of an ancient machine. Absently I wondered if he’d inherited *that* from my father as well, just like his chair.

“Sit?”

Now I was actually nervous. Rocky never asked me to sit, and right now he was pointing to one of the two tiny guest chairs. I shook my head.

“Fine then,” he sighed. He took a long sip of his blue drink. “Kid, I gotta ask you something.”

The room fell silent as I refused to say anything. We stared at each other for a while, like two gunslingers sizing each other up.

“Why are you still working here?”

It wasn't at all the question I expected. My brows knitted in confusion.

“Don't get me wrong,” Rocky added quickly. “You're the best there is. You know this place even better than I do. As far as work goes, you're totally on top of shit.”

“So what's the problem?”

“The problem is I'm not paying you nearly enough to do all the things you do.”

Rocky had cold, deep-set eyes set beneath a bushy dark brow. It could be an intimidating combination for those who didn't know him, but I knew him better than anyone.

“You pay me well enough,” I said, trying hard to stifle a shrug. “Plus the hours are flexible. You give me off whenever I ask. I can leave early for practices and games, or —“

“Is that what you're working towards?” Rocky interrupted. “An unfettered hockey schedule?”

My mouth curled into a frown. “No, but—“

“But what?” my boss pressed. “Axel, you *came* with the damn place. When I bought it off your father, I thought you'd work here for a few months and get bored. Instead of showing me the ropes and taking off, you've stuck around for years.”

I was still confused. All of these things felt like pros, not cons. At least to me.

“Kid, you're in your mid-twenties. And somehow you're still here. Your dad said you ditched college to come *back* here, just to help the place out.”

“I did.”

Rocky's whole demeanor changed. He was still the hard-nosed realist I'd developed a love-hate relationship with, but beneath that outer shell I could see softer emotions too.

There was compassion now, almost pity. It was the strangest fucking thing in the world.

“Well you shouldn’t have done that,” Rocky advised. “I’m sure your old man appreciated the help, and I know you did everything for him you possibly could. But in the end, he lost the place because it was too far gone — even with all the money I dumped into it, it was all I could do to bring it back from the brink of death. The point is, you would’ve been better off if you stayed.”

I bit back a sharp retort, and whatever else I might’ve said out of anger. In my heart though, I knew he was right. I’d spent most of my childhood away from my father, and the guilt definitely built up over time. Coming home to save the lumberyard seemed like a no-brainer at the time. My dad needed help. He was family. That’s all there was to it.

“You’re at a dead-end right now,” said Rocky. “The only one above you is me, and I’m not leaving. That means you can’t be promoted any further. There’s nowhere else to go.”

I still didn’t get what he was driving at. But between his harsh words, and the coppery smell of that blue energy drink, my stomach was in knots.

“In a few months my daughter’s husband is coming on,” Rocky continued, “and I’m going to teach him the business. He’s sort of an asshat, to be honest. And he’ll never be as good as you.”

“Then why—“

“Because he’s family,” said Rocky. “Of all people, I know you understand that. And one day, when I finally retire, this asshat who married my daughter will inherit the business. If we’re still *in* business by then, that is.”

“So you’re firing me?”

Rocky looked suddenly angry again. “No! Of course not!”

“Then what are you—“

“Are you even listening?” he shouted in exasperation. “I’m trying to help you to help yourself. You can leave here on your own terms and whenever you want to, but you’ll eventually leave. And I’d rather see you do it sooner than later.”

Now I did sit down, in one of the undersized chairs I remembered from childhood. My father worked so damned hard, for so many hours each day, it destroyed his marriage. He missed out time with my mother. Time with me. Even the time we had when I came back from school to help out was hectic and full of stress. There was never an end in sight. The burden of this place was just too much.

“I’m going to do a favor for you, son,” Rocky said gently. “I’m pushing you out of the nest.” He shook his head, reverently. “Your father was a good man, and I appreciate your loyalty. But this is something he should’ve done for you long ago.”

“I... I get it.”

I reached into my boss’s mini-fridge without asking and cracked open one of the strange blue drinks. It tasted like battery acid, going down. But at least it was cold.

“Find something you love, then go and do it,” said Rocky. “And you’re going to absolutely destroy it, Axel. Whatever it is. Hard workers like you are rare jewels these days.” He fell back into his usual, grumbling self.

“Hell, I’m kicking myself for even telling you this.”

ZANE

The center skated directly at me head-on, full-speed, his talented hands clasped loosely around his stick. The way he shifted his weight through every stride was deceiving. He leaned left, feigned right... then at the very last second, lined up to swat the puck right through my legs.

But it was his eyes that betrayed his true intentions.

He took the shot. I kicked right and dove left, swinging my arm upward to snatch the puck straight out of the air. It moved so fast I couldn't even see it. But I felt the satisfying thud of the impact, deep in the netting of my glove.

“NICE.”

I could hear the assistant coach's voice, even though he wasn't talking to me. When I finally risked a glance back, I saw the head coach scribbling into his notebook.

Good shit.

It had been a month already, since I was called to the practice squad. A few weeks later, I was tangentially still part of the team. Other cuts had to be made, and there was still the chance I wouldn't make it. But right now my goals against average statistic was beating the starter; a little detail that hadn't gone unnoticed by Devin or Devon or whatever the hell his name was.

Darren. His name's Darren.

Fine. So I knew his name.

Now quit fucking around.

Just the idea that I could be playing on the River Kings — even as backup goalie to that scuzzy bearded asshole — gave me thrills I hadn't felt since my earliest days of playing the game. And I was better than him. Practice by practice, I was already proving it.

If only I could keep it together.

It had been hard, if not impossible, keeping this little venture from Ariana and the guys. I was basically moonlighting. Trying out for a team that could ultimately take up all of my time, all of my efforts. If I actually made the roster, it wasn't something I could hide. It would take me away from the forever run we had, playing hockey together on dozens of teams, over thousands of games. But always with the same core players: Tyler, Axel, and myself. Other than the brief stint when they were away at college, there wasn't a single season we hadn't played together since we were ten years old.

But this was my shot. My one — and probably last — opportunity to do something great.

And I'd decided that I was taking it.

The head coach of the River Kings was a grim man and an intimidating hard ass, but in the hockey world he was also amazing and well-respected. Over the years he'd sent up several of his players to the minors. A select few even made the NHL.

Right now though, I had to focus on where I was.

The line of players kept shooting and I kept making saves, missing a few here and there but generally keeping the puck out of the net. I was well aware of Darren sitting on the opposite bench, strapping his pads on. Getting ready to come out and try to show me up; in an effort to safeguard his job.

But Darren wasn't me.

Eventually the whistle blew, and we exchanged places. The starting goalie skated past me, closing the distance just enough to bump me roughly on the way to the crease. I didn't even turn around. I wasn't about to engage in dick-measuring contests — not with an asshole like this. And especially not with the coaches watching.

Ten minutes later I had my bag all packed, and my pads slung over my shoulder. Sub Zero was an even newer facility than Inline, with bright lights and beautifully-vaulted ceilings. Best of all, nobody knew me here. There was no one in our hockey circles who might report on what I was doing, or who I was potentially doing it with.

I was halfway to the exit, the smell of new carpet and freshly-painted concrete filling my nostrils when I was tapped on the shoulder. I turned around, cringing with who I might see...

Relief flooded through me as I realized it was only assistant coach Veraldi. His full head of prematurely white hair made the man look much older than he really was.

“Zane. Hang on a sec.”

He was staring down at his own clipboard, pen in hand. As he scratched his head, my heart leapt into my throat.

He's gonna cut me.

Fuck. If he did, it would be part-relief, part-infuriating. In fact, with the way I was playing, I might just go nuts.

“Coach wants to know if you can make Tuesday practices too, now,” the assistant coach stated. “You good with that?”

My mouth formed the words before I even thought about answering. “Yes. Of course I can.”

“Good,” coach Veraldi nodded firmly. “I'll tell him.”

Inwardly I winced, wondering how I was going to possibly pull off Tuesdays without anyone finding out. Skipping out on work would be hard enough. But then there

were the guys, not to mention my girlfriend, that I had to lie to as well.

My girlfriend...

It felt funny saying the word, but it also felt incredible. Ariana had been the best thing to happen to all three of us, way back when we first met her. But now things were even better, tighter, crazier. Sharing her between the three of us had been sizzling hot. Totally amazing, in every way.

The last thing I wanted to do was hide things from the people I was closest to in the whole world. But as it stood, my whole crazy experiment with the River Kings could be over with the swipe of a pen on a clipboard. Which meant that for right now at least, I'd keep lying by omission.

“We’re also going to start up weekends,” Veraldi said casually, without looking up.

The sheen of sweat that stuck my hockey jersey to my chest felt suddenly cold, almost like ice.

“T—Tomorrow?” I stammered.

“No, not tomorrow. Next weekend, not this one.”

I exhaled in relief. “Uhhh... sure. I’m in for that too.”

Coach Veraldi nodded again, and this time he did look up at me. His steel-grey eyes matched his hair so well he almost looked like a video game character.

“Keep it up son,” he said, waving the butt end of his pen at me. One eye snapped shut and opened again so fast, I almost couldn’t tell if it were an actual wink. “You didn’t hear this from me, but so far we like what we see.”

ARIANA

The floor of Tulalip casino literally buzzed with Saturday night activity. It was impossible to follow all the lights, the sounds, the excited chatter of couples sweeping arm-in-arm across the intricate black-and-red carpets. They snaked along through a chaotic maze of slot machines and dealer tables, moving between bars, clubs, and restaurants in a never-ending quest to get rich, have fun, or maybe even find love.

I, of course, had already found love. And lucky for me, I'd found it three times over.

“Be right back!”

I pushed off Zane and Axel's broad, granite-like shoulders, leaving them sitting side by side at their respective slot machines. A quick walk later I was at the Blackjack table where I'd left Tyler. He sat in the same spot with his back to me, a stack of red and black chips growing slowly before him.

I leaned in, without touching him, not letting him know I was there. Putting my lips against his ear, I whispered hotly:

“Last night your friend came down my throat *as* I was coming...” I purred in my sexiest, sultriest voice. “And it was so. Fucking. *Hot.*”

Tyler didn't look up, didn't look back.

“Which friend?”

I chuckled softly at the salaciousness of the question. The fact it even had to be asked sent a bolt of heat rocketing through my body.

“Does it matter?” I asked wickedly.

He pushed a pair of chips forward, and into the betting circle. “No. Not really.”

“Good,” I purred. “Because I want it *again*.”

The cards were dealt. The dealer went bust. Everyone was paid out, and the stack of chips in Tyler’s betting circle doubled.

“Let it *ride*,” I murmured, letting my fingernails wander tantalizingly over the back of his neck.

The blackjack dealer — a middle-aged woman with a tightly-wound braid slung over one shoulder — looked at Tyler for his reaction. He smiled and left the bet where it was.

This time he was dealt an eight of spades and a three of diamonds. The dealer’s card was a five.

“What do you think?” he called over his shoulder. “Should I double down?”

The question was entirely rhetorical. Of course he already knew the answer.

I pushed forward, rubbing my tits over his back. “I would.”

“You double down most nights,” Tyler teased. He pushed an equal number of chips forward. “Sometimes triple.”

“Well that’s not my fault,” I shrugged, feigning innocence. “Sometimes a girl just can’t decide.”

“Have you decided tonight?”

I laughed. “Are you kidding? Have you seen our *bed*?”

We’d checked into the suite a few hours ago; a cavernous room, beautifully-decorated in the casino’s theme colors of black, white and red. We were supposed to get a deluxe with double-queen beds, which was exciting because I

looked forward to getting passed from bed to bed all night. Instead, the hotel screwed up. In the center of the smoky glass windowed suite, high up on one of the top floors, we'd been given a single, California-sized king.

"Win this hand," I whispered into Tyler's ear, "and I'll take you upstairs for fifteen minutes and let you do whatever you want to me."

He half turned around. "Oh, really?"

"Yes."

Beneath my hip-hugging red dress, I could feel myself already getting slick with wetness. As a group we'd decided to wait until after dinner before we made a mess of each other. Let the anticipation build.

But damn, Tyler looked fucking *phenomenal* in his suit jacket, his matching slacks, and his Italian leather shoes. Sitting there at the blackjack table, the first two buttons of his white collared shirt left tantalizingly open, I wanted to eat him alive.

The last person at the table finished betting, and the cards were dealt. Tyler ended up with an eighteen. The woman with the braid turned over several low cards...

"Dealer has twenty-one."

He turned, smirking up at me, shrugging as his chips were swept away. But that was Tyler: happy no matter what. Always making the best of things, no matter what the circumstances.

"So... what happens if I lose?" he joked, spinning in his chair to face me.

His hands slid to my hips, bringing warmth and tingles. I felt so sexy tonight. So absolutely amazing in my red, low-cut dress. God, I couldn't wait to fuck him.

"I guess in that case I take *you* upstairs and I get to do whatever *I* want to you," I shrugged.

Tyler shrugged playfully. "Hey, a bet's a bet."

“You know it.”

“Let me gather my chips, and I’ll pay up.”

He turned back to cash out, and I surveyed the casino floor again. Today had been absolutely epic. Having the guys with me at the art show had been more important to me than I realized, and every time I turned around and saw one of them, it filled me with happiness and pride. It didn’t hurt that I sold a few pieces, as well. One of them had gone for a fairly lucrative sum — at least at the levels we were currently at — and my instructor had been happy to see me selling my work.

The money would help with my impending move, which I still hadn’t quite figured out. Upon learning that I needed to vacate the basement, the guys had immediately insisted I move in with them. The thing was, they didn’t all live together. There wasn’t enough room for me in Zane’s little apartment, and if I’d gone to the loft, it would’ve seemed like we were leaving him out.

And the last thing I wanted.

Instead, I kept looking for a new place. Right now I had a few contenders, all within striking distance of work and school. But the guys didn’t seem thrilled with the prospect of me still living alone. Especially since, just about every night, we were always together anyway.

“You ready?”

Tyler stood up and slipped his hand into mine. Our fingers interlocked, and I felt the heat between my legs rising.

“Should we grab the others?” Tyler asked.

I hesitated, then shook my head. “Nah, they’re having fun on the slots. Besides, this little side bet was between you and I.” Pulling him toward the hotel lobby, I turned and licked my lips. “Trust me, it’s not going to take long.”

The wait for the elevator was only half a minute, but it seemed like an eternity. Up and up we went, letting off other guests on different floors. Finally, it was just Tyler and I and nobody else.

“Do you have any idea how hard I’d fuck you in this elevator,” he said, sliding up behind me, “if there weren’t like, a jillion cameras?”

The way he whispered the threat into my ear made me lose my breath for a moment. I glanced at us in the elevator’s mirrored walls. Between my tight red dress and his dark suit we looked like a power couple. Like we were made to hit the STOP button and fuck in elevators, if not for the alarms and inevitable bullshit that would surely follow.

Besides, I didn’t want to fuck him now anyway. Not yet.

But what I *did* have planned...

The elevator doors opened; just when I thought they never would. I yanked Tyler out and pulled him down the hallway, anxious to have him. As we reached the door, and he began fumbling in his pocket for the keycard, I was already unzipping him.

“When do the fifteen minutes start?” he asked.

“The moment you’re in my mouth.”

We pushed inside, and I was on my knees before the door’s electronic locking mechanism even went ‘click.’ Not surprisingly, Tyler was already hard. I pulled him straight out from his slacks and slid him past my lips, moaning around him. His long fingers sifted into my hair, coaxing me forward with a rhythm that was growing rapidly familiar.

“Mmmmm...”

He let out a sexy growl and I went for broke, pulling out all the stops. But Tyler had plans of his own. Bracing my hands on his warm, muscular thighs, I relaxed and gave up control. Rather than simply blow him, I let him fuck my face with savage, wanton abandon.

“Holy *fuck*, Ari.”

Tyler took over, screwing himself down my throat. It was hot. Dirty. Totally fucking crazy. I thought of all the times we’d been together, through all our years of friendship. All the

sideways glances I was now sure I saw. All the little looks I stole here and there, desperately trying not to let him catch me, because the purity of our friendship meant so much.

He was my neighbor, my friend, my first true love. My first kiss. My first crush, whether I wanted to admit it or not. And he was always *there* for me. Any time of the day or night, whenever I called on him, Tyler showed up without question or reservation. I couldn't count the number of times he'd lifted me up when I needed it most. I couldn't describe how amazing it was to have such a selfless best friend, but also how incredibly comforting it felt being crushed in his two big arms.

Right now those arms were flexing and unflexing, pounding his hard, thick shaft down my tender throat. God, I loved pleasing him! And I loved that he loved pleasing me.

“Ari...”

He murmured the nickname in a sort of warning growl, which meant he was long past the point of no return. I made my lips even tighter. I also started whimpering louder, because I knew damn well it turned him on.

“Fuck,” Tyler breathed. “Baby...”

He threw back his head — I knew it because of the way his body bent slightly backwards — and unloaded everything at once. Long, creamy ropes of his hot seed went straight down my throat, thrilling me as I felt his urethra pulsing hard against my bottom lip. But I kept my lips tight, especially with my red satin dress in mind. I kept my mouth sealed around him, my face buried tightly against his trim, taut stomach as Tyler continued to feed me.

“MMMmmm...”

Only once did I have to stop, swallow, and go straight back down again. And it was only for lack of oxygen that I even had to do that. But in the end I took it all. Every bit. Every last drop.

“You're unreal,” he sighed dreamily, his pulses finally slowing to a stop. “Totally unbelievable. And I—“

“I love you.”

I murmured the words from my knees, staring up at him. Tyler looked down at me with glazed, soulful eyes.

“I know I’ve said it a thousand times, but I want you to —“

Two strong hands lifted me into his arms, until he was staring at me. Looking at me in ways that he’d always looked at me before, but also, in ways that he hadn’t.

“I—I know this might seem an odd time to come clean about it,” I chuckled, dabbing at one corner of my mouth. My lips were all swollen. My belly full, and pleasantly warm. “But I’ve *always* loved you. And I think I’ve always known it.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes all glassy and not just from my incredible blowjob. There was understanding there, a shared feeling of mutual love and respect. The regret of having held back when we could’ve probably moved forward, set against a backdrop of enormous relief that we finally got around to loving one another.

Tyler’s forehead touched mine. His gaze searched deeper than ever, those hazel eyes piercing their way to my very soul.

“I’ve loved you forever, Ari. You know that. I knew it too, but I just wouldn’t let myself, and for the same reasons as you: I was afraid.”

Smiling gently, he winked.

“I’m not afraid anymore,” Tyler murmured softly. “We found each other now, and that’s the only thing that matters.”

His hands slid behind me, cupping my ass. Pulling me tightly against his hard body until I was molded into him, exactly where I belonged.

“That... and making up for lost time.”

ARIANA

We found Axel right where we left him, pretty much breaking even on a series of fishing-themed slot machines. The chair next to him however, was now empty.

“Where’s Zane?”

Axel shrugged and fed another twenty into the machine. “He wandered off a little while ago. I don’t know what’s up with him. He’s not entirely himself.”

I was suddenly concerned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean he’s acting... I dunno. Weird.”

“He’s *Zane*,” chuckled Tyler, as if the two-word statement explained everything.

“True,” Axel agreed. “But something still seems off.”

“Alright, let’s go and find him then,” I said.

“*You* go and find him,” chuckled Axel. “I’m not going anywhere until I catch the big piranha.”

Tyler and I split up to search the casino floor, with plans to meet back at the fishing slots in fifteen minutes. We had late dinner reservations in less than an hour, but after what Axel just said, my hunger had vanished.

He’s Zane.

This much was true, but I knew Zane better than anyone. He could be moody, broody, sometimes downright ornery, depending on the day of the week. But Axel was probably the least observant of the four of us. If *he* noticed something was off about his friend, then whatever it was couldn't be good.

My mind wandered to Zane's life, his thought processes, his issues and problems. He'd been disappearing on Fridays, but that wasn't too far beyond the scope of normal. Sometimes he went over his mother's house to clean things up, or to sit with her and watch game shows until she fell asleep in her chair. Or it could be something with work. Or maybe—

I found him in a sleek-looking sports bar off the main casino floor, sitting in a black leather seat that appeared more like a throne. His hands rested on the arms of the chair. One of them was wrapped around a significantly full glass of whiskey.

“Hey stranger.”

I dropped into the chair beside him, lightly tapping his hand. Zane handed me the glass without saying a word. I took a long swig and handed it back to him.

“You're drinking the good stuff.”

He nodded. “Sure as fuck am. We're celebrating, aren't we?”

“We are,” I answered. “But you're all the way over here.”

Zane gave off a shrug of his beautiful shoulders. He'd untied his tie hours ago, the moment we left the gallery. It looked even sexier hanging down both sides of his broad chest.

“I got bored of playing slots,” he said dismissively.

“Sure,” I allowed. “But what else?”

Zane's gaze had been everywhere else, but now his eyes locked on mine. There had never been a curtain between us, not even a veil. We'd been around each other far too long;

and shared too many things. Our bullshit detectors were finely tuned in to one another.

“Alright, fine,” he said, matter-of-factly. “I’ve been working out on the practice squad for another team.”

I tried not to let my face register too much in the way of surprise. It was difficult, though.

“Which team?”

“The River Kings.”

Now my eyes did go wide, and with very good reason.

“Zane, that’s incredible! That’s—“

“I’m not on the team,” he said quickly. “Not yet. Probably won’t be, actually. But—“

“Is that where you’ve been Friday nights?”

He took another slow pull of whiskey and nodded. Ice rattled musically in the glass.

“It’s gonna be much more than Friday nights,” he continued. “They want me there three or four times a week, now. I don’t know how I’m going to be able to hide it from the guys.”

“Then don’t.”

My words seemed to stop him cold. They fell with the weight of a cement truck launching off a cliff.

“Seriously, Zane. They’ll understand.”

“Will they?” he challenged. “Ari, we’ve been on the same team *all our fucking lives*. Now I’m going to go off and play without them? Because I’ll have to, you know. If I were to actually make the River Kings, there won’t be room for recreational hockey. That’s the end of the line for us.”

“The end of the line?” I repeated. “*Really?*”

Zane stared back at me confused.

“You, Tyler and Axel have been friends forever!” I cried. “You boys have been around each other your entire

lives. You've shared damned near everything together. Including me."

I leaned forward and took the drink again. With the other hand, I pointed a finger at him.

"Do you really think your lifelong friendship — no, your *brotherhood* — is built solely on playing hockey?"

Zane blinked. "No. Of course not."

"Then why the *hell* wouldn't they be supportive of you? Shit, they're gonna be thrilled for you. I guarantee it."

I threw back more of the cold amber liquid. Whatever he was drinking was so smooth it hardly burned as it slid down my throat.

"Look, Tyler and Axel played on other teams, didn't they?"

Zane swiped his drink back. "That was different. That was school."

"So they went away to college," I went on, "and eventually they came back empty-handed. Tyler because of stupid-ass Lexus, and Axel to help with work for his father." I tapped my finger on the table between us. "But they tried, Zane. They might've missed because life got in the way, but they each took their shot."

He was starting to get it. I could see the guilt slowly draining away, but there still wasn't relief in his eyes.

"This is *your* shot, Zane. You have to take it. And the guys have to be supportive, even if it means you're not going to be around for a while. Just like you were supportive for them, back when they weren't around."

"This is a little different though," Zane eventually said.

"It's not different at all," I said emphatically. "It's not different from—"

"It's different because of *you*."

I sat back a little. The surrounding noise of the bar grew dim.

“You know we’ve always had our own special thing,” said Zane. “But now it’s different. We’re not just friends or fuckbuddies or anything near that casual. We’re *together* now, Ariana. And that means the world to me.”

His candidness and vulnerability brought tears to my eyes. My heart felt like it was going to burst.

“You’re my *girl*, now,” he went on. “Our girl. And that’s—“

“That’s never going to change,” I cut him off. “No matter where you go, or what team you’re playing on, I’m *still* your girl. I’m still going to be right here for you.”

Zane looked back at me with eyes that were full of love. I’d never seen this side of him before. It made me want to hug him to pieces.

“The River Kings feed into the American Hockey League,” I pressed him. “You know that. You could end up on the Calgary Heat, or the Alberta Oilers, or God knows where else.” I reached out and actually pushed him. “Or fuck it Zane, you could go all the way to the NHL. You’re good enough, and you *know* you are.”

I saw his eyes flash briefly, entertaining every one of his childhood hopes and dreams. I knew all about the pride he kept locked away, deep down inside. I knew even better than Tyler or Axel did.

“I could be traveling for years,” he shrugged. “Playing in every city across the United States and Canada.”

“You sure could,” I grinned, plucking the glass from his hand. “Or you could be cut from the practice squad tomorrow. Either way, I’m still your girlfriend. I’m still in love with you. Whatever ride you go on, the three of us will take it with you. No matter what.”

I threw back the rest of the whiskey, which by now was somewhat watered down. It made me want another, but we were out of time. Besides, my hunger was coming back with a vengeance.

“Tyler was right about you,” said Zane.

“Oh yeah? Right about what?”

“He said you were the greatest fucking thing to ever happen to our three sorry asses.”

I chuckled softly. “Can’t argue with that.”

“He also said something about our paths being forever intertwined,” Zane continued, looking thoughtful. “That we should follow you anywhere. No matter what.”

“Good,” I said, clapping the glass down so hard an ice cube skidded out. We stood up together, and I took his hand. “You can follow me to dinner then,” I said, pulling him along. “Before I eat my arm off.”

ARIANA

The real fun started the moment I walked into our suite's central bedroom, decked out in wicked-looking black and red lingerie that matched everything else in the room. That part had been the guy's doing. They'd totally surprised me with the casino trip, not even announcing it until after the art show. They'd even packed me an overnight bag.

But the cutest part was that they'd gone shopping together, as a trio, at Victoria's Secret. Just as they promised.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Zane asked the question while standing at the side of the bed, running one slick hand up and down his giant, glistening erection. Tyler was busy fucking me from behind, hands glued to my hips, one leg up for leverage so he could really drill into me. My moans of delirium showed him how much I appreciated the effort.

"Yes," I said breathlessly, tilting my head back as Tyler pulled my hair. God, I fucking *loved* that part. The hair pulling made me wetter than just about anything.

"Two..." I gasped, urging Zane forward. "I need *two*."

Zane obliged me, climbing onto the giant bed somewhere behind us. I was thrilled and terrified at the same time. Dying with the anticipation of what was about to happen.

"Give her to me."

Axel's voice preceded another shift of movement. Tyler's hands were replaced by another pair that were equally hot, equally strong. Before I knew it I was being lifted and redeposited over Axel's gorgeous, perfect body. He was flat on his back, gripping his enormous shaft by the base. In a daze, I watched it pulsing with his every heartbeat, as he guided it inside me and impaled me on it...

"Holy fuck... Holy FUCK..."

I straddled him all the way down, burying him deep, and the guys paused mercifully in their manipulations. They let me rock forward and back for a while, giving me time to get used to having Axel so fully inside me. It was always like that, whenever I fucked him. But right now I was about to do a lot more than just ride him.

"Okay, come on," I eventually murmured. "Let's try this."

"Let's *do* this," I heard Tyler chuckle. "Forget about try."

"Whatever."

Axel was starting to feel amazing inside me, as usual. The four of us had been fucking all night. Sucking and screwing and sixty-nining our way across the giant, king-sized bed, ever since we got back to our beautifully-decorated suite. There was a mirror on one wall, and the things I saw in that mirror made me feel like a filthy but glorious porn star. All that black and red, against white. The gleaming, glistening, thickly-muscled nakedness that surrounded me on all sides, pounding my willing body into happy oblivion.

I wanted to come so badly, especially because the guys had gone through great pains not to let me. But now I had the top position, and I could if I wanted to. I had to fight back the overwhelming desire to just lean forward and spread my palms over Axel's chest. To screw down on that beautiful monster, until the wonderful surge of endorphins flooded over my brain.

But this night was special, and so we were going to try something special. Something we'd talked about a bunch of times already.

“Lean forward, baby.”

I did as instructed, bringing my lips down over Axel's hot mouth. I gave him a slow, soul-searching kiss, pressing my tits warmly against his hard chest. His hands were planted firmly on my asscheeks. I could feel him pulling them apart, spreading them open...

Holy shit.

“*There we go.*”

I jumped as Zane slapped me on the rump, hard enough to leave a nice red handprint. I braced for a second hit on the opposite side, because I knew it was inevitable. As the more OCD of my three boyfriends, he liked to keep things even.

Besides that, I'd also learned that I *loved* being spanked. Hell, I'd learned that I loved a lot of things I never thought about doing before. Right now I had three times the opportunities, along with three times the number of eager teachers. And with three men instead of one, I could also do things and accomplish positions no woman with a single lover ever could.

Lucky, lucky you.

I jumped again as I felt Zane get in position, then remembered to relax. I'd done anal before. I very much enjoyed it, actually. But this... this was all new territory.

“You look so sexy fucking my friend,” Zane whispered nastily into my ear. The words made me melt even further into a puddle, as his hands slid around me from behind.

“You like watching me fuck your friends?” I teased back.

“Yes.”

“You like sharing me with them?”

Zane responded by burying his face in my neck. His kisses, coupled with his warm palms cupping my breasts, set my whole body on fire.

“I think you like being shared,” he growled back, chewing my neck. “I think you *love* fucking three friends at once.”

He took back one hand. I felt him using it to drag himself up and down along my tight little hole.

“Three best friends,” he went on hungrily, “who for years and years should’ve been fucking you *senseless*.”

The last words were wicked whispers, eliciting shivers that wracked my body. I was pinned between them. Writhing and twisting and—

Very slowly, Zane pushed inside. I gasped as he entered me, gliding into my ass. Filling me so amazingly full that I cried real tears, even as I cried out.

“You okay?”

I nodded quickly. Yes I was okay. I was pretty fucking fantastic actually.

“Do it,” I whispered. “Both of you...”

Axel’s hands squeezed my ass, and I felt him surge upward. At the same time, Zane began pistoning in and out of me. I didn’t have to tell them to go slow. I trusted them. I loved them. And I knew that somehow, though none of us had done anything remotely like this, my boys knew *exactly* what to do.

“Oh God...” I breathed, getting used to the exquisite feel of being double-penetrated. “Oh my fucking *God*...”

Off to my side, I heard Tyler chuckle. “Good?”

He kissed me, swirling his tongue through my mouth. I grabbed the back of his head and kissed him back, as his two closest friends in the world continued screwing me in tandem.

That’s it, I thought to myself. *You’re spoiled for life.*

I was! I really, really was. The whole thing felt so good it was actually terrifying. The fulfillment was total. The raw, primal rapture of being sandwiched between their two hard, surging bodies...

I began bucking and rolling. Moving my hips in time to their wonderful thrusts. Maybe it was because I'd been deprived all night, but I could already feel myself getting ready to climax. But with the two of them fitted so tightly and deeply inside me, I was almost afraid of squeezing their dicks off.

"Oh we're doing this all the fucking time," I grunted breathlessly. "No doubt."

"Every night?" Tyler kissed me.

I smiled against his lips. "I don't know about that..."

"Every night for the next two nights at least," Axel sighed from beneath me. His hands were kneading my asscheeks. Providing extra rhythm, as Zane continued pumping me.

"The next two nights?" I breathed.

"So we can each get a ride back there."

My eyes flitted open and I thumped him in the chest. "Honey, I don't know if you'll fit back there."

Buried to the hilt inside me, Axel laughed. "We'll see."

I felt the bed shift again, as Tyler stood up. And then he was pushing against my lips, entering my mouth. I opened wide for him, wrapping one hand around his thick shaft, while bracing myself with the other. Sucking and fucking and rolling my hips in obscene, beautiful circles.

And that was it — that was all it took. I let everything go, as the three people I loved most in the whole world took their pleasure in me, all at once. Tyler. Zane. Axel. All of them *inside* me. Each of them watching the other enjoy me in ways that no one ever, ever had. Or ever could. Except for them.

My orgasm came rushing up from my innermost of places. It exploded upward, outward, obliterating all other

thoughts as I trembled and clenched and screamed with a pleasure I couldn't possibly have imagined, not in my wildest dreams, my craziest thoughts, my most secret, depraved fantasies.

When it was over I collapsed forward onto Axel's chest, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. I was emotionally drained. Physically spent. Somewhere through the haze of euphoria I could feel them surging, pulsing, filling me with warmth and heat and love. Their individual cries of rapture echoed my own.

And everything was right in the world.

TYLER

Taking your girlfriend to lunch is one thing. Taking her to lunch with her *other* boyfriend, who also happens to be your best friend, is something else. The whole thing could've felt strange, or weird, or any number of other adjectives., but it sure as hell didn't. Axel and I had been like brothers for our entire lives. Ariana was merely an extension of our brotherhood, opening it up to all-new experiences, in all-new amazing ways.

“Umm... is that...”

But taking your girlfriend out to lunch with your best friend who also happens to be her boyfriend, when your ex-girlfriend is suddenly approaching the table?

Well, that's all kinds of awkward.

“Hi Tyler. Hey Axel.”

Lexus was wearing a white sweater with black leggings, and the boots I'd bought her last Christmas. She had a white knit hat with a pompom on it, which was for looks, not for warmth.

“Err... can we talk?”

She glared down at Ariana, who she hadn't even addressed. There had never been any love lost between them, but whatever thread of goodwill existed purely for the sake of

our friendship had apparently snapped in the wake of our breakup.

“I don’t need to talk, Alexandra. In fact—”

“*Lexus*,” she interrupted me, looking hurt. “You’ve never called me Alexandra.”

“He does now,” Ariana snapped. I could tell by her barely-contained restraint she’d somehow bitten off the word ‘bitch’ at the end of the sentence.

“Look, there’s something I need to tell you. Something important.” Now she did look at Ariana, and a bit pleadingly at that. “I promise it won’t take long.”

“You sure you don’t have Jagrbombs to do with *Malcolm*?” Ariana sneered.

Lexus appeared magnificently annoyed — a look I knew all too well. Somehow she bit her tongue, though.

“Go ahead,” Ari shrugged, bumping my leg. “Might as well see what ‘Lexus’ wants.”

I couldn’t believe it. Either this was some sort of twisted test by Ariana, or I had the most understanding girlfriend in the world. The way she went back to casually eating her tortellini didn’t help me either. And when I looked to Axel for help, he merely shrugged.

“Fine,” I said, standing up and dropping my napkin to the table. “Excuse me.”

I wasn’t about to walk out with Lexus, which is what she probably wanted. Instead, I guided her over to the waiting area at the front of the restaurant, which was currently empty.

“What is it you need, Alexandra?”

Lexus bit her bottom lip — a gesture I used to think was adorable. Now I saw it for what it was: a childish attempt at manipulation.

“Does Malcolm even know you’re here, or—“

“Malcolm is over,” she said glumly. “He was never really a thing to begin with.”

We stood toe to toe, staring at each other while her words sank in. I'm pretty sure she expected them to have some sort of impact. They didn't.

"I—I don't know what the hell I was thinking," Lexus went on. She spoke fast when she was nervous, and this was the fastest I'd ever heard her talk. "Maybe I was bored, or just restless... I dunno. Malcolm seemed fun and exciting at first, when everything was new. But I missed you, Tyler, whether I liked it or not. I kept missing you and shoving my feelings to the side, because missing you seemed wrong."

"Look, this isn't—"

"No please," she pleaded. "Let me finish."

I was three seconds from walking away. Only the look of genuine remorse on her face kept me from heading straight back to my table.

"One day I just turned around and said to myself: 'Lexus, what the fuck have you done?'," she blurted. "And my parents! When they found out we were no longer dating, the two of them went nuts! Especially my father. He's absolutely furious at me for screwing this up. I couldn't believe how much he actually loved you."

She lowered her head somberly. "And I really *did* screw up," Lexus admitted. "This was by far my worst decision ev—"

"Save it."

"Anyway, you know that job I kept saying my father could get you?"

My eyes narrowed. "You mean the one the two of you kept dangling over my head for *years*?"

She looked crushed. "Tyler, no. I—"

"The one he promised to give me when and if I actually married you?" I laughed. "We dated all that time, remember? And he still didn't trust me?"

“No, he—“

“I dropped out of school for you, Alexandra!” I shouted. “For *you*. Not for your father, or for some job that he held out like an unreachable carrot, or for any other reason than—“

“It pays six figures,” she said hurriedly. “And that’s only to start. Plus benefits of course, and there would be time for us to go on plenty of vacations...”

She looked up at me questioningly as her words trailed off.

“Us?” I scoffed.

“Tyler, I love you. I made a mistake.”

“*Us*?”

“You have no idea what it’s like to—“

“Listen to me carefully,” I said icily, my words cold enough that her gaze drifted upward again. I stared into those pretty blue eyes one last time. It was the only thing pretty about her now. “There *is* no us, Lexus. Not anymore. I don’t know if there ever really was, but whatever we once had together is completely and totally over.”

Those eyes went glassy. Her nostrils flared. But for once, there was finally comprehension in her pained expression. She was past denial, and acceptance was just around the corner. I felt badly, but only for her pain. Not for any other reason whatsoever.

“I— I understand,” she said finally.

I nodded slowly. “Good.”

“And I want you to know something: the job is yours even if we don’t get back together. My father wanted me to be perfectly clear on that. He’s wanted to hire you for a long time now, but I think I was the one standing in the way.”

She sniffed, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. “I’ve stood in the way of a lot of things for you, Tyler. But I don’t want to stand in the way of this.”

ZANE

I'd been to hundreds of scrimmages, but never one this serious. Every one of the players and coaches were here. Hell, even the *owner* was here, along with AHL scouts, ex-players, and a crowd of people larger than any one of our games — even the time we played the Scorgasms in the finals.

Best of all, the planets had finally aligned. I was playing my best game in a worst-case scenario; a two-period shutout against one of the most offensive teams in the junior pro division. Our defense was being badly beaten, but I'd stopped shots that dropped jaws. I'd come out of the crease to foil three separate breakaway attempts, and even caught a fourth between my waffle and the side of my lucky mask.

None of this, of course, made Darren very happy.

“You're in,” coach Veraldi signaled to him at the start of the third. He jerked a thumb toward me. “Be like him and keep the puck out of the net.”

The starting goalie — who hadn't started the scrimmage — gave me such a venomous look of utter disdain I had to laugh. My laughter made things worse, of course. His lips were curled back, his face a cherry red color by the time he flipped his mask down and skated off, just as the ref was bringing the centers together for the face-off.

I watched from the bench, enduring a few rough but congratulatory back-pats from my fellow teammates. I'd

played well and they knew it. Outclassed and outgunned, they were doing the best they could against a semi-pro team. Yet we were still in this because of me.

It felt totally strange, looking around my bench and not seeing Tyler, or Axel. There was no Blake, no Aaron, no Nathan, no Kyle. There was more seriousness and paying attention to the game at hand, and a lot less fucking around. The surface we were playing on was beautifully-kept, instead of run-down. Even the crowd was foreign to me.

I couldn't think about any of these things, though. Not at the moment, at least. Ariana had been right; this was the chance I never took — the one last shot at something bigger and better than anything we'd done before. If I had to walk this path without my friends by my side, so be it. They'd have to understand. I already decided that I really fucking *wanted* this. In the back of my mind, I always had.

BZZZZZZZZZZTTTT!

The crowd on one side of the little arena erupted as one of the teams finally scored. It wasn't our team, unfortunately.

“Dammit!”

I thought I heard the head coach swear, then realized it was the owner. He seemed like a nice enough guy, with even nicer kids — twin boys and a little girl. They played on the ice between periods, skating awkwardly, holding hands. It dragged up fond old memories of when I first learned to lace up my skates.

Right now though, the owner had come down to the seats just above the bench. He was talking animatedly to the head coach, and he didn't look pleased. The entire bench went church-quiet, almost instantly. Including me.

Then he pointed at me... and I saw the head coach shrug.

“He's mad that coach pulled you.”

The voice belonged to Troy, my left-winger. He elbowed me subtly as he said it.

“It’s only a scrimmage,” I muttered. “It’s not like—“

“He should’ve left you out there,” Troy said firmly, staring down at his stick. “You’re on fire right now. You don’t pull someone who’s playing like that.”

The game resumed, and the owner headed back to his seat. Troy’s hair was matted to his forehead by a line of sweat. He wiped it away before it could drip into his eyes.

“Scrimmage or no scrimmage, we want to win this one.”

I watched him hop over the boards at the next shift change. Before he made it back however, the other team scored again.

“FUCK!”

One of our defensemen was cursing now. A guy who’d been grateful, because earlier I saved two breakaways that had gotten around him.

“This isn’t—“

The assistant coach got a signal, and held up his hands in a ‘T.’ The referee blew the whistle. Everyone skated over for the time out.

Everyone except our goalie, Darren.

“Get in here!” coach Veraldi demanded, waving his arm.

Darren pretended not to see or hear. He was tipping his mask up and reaching for his water bottle when one of the line refs tapped him and pointed to our bench.

He shook his head angrily. Eventually he skated over, hanging back outside the circle of players who were already talking to the coach.

“SIT DOWN,” the head coach told him angrily. The coach then looked at me, and waved me in.

“What?” Darren demanded angrily. “*Him?*”

Both coaches ignored him. Coach Veraldi was talking to the linesmen, discussing strategy. The head coach was in conversation with the owner again, who'd come back down.

“NO!” Darren cried. “NO FUCKING WAY!”

“I think you're out, son,” one of the refs said. He put a hand on his shoulder to guide him to the open door. “Now get off the—”

All of sudden, everything seemed to happen at once.

Darren shrugged off the ref who'd touched him, then spun away. He ripped off his mask and flung it full-speed across the ice...

... right toward the back corner, where the owner's three kids were skating in a shaky, uncertain circle.

The crowd gasped. The referee screamed. The mask skidded past the icing line and bounced right into the little girl's knees, totally taking her out. She fell face-forward, one hand still clutching her brother's hand, the other held out before her, trying desperately to break her fall.

I was over the boards and on the guy before she even hit the ice.

“FUCKER!”

The goaltender's horrified expression didn't even have time to turn to fear. I tackled him dead-center, sprawling him backwards, hurling him to the ice. Shrugging my blocker off I straddled his body and began punching him repeatedly in the face, heedless of what might happen to me, regardless of whether or not I would still be on the team, or in the back of a police car by the end of the night, or whatever. The only thing that mattered was making him pay. Erasing the frightened look on the little girl's face from my mind, by punishing this careless brat the only way I knew.

I don't remember being pulled off him, but eventually I was. Darren was on his knees, coughing profusely, spitting out his bloody mouthguard. Nobody paid him any attention, though. Everyone was huddled around the crying little girl, who by now had been picked up by the team's furious owner.

“You probably should get the hell out of here before the police show up.”

I stiffened at the sound of coach Veraldi’s voice behind me. My shoulders slumped.

“Not you, kid. *Him*.”

He pointed at Darren, as the rest of the team gathered around me.

“You’re finished,” he told the goaltender. “We’ll pack out your locker for you, just leave.”

A blood-bubble broke between Darren’s lips as he attempted to speak. “But—“

“Leave the building before I call security,” the assistant coach snapped.

The goalie stood up on shaky legs. “Coach, listen!” he said pleadingly. “I didn’t—“

“NOW!”

Someone from the team hit him in the face with his own thrown glove. Another grabbed the goalie’s stick and shoved it butt-first into his midsection. Darren was crying now, utterly miserable. He skated off just as someone else shoved him, exiting the ice on the opposite end of the arena.

Eventually the crowd of people dispersed, and people began filing off the ice. The owner walked off holding his daughter over his shoulder, the head coach beside him. He was patting her on the back as they went.

“She’s okay,” one of the refs said, skating over. “A little rattled, but she didn’t hit her head or anything.”

The whole team and I nodded, relieved. “Good.”

“You ready?”

The ref pointed at the empty crease. I looked back at coach Veraldi, who nodded.

“You’re all ours now, kid,” he said, raising an approving eyebrow. “I mean, in all likelihood, you were

already going to be. But now it's official.”

Official.

Hands were clapping me on the back — multiple hands. What felt like a dream sure seemed like an abrupt reality. Especially with all the blood and adrenaline still pumping through me.

“Welcome to the River Kings.”

ARIANA

The look of shock on Zane's face as he skated off the ice was absolutely priceless. I wanted to save it forever. Print it out and pin it up on the wall, so the rest of us could always enjoy it.

“What the hell...”

He looked exhausted, but exhilarated. Tired and excited and surprised to see us, all at the same time.

“You looked great out there,” Axel smiled, punching him square on the shoulder-pads.

“Yeah,” Tyler laughed. “Why can't you play that way for *us*?”

Zane's look of shock and surprise faded almost entirely at once. He looked suddenly guilty.

“Oh stop it,” said Axel. “He's only kidding and you know it. We're proud of you, man. You kicked ass out there.

“Yeah?” Zane said wearily. “But we didn't win.”

“You lost because of that asshat who threw his mask,” said Tyler. “But otherwise...”

The three of them exchanged knowing glances, and for a few seconds there was only silence between them. Nothing really needed to be said.

Zane eventually shrugged.

“I— I just didn’t want you to—“

“Know you were moonlighting for one of the best teams around here?” asked Tyler.

A few of his teammates skated past him, patting him on his head on the way to the locker room. A few of them had their gloves still on.

“Was that Jaime *Gassaway*?” asked Axel.

Zane didn’t say anything.

“You’re playing with *him*?”

“He’s playing with me,” Zane corrected him with a smirk. He hopped off the ice and stood upright again. “And yeah. I sure as fuck am.”

His gaze found mine, and relief flooded through me. Instead of being angry at me for telling the others — and even bringing them here unannounced — Zane was silently beaming at me.

“Well this explains it then,” said Tyler. “Why you’ve been missing in action lately.”

“I know,” Zane said quickly. “And I’m sorry, I really am. I would’ve told you. I mean, I *should’ve* told you, but—”

“At first we just thought it was more stuff with your mom,” said Axel.

Holding his lucky mask tucked under one arm, Zane shook his head.

“Nah,” he said. “Mom’s good. Better than good, actually.”

“Oh?”

“She’s finally going to move in with aunt Janet,” he explained. “My siblings and I convinced her a few days ago. We have a real estate agent listing the house this week. Lillian and Jackson are even flying down to help pack shit up.”

“Dude, that’s fucking *awesome*,” Axel swore.

“It is,” Zane said. The relief in his voice was unmistakable. “It really, really is.”

He looked over his shoulder. The coaches were almost done talking.

“It comes at the perfect time, too,” Zane added. “Not worrying about mom gives me the freedom to move around. To travel wherever I’m needed.”

Tyler jerked his chin. “With this team you’ll be traveling a lot.”

“Yeah,” said Zane.

“Enough that you’ll miss some of our games,” said Axel.

Zane and I looked at each other. We were both thinking the same thing.

“I’m afraid I’m going to miss *all* of our games,” he said glumly. “Once I sign with the River Kings, that’s it. I’m theirs.”

Axel nodded understandingly. “Can’t have you getting hurt playing street hockey,” he joked.

“No,” Zane agreed.

“It’s for the best anyway,” said Tyler. “We can finally give Kyle a shot. He’s always wanted to play goalie anyway.”

“I know,” said Zane. “But I mean... I still feel bad.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll be the first time we’re not playing together since we were kids.”

Axel shook his head. “Not true. We played without you when we went off to school, remember?”

“I know, but—“

“And you stayed home and took shots at *this* net,” Tyler said pointedly, grabbing me around the waist. He pulled me close, squeezing me against him. “We still don’t forgive you for that, by the way. You broke her in without us.”

I poked him. “And how do you know I didn’t break *him* in?” I asked slyly.

Axel laughed. Zane too.

“She’s right,” Zane said. “If I remember it right, she almost broke me that week.”

“Two weeks,” I corrected him. “Nonstop. Every day, every night—“

“Alright, alright,” Tyler cut in. “Now you’re *both* trying to make us jealous.”

“Hey, you were the ones who went away to college,” I teased. “And would you rather I stayed a virgin forever?”

“No,” Axel agreed. “Definitely not.”

“Then you should be thanking this guy,” I bumped Zane, “for stamping my V-card. For getting the proverbial ball rolling.”

“Among other things,” Zane winked.

“The point is, this is something you could’ve told us,” said Axel. “We’re on your team, Zane. Always.”

“Yeah, totally,” said Tyler. “Did you really think we wouldn’t understand?”

The coaches finished up and headed into the locker room. Zane would be expected in there, I knew.

“Go,” we told him in unison. “Do your thing.”

“When you get out, we’ll be waiting right here,” said Tyler. “So you can take us out for drinks to celebrate.”

“And just so there’s no misconception,” winked Axel, “you’re buying.”

Zane nodded and gathered his things. His cheeks were flush. His eyes glowed with an inner, competitive fire that had been missing for some time now. It occurred to me that I’d known him a long time, and very intimately at that.

But I’d never seen him so happy.

ARIANA

“You sure you’re okay with me not playing on the team anymore?” Zane asked, one last time.

“Are you kidding?” asked Axel. “You know you’re on the River Kings, right?”

“Of course,” said Zane. “Even so... It’ll be the end of an era.”

Tyler sat at the bar, using the swizzle stick to swirl the ice around in his empty glass. He looked introspective.

“Sure will,” he lamented. “But we’re not kids anymore. We can’t play in the sandbox forever.”

His somber expression of pride for his friend had me all choked up. Not since childhood had I seen him so happy, yet at the same time, so very sad.

“Everything ends eventually,” Axel sighed. He held up his beer. “We had a good run, though.”

“The best run,” I toasted him.

“Remember John Cardillo?” Tyler suddenly asked.

The others looked skeptical. “The kid who always skateboarded?”

“Yeah, him. He and his friends used to hang out on the side of the 7-11 all the time, drinking Slurpees and skating tricks in the lot. All throughout our childhood. Without fail.”

“They were there every time I went,” Zane agreed.

“Right? But then one by one, they suddenly weren’t,” said Tyler. “There were five of them, then four, then three, then two. And then one day I ran into John and he was all by himself. This was after high school. And he was still there, leaning against that wall. Still waiting for his friends, like he had for years and years.”

“Fuck, that’s depressing,” said Axel.

“Right?” Tyler agreed. “And on that day, I remember talking to him, asking him if the others were coming down to meet him. And he turned to me with this strange look in his eye. Like he hadn’t realized what he was still doing against the wall.”

Tyler was lost in the memory. Reverently, he shook his head.

“And then John shrugged,” Tyler continued. “He looked at me and said ‘I guess not,’ and that was it. He just tucked his skateboard under his arm and he walked off. And after that day, no matter how many times I went back, I never saw him again.”

Axel, stunned by the profundity of the story, sat there with his mouth open. I had to admit, I felt the same way.

“The point is, nothing lasts forever,” said Tyler. “It’s better to walk away like this, together as a team, than to be the last guy standing outside, leaning against that wall.”

Silence descended for a moment, drowning out the din of the crowd. Zane raised the pint of beer he was drinking.

“That’s goddamn beautiful, bro.”

Axel laughed. “Right? I almost cried.”

“It still doesn’t mean I’m gonna miss you when I’m away in New York,” said Zane.

The three of us looked at him together, as one. He shrugged.

“I’d heard rumors that they’re moving the team up near Rochester,” he explained. “I found out tonight, it turns out they’re true.”

For a moment no one said anything at all. It was news to me, but an even bigger adjustment for Tyler and Axel. In the span of an hour the guys had gone from losing Zane as a teammate to losing him entirely, clear on the other side of the country.

“The River Kings,” swore Axel. “I still can’t believe you didn’t tell us.”

“Yeah, well...”

Tyler cleared his throat. “There’s something I didn’t tell the three of you either.”

I whirled on him. This was a surprise I hadn’t expected.

“Alexandra’s father finally offered me a job with his company. A good one. Tons of money. And I don’t even have to speak to his daughter again.”

My mouth dropped open. He’d been after this job forever.

“Tyler that’s... that’s great.”

He laughed and shook his head. “No it’s not. It’s miserable.”

“But you said it pays tons of money,” Axel pointed out.

“Oh yeah.”

“So you’re at least considering it?” asked Zane.

“Fuck no. Not even a little bit.”

I was shocked and relieved at the same time, but I also felt terrible. The job had always been a carrot Lexus dangled to keep Tyler interested in her. Now it was a lure she was using to get him back. I wasn’t worried about that part, but Tyler’s job prospects had remained pretty much in neutral while he’d waited on this. And now that it was finally here, he had to turn it down.

“So what are you going to do?” asked Axel.

Tyler drained his beer and shrugged. “Look, I’m tired of doing odd jobs, of drifting from place to place. It would be amazing to settle down, to have a career. But not with him, and not with Alexandra around. And maybe, not even here.”

“What do you mean?”

“You ever wanna just get away? Go somewhere else?” Raising a finger, he called for another pint. “I mean, we grew up in Seattle. We’re still here, after all these years.”

“Amen to that,” said Axel.

“Might be cool to see somewhere else,” Tyler went on. “Anywhere else, actually.”

“You mean like upstate New York?”

The question came from Axel, not Zane. His expression looked almost hopeful.

“I wasn’t thinking of anywhere specific,” Tyler lied. “But yeah. I’ve heard upstate New York is pretty fucking amazing.”

Zane’s eyebrows came together so hard it looked like they touched. “Are you saying the rest of you would—“

“Why the hell not?” asked Axel. “Rochester’s a huge hockey town, plus you’ve got Buffalo right on the Canadian border. It would be nice to see the eastern cities, no? Toronto. Montreal...”

“Ottawa...” I added slyly.

A huge smile began playing its way across my face. I couldn’t help it.

“Really, Ari?” asked Zane, poking me. “You too?”

“Sure,” I shrugged. “Why the hell not? Semester’s almost over, and I need to move anyway. Plus, Tyler’s right. Maybe we’ve all been here too long. Grown too comfortable. We’re stagnating.”

“Time to leave the side of the 7-11?”

“Damn straight.”

I could see Zane getting excited. I had to admit I was pretty excited myself.

“Holy shit, could we actually do this?” asked Tyler.

“Well I’m pretty sure I’m done at the lumberyard,” grinned Axel. “And GreatSkates is going to shut down soon, anyway.”

“If it doesn’t collapse first,” Zane rolled his eyes.

“So if you’re up for it, and Ari’s coming with us...” Axel beamed. “Yeah! Why the hell not?”

There was a hug, and a toast, and another hug even tighter than the first. And after that we drank our faces off, before staggering back to the loft to celebrate in other, more carnal ways.

In the end though, it was the camaraderie that decided our future. The solidarity of four interwoven destinies moving forward with the same common goal. It was a goal I knew we’d ultimately achieve, no matter where we went, no matter what challenges we faced on the unknown horizon.

As long as the four of us faced them together.

Epilogue

ARIANA

“Ummm... miss?”

“Yes?”

“There’s a dick in my coffee again,” said Axel. He looked down. “Three dicks, actually.”

Still wiping down the espresso machine, I smiled coyly. “So?”

“So what do you have to say for yourself?”

I dropped the rag and stared back at him. Axel’s expression of mock outrage was so silly, we both broke out laughing.

“Hey,” I shrugged, when the laughter died down. “I draw what I know.”

We finished shutting down the place, and Axel helped me turn the lights off and lock up. The short walk to my Jeep was in near pitch darkness, and swept by frozen winds. Because if I’d learned one thing over the past year, and one thing only, it was this:

Rochester was *cold*.

“How’d you do today?” he asked.

“Not bad actually. Big rush in the morning, as always. But there was a good afternoon crowd today as well.”

“Anything Instagrammable?”

It was cute, watching him ask such questions. Axel knew very little about social media, but he knew it was important to me. In fact, support from my fans had made the place I’d just locked the doors to even possible.

I turned and looked back at my humble little coffee shop. Steam Queen was named after my TikTok and Instagram handles, which had turned into Twitter and Facebook and everything else. I’d been able to rent this cute little corner of the building with money made from chronicling my journey as a coffee shop owner over social media. That, plus my borderline racy (but hilarious) creations, had won me more than a million followers in the last six months alone.

Sure, it wasn’t an art studio. But one day it would be. Maybe not this building, or even this part of the city. But in time, I’d get there. I knew I’d make it happen.

“We picking up food?” I asked hopefully.

“Nah. Tyler’s cooking.”

“Oh *really?*” I chuckled.

“Well I’m starving,” said Axel, “so I made him promise not to do anything weird tonight.”

Weird was putting it mildly. In living with the boys I’d seen a lot of strange things, but Tyler was responsible for a lot of experimental stuff like baking french fries into pizza, or putting raisins in his meatballs. You never knew what he might do next, so if you were really hungry, you might ask him to rein it in.

Eventually we reached the Jeep. Icicles of dirty slush clung to the step-bars, as well as the front bumper. My vanity plates were still visible, however. The ones the guys had surprised me with that read: OUTNMBRD.

“Wanna drive?”

I tossed Axel the keys before he even answered. He took them, adjusted my seat all the way back, and we began the long trek home.

The coffee shop was on the outskirts of the city, but the house we'd bought together was nearly an hour away. Nestled in a cute little valley between two mountains, we'd gotten a big old house with great bones on an old piece of land. A fixer-upper for sure, but the guys were handy like that. Plus, we got the place cheap knowing we'd have to do the repairs ourselves.

“What’s on the agenda tonight?” I asked, rubbing my hands together, waiting for the heat to come up.

“Not sure,” lied Axel.

I punched him playfully. “You know damn well it’s my turn tonight.”

“It is?”

“Hell yes. Especially after what I did for the two of you during that football game...”

Axel smiled, and my stomach went queasy just thinking about it. I'd come out during halftime in a cheerleader's outfit, then proceeded to give he and Tyler lap dances until they were bursting from their jeans. I served them drinks. I served them food. I swallowed them one by one, alternating back and forth, letting them watch the entire third quarter before mounting them and fucking their brains out.

“Tonight I want to start upstairs,” I sighed, sinking into my seat. “Double oil massage, followed by ladies choice—“

“Ladies choice?” Axel asked, amused. “And what would that be?”

“You’ll just have to see,” I teased. “After that we’ll sit down to eat, and then... well...”

I unbuckled my seat belt temporarily, then leaned over to kiss his neck. Axel moaned, lolling his head to one side as I dragged my tongue ever so slowly over his salty, musky skin. I slid one hand into his jacket, my hand wandering over his hard chest. The other was busy making its way up his thigh...

Tell him to pull over.

I could, of course. I'd done it before. On a night this cold, when we could still see our breath, mounting and riding him would work up a good sweat between us.

"You're going to make me crash."

I laughed and continued nuzzling his neck. "But the road's straight."

"Even so..."

I giggled and began rubbing him through his jeans. If I didn't want to get home so quickly, I'd be fucking Axel already. Or I could just yank everything down and blow him for the next few miles. Either way...

"Alright, fine," I said, patting him firmly before retreating to my side of the vehicle. "We'll save all the fun for later. More anticipation. Bigger payoff."

"Agreed," he said, somewhat relieved.

"Besides, you guys owe *me* a night of pampering. Not the other way around."

"Don't worry," Axel assured me. "You're going to be *very* happy tonight."

He continued driving, but now there was a strange grin on his face I couldn't quite figure out. I settled back to let the warm air from the Jeep's vents flow over me. Reminiscing about all the wonderful changes over the past year, and all the good things our move had brought so far.

If having three hot boyfriends had been amazing back in Seattle, living with them in the same cozy house was totally over the top. Now, a year later, it was all finally coming together. We'd pooled our resources to afford the mortgage on an incredible place that needed an even more incredible amount of work. Still, I had three strapping guys to help whip it into shape. I myself worked mostly outside, reclaiming a lot of the overgrown paths and gardens that had made the place so beautiful many decades ago.

The best part was that everything was ours, as far as the eye could see. Bit by bit, piece by piece, we were making

the place home.

Zane traveled with the team for a good chunk of the time, but even while home he was constantly practicing in the city. We made up for lost time together whenever he got back, and the others took very good care of me during the times he was away. Our favorite times were when we were all together, though. Laughing and drinking and reminiscing about all the great times we had growing up together, and of course, there were many of those.

Another advantage of moving to New York was that Zane was closer to his relatives. Lillian and her family lived in Connecticut, just a state away. And visiting Zane's mom was an easy three-and-a-half hour flight to Florida; a trip we took in twos and threes, just to get some sun.

The truth was, we needed this. Getting out of a big city like Seattle seemed tough at first, but there were so many positive changes it was hard to miss it. Tyler and Axel found work together with the same construction company, and were currently moving toward GC'ing their own jobs. And with all the good lumber in every direction, Axel was in talks to take over a supply house. With his vast experience they could incorporate the place into their new venture, which included a stone masonry yard as well.

Between my coffee shop, their new business, and Zane kicking ass with the River Kings, we were almost too busy for anything else. But no matter what, when the sun went down, we always made time for each other.

I drifted through all these pleasant thoughts and more, leaning on Axel's shoulder until we rolled up our long, gravel driveway. I saw Zane's truck immediately, even before I saw him. He was halfway back to the house, a load of firewood dangling from a carry bag at the end of each arm.

“YESSSSS!”

Throwing the Jeep's door open, I crunched my way across the driveway in a full-blown sprint and flung myself bodily into his arms. Zane dropped the firewood and stepped back, laughing and cursing. Twirling and lifting and kissing

me in a circle, as he moved to avoid tripping over the pile of spilled logs.

“You’re back!” I cried. “For how long!?”

“Day or two.”

“But we haven’t seen you for *weeks!*”

Beneath my hands, I felt his big shoulders shrug. “Sorry, baby. There’s a week-long combine up in Oakville, Ontario. A couple of tournaments in Saskatchewan. And then there’s—“

I kissed him again, this time deeper and longer and with much greater intent. It didn’t matter where he was going, really, or when he’d get back. All that mattered was the time we had.

And I planned on making the most of it.

“Tyler’s cooking,” I told him, once I was back on my feet. I took his hand and began pulling him toward the house. “That means we’ve got enough time.”

“Time for?”

“For me to take you upstairs,” I winked. “And welcome you home properly.”

Axel stood nearby, hands on his hips. His grin was a knowing smirk.

“He can come too, of course,” I smirked back, nodding his way. I jabbed a finger into Zane’s chest. “But you’re going first.”

I pulled him into the house, with Axel following close behind. I knew immediately there was a fire going. I could smell it from out in the driveway, but now I could actually see the flickering flames. Even better I could feel the uniqueness of the warming heat against my skin, driving away the winter chill.

“She found you, huh?” Tyler called out to Zane. He was standing before the stove in the kitchen, licking his middle finger.

“Yeah.”

He laughed. “Take her upstairs, then. We’ve got a half-hour before dinner anyway.”

“A half hour?” Axel grumbled.

“Sorry, yeah.”

“A half-hour’s plenty of time,” I shot back. “You know the damage I could do to you boys in a half-hour?”

Tyler chuckled. Axel rolled his eyes.

“We created a monster, didn’t we?”

“Yup,” Zane agreed. “Sure did.”

“Might as well take advantage of this monster then,” I told all three of them. I blew Tyler a sensual kiss. “C’mon. Head upstairs with us. Zane’s getting his brains fucked out first, but it’ll be a lot more fun with you two watching.”

My stomach erupted with butterflies as Tyler began untying his apron. I winked at him.

“And I *know* you like to watch.”

Zane was pulling *me* now, instead of the other way around. In the meantime, Axel’s hands had moved to my ass. The last thing I saw was Tyler turning the stove down, and then I was being carried over one giant shoulder and up a creaky old flight of stairs.

“Better make this fast,” I heard Tyler say. “I don’t want to burn the sauce.”

“Burning the sauce might be an improvement,” Zane grumbled.

“We’ll make it quick,” I assured them. “Down and dirty. In fact—“

The rest of my sentence was cut off as I was thrown onto the biggest bed in the house: my bed. My body bounced only once. Before I’d even landed on the mattress again, someone was yanking my pants and shoes off.

“You know it’s been a while,” said Zane, pulling his shirt off as Axel and Tyler continued stripping me for him. That part was a huge turn-on. “So it’s definitely going to be fast. At least for me.”

“Fast is good,” I chuckled, as he buried his face in my breasts. “We can always do slow later on.”

Zane appeared to be done talking. He was too busy kneeling my thighs apart and climbing between my legs. I spread wide for him, clawing his broad back and sighing happily as he sank straight into me. I hadn’t even touched him yet and he was already rock-hard.

Damn, Ariana.

My eyes closed and mind drifted away, soaring through happy, happy places as Zane kept plowing away. It was heaven. Beyond heaven.

What the hell did you do to deserve this?

I didn’t know. I didn’t care. All I knew was that I was exactly where I wanted to be in life, right here, with the men I loved.

A hand caressed my face. Someone kissed me... then passed me off to be kissed again. Zane’s body went rigid, and before long he was erupting inside me. I urged him on, kicking my heels into his tightly-clenching ass as he moaned and groaned and dumped his seed achingly deep in my womb.

Friends.

Zane withdrew and Axel took his place. Or was it Tyler? I was too far gone to know, or to even care. I only spread wider, welcoming whoever it was inside. Bucking my hips upward to meet their uniquely new thrusts, as I drifted along the edge between nirvana and oblivion.

Best friends.

They say the best marriages happen when you end up marrying your best friend — or friends, as the case may be. I just don’t think anyone imagined the saying to be this literal. And yes, I could see myself marrying these men. I could see

myself bearing their children, and raising them together. One big, beautiful family, in this place or the next.

This place is beautiful though, I smiled happily. *This place—*

There was another surge, another hard body clenched tightly against mine as my next lover filled me with his warmth and heat. I looked up deliriously into Axel's eyes, just as he finished inside me. He was only half there, though. Physically he was still shoving himself deep, pulsing into me, but emotionally and mentally he was gone... hopelessly lost in the dreamlike world of post-orgasmic bliss.

I thought about how deeply I loved them, as Tyler moved to take me last. It had begun with him: the boy next door. The one you grew up with, the one you loved and admired but never considered as anything but the friend he was because daring to believe you'd actually end up with him might break the spell, or jinx destiny. Somehow though, I'd played my cards right. I'd gained the love and trust and lifelong memories of being Tyler's best friend, and his best friends' friend as well, until the four of us — hopelessly inseparable; already — were drawn inexorably together in that one, final way. *This* way. The way that would forever cement our lives and rattle the dice of the future together, in the same beautiful cup, rather than apart, with people we couldn't possibly love as much as we already did.

Tyler held me close now, kissing me softly. Murmuring words into my ear that were both sweet and hot and deliciously sexy, telling me how wet and wonderful I felt, how much he truly loved me. He nuzzled my ear, kissing me one final time before murmuring those words, promising that he'd love me forever and that we'd never, ever be apart. And with that, I was coming around him. Twisting and gasping and squeezing him from the hottest depths of my womanhood, until he couldn't take another moment, and gave me everything that he had.

“Holy *fuck*, Ari...”

It was a mantra I probably heard several times a week. I used to laugh at it. Now, just hearing it drop from the lips of the men I'd wholly and completely satisfied made me insanely happy.

I had friendship. I had love. I had the adoration of the three most important people in the world to me, not to mention a new home, a new life, a new business. When I looked up I saw a horizon that was radically different than the one from only a year ago, though it was no less far away. We just had more to look forward to, now. That many more unknowns, spread out before us in the near and distant future.

And I, for one, couldn't wait to see what adventures were coming next.



BONUS EPILOGUE



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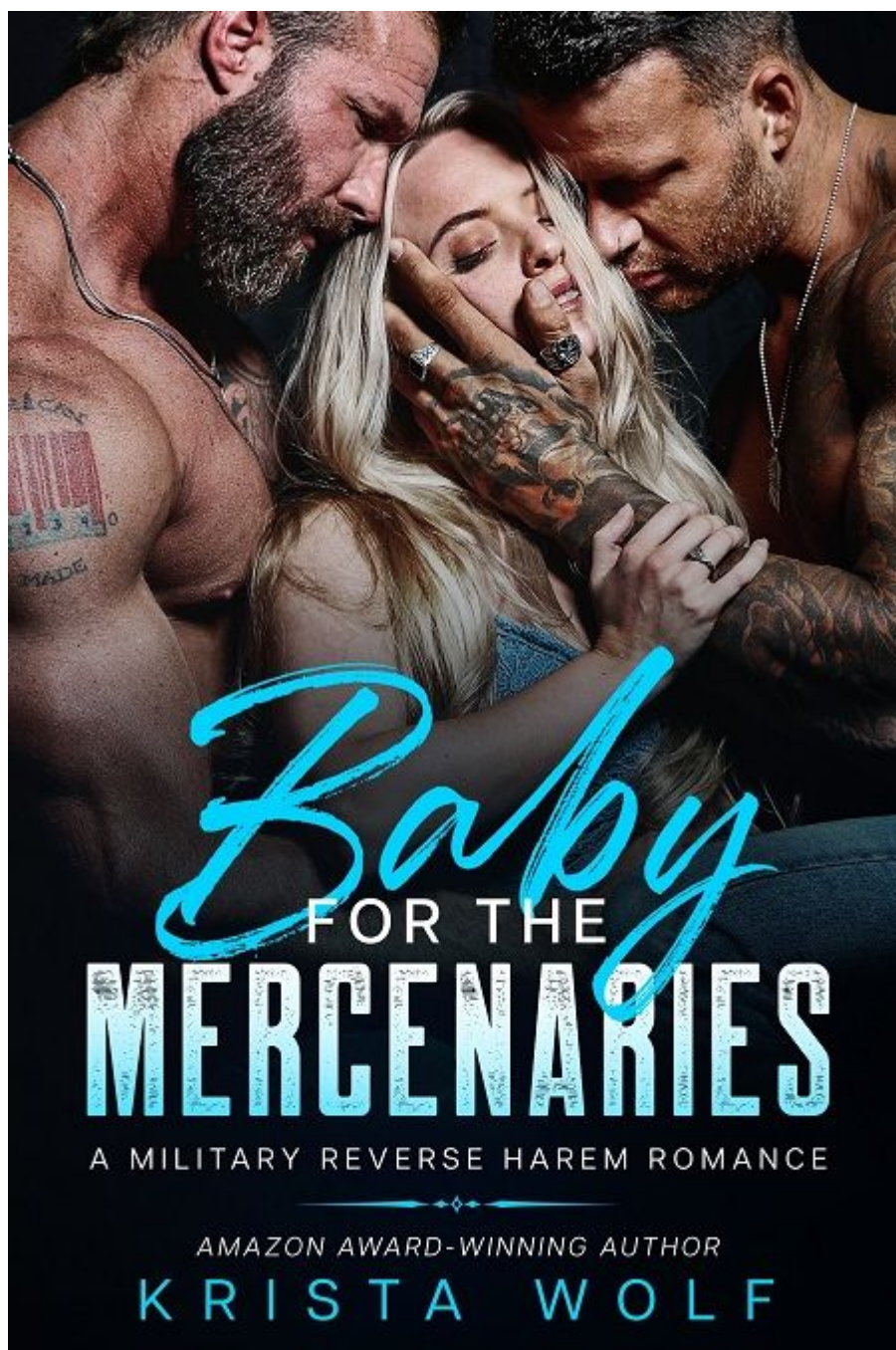
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Need more Reverse Harem?

Thanks for checking out *Best Friends Never Kiss*. Here's hoping it blew your doors off!

And for even *more* sweltering reverse harem heat? Check out: [Baby for the Mercenaries](#). Below you'll find a preview of the sexy, sizzling cover, plus the first several chapters so you can see for yourself:



QUINN

“Are you absolutely *sure* you don’t want to come in?”

My voice was virtually a whisper now, and that’s because our faces were practically touching. Evan held my gaze, his green eyes boring hotly into mine. I could feel the heat from his face. It radiated toward me with a whiff of leather, musk, and steel...

“I shouldn’t.”

If he was playing a game, he was playing it well. The butterflies in my stomach began ricocheting like little rockets.

“It’s only a *drink*,” I lied through my teeth. “And if you don’t want alcohol I could make coffee, or—”

He shifted ever so slightly forward, and his lips brushed mine. I sighed in exuberant triumph.

Yes!

My eyes fluttered closed, waiting for that first rapturous moment that our faces would come crashing together. Already I could imagine his hands on my hips. In my mind’s eye I could see those massive shoulders rolling forward, his deliciously-tattooed arms flexing as they took hold of my body, to do with it whatever he damn well wanted.

But as the seconds ticked by, nothing happened.

I opened my eyes to a barren, empty street. Evan was gone. I was standing on the threshold of my building’s front door, well after midnight, totally and completely alone.

Huh?

He was the hottest guy I’d ever been on a date with, and that was saying a lot. Evan was unfathomably tall, with luxurious dark hair you could lose your hands in and a V-shaped back that could carry the world. He had the arms of a superhero. The face of a supermodel. The ass of a—

What the FUCK?

I still couldn't believe the street was empty! We'd had dinner at a beautiful Italian restaurant, then drinks at the cutest Irish pub in all of Boston. We'd flirted and held hands while walking through Christopher Columbus Park, picking our way through the flower-lined trails. Hell, we'd even stopped for ice cream.

And now he was gone, without so much as a goodbye — much less a first kiss. Much less even more than *that*, because between our incredible sexual chemistry and my long stretch of unwelcome celibacy — not to mention my current hormonal condition — I was pretty much willing to throw myself over the nearest piece of furniture and let him do absolutely *anything*.

“This is fucked.”

My words fell flat against the humid night air, especially in the wee hours of the morning. Somewhere off in the distance, a dog howled mournfully. It seemed fitting.

“Yeah, right back at you.”

I turned and stepped into the lobby of my apartment building; a black-and-white tiled foyer of dirty open space that was even lonelier than the empty street. I had four flights of stairs to climb. I could've taken the elevator, but it would've taken three times as long. Besides, each trip in that rickety deathtrap was like rolling the dice with the Grim Reaper himself.

Putting one foot after the other, my body still surged with the adrenaline of what *might* have been. My libido was extremely unhappy with me.

Twice in one week, Quinn?

Through tightly clenched teeth, I let out a heated sigh. Yeah, I guess so. Give or take a day or two.

Maybe you're losing your touch?

I passed the mirror on the third floor landing, taking quick stock of myself for the first time since the bathroom of the Italian restaurant. My hair had fallen a little, but my makeup still held up. My best 'night out' dress still hugged my

many strategic curves, which at this point were still in all the right places.

For now, anyway.

No, I definitely looked sultry. Sexy. Maybe even irresistible. Which is why it was so surprising that not one, but *two* different men had left me dangling in the wind. Both had been beautifully built to the point of being genetically gifted. And both of these heartbreakingly gorgeous specimens had taken me out on whirlwind dates.

I'd given the signals. I'd given the signs. I'd even received many of those signs back, which led me to believe the runway was wide open and we were cleared for landing.

Yet both of them had left me standing at my doorstep, wondering if my lips were poison.

I reached my door, clicked the lock, and pushed my way into my woefully empty apartment. The sound of my keys clacking against the counter was the loneliest sound in the world.

Dammit.

The situation wasn't just dire, it was confusing as hell. Which meant there was only one thing left to do:

Take Meghan to lunch.

EVAN

There were a few sounds you never really forgot, no matter how much you wanted to. For me, unfortunately, it was the almost musical rattle of teeth clattering across pavement.

“UnghhhHHH!”

My attacker rolled sideways across the darkened alley, his ruined mouth now a fountain of blood. I couldn’t see the knife anymore. And that worried me.

“Who *are* you?”

He’d been following me for the past several blocks. Or maybe even following *us*. That part worried me most of all, because if it were true it meant he knew who *she* was. Or rather, what she might be to us.

And that was something that simply couldn’t fucking happen.

“Who SENT you?”

He was still on all fours, fingers splayed, gasping for air. Spitting blood, and froth, and probably more teeth.

“Nothing?”

I reared back to deliver a hard kick to the man’s ribs. To his credit though, he was a tiny bit faster. Or rather, he’d played up the whole ‘wind knocked out of him’ thing to the point of making me complacent.

And I *hated* being complacent.

What the—

In one swift movement the man grabbed my ankle, sprang upward, and twisted hard. I had to twist with him, or my ankle was history.

And that meant rolling through the garbage-smeared river of filth.

FUCK.

The knife flashed again — a glint of moonlight on mirror-sharp steel. The thing wasn't a knife so much as a long, curved machete. A fucking short sword, even.

It rang like a bell against the old cobbled pavement.

CLANGGG!

The man's face contorted in anger and misplaced vengeance. If I hadn't continued rolling he would've buried it firmly in my sternum. Apparently we were playing for keeps.

I swung my leg in a lightning fast arc, catching him in the side of the ankle. It wasn't enough to break anything, but it knocked him off balance enough that I could scramble to my feet.

“Alright,” I spat acidly. “We'll do it your way.”

Six blocks. That's how far I'd gotten. Six blocks from dropping my beautiful 'date' at her doorstep and having the willpower to walk away, despite every nerve ending in my body telling me to stay.

Only I couldn't stay. Not in a million years. Crossing that threshold was an impossibility, made even more complicated by—

The man lunged, and in lunging he made his final mistake. I twisted sideways, grabbed his arm in two places, and forced it in a direction it was never meant to go. A grim satisfaction stole over me as it snapped neatly at the elbow.

“AHHHHHGGGG!”

His scream of agony split the silence of the alley with all the impact of an air raid siren. Somewhere in the chaos the knife clattered to the ground.

“Tell me!” I snarled again, yanking him close. “Who do you work for?”

Tightening my grip, I continued twisting him unmercifully. I could feel the grinding of bone on bone.

“I— I—”

His lips formed a single, pain-induced word. I couldn't make it out. And that's because the shadows in the alley shifted, and my attention was diverted to the two new men bearing down on us from the opposite end.

Shit.

Even in the darkness I could see that the men were dusk-skinned and dark-haired. The same as my attacker. The same as we'd feared for nearly a month now, despite trying not to be paranoid or read into anything.

But it was reading into things that had kept us alive all these years to begin with.

“Run.”

My would-be attacker and now temporary prisoner had grunted the word, sneering evilly through a mouthful of broken, bloody teeth. He was brave, I'd give him that. Even if he was stupid.

“Fuck you.”

I jerked his arm again for good measure — or maybe revenge, really — eliciting another sharp cry of pain. Then I shoved him face-first into the filthy cobbles and took off running in the opposite direction.

Damn.

Just when we'd wondered if things could be normal again, too.

QUINN

“And this other guy... you say you went out with him *twice*?”

Meghan dragged her triangle of warm pita bread through a sea of olive-topped hummus. I watched as she ate it ravenously, heedless of how she looked in the crowded restaurant.

“Three times actually,” I admitted glumly. “If you count the first time we met and had coffee.”

My friend sighed in a grave disappointment that wasn’t directed at me.

“And he never made a single move on you?” she squinted.

I shook my head.

“No hand-holding? No kiss goodnight?”

“Once. On the cheek.”

“Are you sure you didn’t miss any signals, or—”

“Trust me, it was purely platonic. I know that for a fact.”

My friend tilted her head to one side. She was still skeptical.

“And how do you know *that*?”

“Because he walked me to my apartment door and shook my *hand*,” I said, wincing at the memory.

“Ouch.”

Meghan considered me carefully while tearing another pita in half. Staring back into those wise emerald eyes, the background noise of the restaurant melted away.

“So you’re telling me you met these two guys in the street — under some very unusual circumstances — and they both took your phone number.”

“Yes.”

“And then they both took you out on dates.”

I shrugged. “They sure seemed like dates.”

“And you said there was chemistry.”

“A fuck-ton of chemistry,” I agreed. “Yes.”

“And these men walked you all the way home, you invited them up...”

I knew where she was going. I rolled my eyes.

“... and somehow neither of them wanted to fuck you.”

And there it was. In stark, perhaps unnecessarily succinct terms.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” sighed Meghan. “If you really wanna know.”

Now she *really* piqued my interest.

“What?”

“Either you found the only two straight men looking for a female ‘friend’ in all of Boston...”

“Or?”

“Or it’s been so long since you got your buns crushed that you’ve totally lost your touch.”

She laughed, stuffing a dolma into her mouth. Which happened to be *my* dolma, since she’d eaten her own five minutes ago.

“Buns crushed...” I said glumly. “Real nice.”

“Or your pipes cleaned,” Meghan shrugged, “if that’s a bit clearer. Or your cave explored. Or your donut filled—”

“Ewww!”

My friend laughed even louder, and her laughter was lilting and playful and absolutely infectious. Even as the butt of her joke, I couldn't help but laugh with her.

“Quinn, listen, I don't know what the hell is wrong with these guys,” she said consolingly, “but it definitely isn't you. You're hot. You're fit. You're practically glowing. And on top of all that—”

“You don't think they sensed my... *condition*,” I mused aloud. “Do you?”

“Not a chance in hell,” Meghan shook her head vehemently. “It's way too early. And besides, there's a huge subset of men who very much appreciate a woman in your 'condition.' Especially since a woman in your condition—”

“Gets horny at the drop of a hat,” I added for her.

My friend beamed back at me happily, raising a fork in salute. “Touché.”

Meghan tore back into her chicken souvlaki platter, while tapping the blade of her foot on the restaurant's tiled floor. I followed that blade up to the knee, where it disappeared almost seamlessly against a tan, shapely thigh. My friend had lost the limb while snowboarding, suffering through an agonizing avalanche that tore it violently away. Either that, or there had been a shark attack in Belize. Or an alligator had played tug-of-war with it, deep in the everglades on some hovercraft tour.

The story of Meghan's leg all depended on who was asking, but each time it was different and more creative. Once, I watched her tell a sexy bartender she'd lost it to a boat propeller, while doing a Hawaiian Tropics photo-shoot. Right before she took the guy home and screwed his brains out.

“Look, why don't you just go on Tinder?” Meghan suggested. “You'd find some hot guy to pile-drive your cannoli in ten seconds flat. No strings attached.”

The visual made me laugh. But it turned me on, too.

“Or I could just lend you Dante for a weekend,” she winked.

“Dante?” I gasped. “Your *ex*?”

“Sure, why not?” my friend grinned. “Shit, he was always going on about how cute you are. He never shut up about you.”

For a few long seconds I was torn between being shocked and flattered. Dante was *hot*. Dante was *big*. Dante was—

“Don’t you think that’s a little... incestuous?” I asked.

Meghan crunched down on a piece of lettuce and shrugged again. “Only if you want it to be. I mean, it’s not like we’re together or anything. I’m dating Brian now.”

“Yeah, but you make up with Dante like once a year. You’ve dated him at least four or five times.”

“Probably,” she chuckled.

“And what if you actually *married* him?” I pressed. “And I was a bridesmaid in the wedding party, and—”

“Maid of honor,” Meghan interjected.

“—and he became your husband,” I went on. “And then the two of you would always know that he... that he and I ___”

“Swept out your chimney?”

I flushed another two shades redder. Only Meghan affected me like this.

“Well... yeah.”

“Look, that’s not gonna happen,” my friend protested. “And even if by some miracle that *did* happen, it wouldn’t be a problem because we weren’t together at the time. Besides, you’re like a sister to me. If I’m going to share my favorite toys with anyone, it’s going to be you. You’re someone I love and respect.”

For the second time in as many minutes I didn't know whether to be astonished or flattered. I decided to go with the latter.

“And how *is* your condition, by the way?” Meghan smiled, changing the subject. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “Great, actually.”

“Good.”

“Everything's pretty much the same, I guess. Except for the cocktail of hormones racing through my body, begging me to drag one of these handsome, hunky guys upstairs with me.”

“Why pick just one?” Meghan grinned devilishly.

“Meghan!”

She giggled. “What?”

“You're an insatiable bitch!” I cried. “You know that?”

My friend leaned forward and stole another of my vanishing french fries from my plate.

“Oh, I've already been told,” she winked.

QUINN

“You ready?” the woman smiled. “This is my favorite part.”

She pressed something on her keyboard, which beeped twice in rapid succession. And then all of sudden, loud and clear, there it was.

Pew pew pew pew pew pew pew!

A strange warmth stole over me, radiating outward from where the technician’s wand touched my belly. The feelings that followed were unexpectedly overwhelming.

“T—That’s the baby’s heartbeat?”

“Sure is,” the woman beamed. She was blonde and pretty. Probably too young to be a mother just yet, but these days you never really knew.

“Why is it so *fast*?”

“The smaller the organism, the faster its heart needs to go,” the woman answered. “You ever hold a rabbit? Its little heart goes a mile a minute.”

I shook my head solemnly. “Whoa.”

For several long moments I just sat there, listening to the steady pulse of static from the sonogram machine’s speaker. A heartbeat. A *life*. And not just on the black-and-white screen either, but growing inside me...

Damn, I couldn’t believe it.

Seriously? The voice in my head chided me. *What the hell did you expect?*

In retrospect, I guess I hadn't really thought about this part. In making the decision to become a surrogate, I promised that I'd distance myself from any sort of attachments, to make the transition easier later on. The baby in my stomach wasn't mine; it belonged to someone else. Or *someones* else, according to the lawyers of the trust I'd been dealing with since the very beginning.

Well, technically that's not true.

Technically? The word seemed somewhat dangerous. Alarms went off in my mind, telling me to push that word away.

Technically the baby is half yours, no matter what happens next. Biologically, anyway.

Initially, I'd thought it would be different. I imagined myself carrying a child to term for a loving couple who, for whatever reason, couldn't do it themselves. They'd provide the embryo. I'd provide the womb. I'd help bring new life into this world — a beautiful, wonderful gift all its own — while getting paid for my time and sacrifice. Helping to create a family was win-win, as far as I was concerned. I couldn't wait to do it.

And then I found out the clients had needed an egg as well. For that, they were willing to pay handsomely. Maybe even more than they'd paid for the team of private doctors, nurses, and obstetricians I was instructed to visit, far removed from normal medical circles.

Maybe even more than they paid to remain totally and completely anonymous.

"You okay?" the technician chuckled.

"Yeah," I replied reflexively. "Of course. I just... well..."

"I know; it's a little overwhelming."

I laughed weakly. "Maybe a little."

"I see it all the time," she went on. "Knowing you're pregnant is one thing, but hearing the baby's heartbeat makes

it *real*. It puts things in a different perspective.”

I watched as she reached behind her and swung her arm forward. When she did, she was holding a yellow envelope. The same kind I’d received once a week for the past seven weeks.

“The clients send their regards,” the woman smiled cheerfully.

I took the envelope reflexively, a little surprised. The first six had come by mail. Each one contained a short, printed letter asking me to take care of myself, not to miss any vitamins, and to avoid certain foods. A few got even more personal. Like the one asking me to stop staying up late and get plenty of sleep.

Which was kind of eerie, because I *had* been staying up late that week.

“If it’s okay, they asked for copies of the sonogram pics,” the technician said. “But of course you have final say.”

“That’s fine,” I allowed. “Not a problem.”

The woman’s smile widened. “It’s a great thing you’re doing, Ms. Logan. The most unselfish thing in the world, actually.”

I nodded numbly, my return smile a washed-out version of actual happiness. The truth was, I wasn’t unselfish. Not by a longshot. I was getting paid extremely well to carry a child for some mysterious, anonymous couple. I was doing it not out of charity, but solely because I had plans for the money.

Big plans.

“You’re all set then.”

A few minutes later I was dressed and back on the street, ready to resume my complicated life. I had three different jobs: I worked as a sous chef at two different restaurants; I taught culinary classes every weekend at a local kitchen; and I was taking business management classes at Bunker Hill Community College.

All that would have to wait though, at least for the next hour. Because first... pizza.

QUINN

You ever have one of those moments where time just stops? Where something happens that's so crazy, so bizarre, your mind refuses to immediately process it?

That was me, standing in the middle of the crosswalk, on one of the busiest streets of Boston's North End. Staring through the plate glass window of some historic old restaurant, where—

BEEEEEP!

The car's horn sounded the moment the light turned green, which happened to be the same second during which I flipped the driver off. A lot could happen in a big city like Boston. Even within the span of a single—

“Lady, MOVE!”

Scowling, I withdrew my finger and retreated back to the sidewalk. Then I looked again, to make sure my eyes weren't messing with me. And they weren't.

Three hulking men sat seated around a table in what looked to be a small restaurant or sports bar. They were smiling. Laughing together...

But not for long.

Unfuckingbelievable.

I stormed my way over, scanning them carefully. Not even two weeks ago I'd been followed home by a scary-looking giant of a bearded man, who tailed my every move for several blocks. It had been dark outside, and the streets

uncharacteristically empty. I'd been 'saved' by sprinting up to a pair of equally badass-looking guys, who happened to be on opposite sides of the sidewalk. Together they chased the guy off, or rather he disappeared into the night. Then they took me out for coffee, to calm my rattled nerves.

Two of those men sat in the restaurant right now, facing the window.

The third one — the one with his back to me — was the scary bearded man they'd "frightened off" that night.

Bastards.

It just didn't make sense. There'd been no scam, no set up, no long con. One man — a sandy blond giant looking very much like Captain America — had given me his phone number, telling me to text him if I needed anything. When I texted him that I needed dinner and a movie, he took me out on a pair of very hot dates. Yet both times he'd shaken my hand politely and walked away. Both times he'd spun on his size fifteen or sixteen heel, rather than carry me upstairs and ravage me the way I fantasized he could.

The other, Evan, had actually taken me out to dinner that weekend. He followed it up with ice cream, hand-holding, and a slow, romantic walk through the park.

And then... *nothing*. Nada. No phone calls, no text-messages, not even a kiss goodnight. It was like I'd done something cataclysmically wrong during the course of this date. Because not only didn't he call me again, but when I messaged Joshua — the blond giant — to pick his brain? Even *he* refused to answer.

Being ghosted by a hot guy who gave off every possible signal he liked you obviously sucks. Being double-ghosted, even more so. But now to see all *three* of these men eating and laughing and happily throwing back steins of beer like a trio of old buddies?

It was enough to make me want to kick the restaurant's historic little wooden door to pieces.

Instead, I slipped inside without being noticed. The place was warm, cozy, and smelled absolutely wonderful. With my anger reaching its peak, I dragged an empty chair over and skidded it noisily over to their table.

“Hello, boys.”

Strangely enough, I couldn’t tell if they were even surprised.

“So you’re friends after all,” I declared, jerking my thumb between the two men I’d gone on dates with. “Despite that evening on the street, where you claimed to be strangers.”

Joshua grunted, turning his attention back to his drink. But Evan met my gaze and refused to look away. For an uneasy moment, my concentration broke. Those gorgeous blue-green eyes I’d lost myself in were like a siren’s call.

“And *this* guy...” I nodded toward the black-bearded monster. “At what point did you tell him to follow me?”

All three men remained silent. No one answered.

“Was rescuing me from someone who’s apparently your friend part of the whole ‘getting me to go out with you’ thing?” I sneered. “Or was it—”

“No.”

Joshua spat the word confidently, almost defiantly. But his one-word answer made me even more angry.

“Then why take me out at all?” I demanded. “The two of you took me on what were *obviously* dates. There was romance and flirting. There was build-up. There was a ton of chemistry—”

In the middle of my sentence the men glared at each other. Or more accurately, the bearded giant shot his two friends a pair of *very* dirty looks. I could sense his breathing getting heavier. One ham-like fist was clenched now, the knuckles going white.

“You take me out, you take me home, you refuse to come up...” I sighed in exasperation. “All of a sudden I’m

stranded in the friend zone, shaking nervously like a high-schooler at her first big dance.”

The only looks at the table passed between them now. None of the men were even looking at me.

My God, I was fucking *furious!*

“Look,” I seethed, “I don’t know which one of you is interested in me — if anyone at all — or what the hell your deal is. Maybe you’re a trio of hyper-competitive jocks,” I shrugged. “Maybe you get off on dating the same girl, or maybe you’ve got some kind of cheesy rom-com ‘bet’ going on between you as to who can make me feel the most confused.”

I took a long, heated breath and let it out through clenched teeth.

“But none of this really matters anyway, now does it?” I jeered. “Because guess what, you assholes? I’m pregnant.”

It was something I would’ve told them, of course. In time. Maybe when things had gotten more heated and less platonic. Or maybe when—

“We know.”

Evan slid a drink my way, and it wasn’t one of their beers. It was a tall glass of ice-cold water, instead. The only one at the table.

“We’re the ones who made you pregnant.”

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About the Author

Krista Wolf is a lover of action, fantasy and all good horror movies... as well as a hopeless romantic with an insatiably steamy side.

She writes suspenseful, mystery-infused stories filled with blistering hot twists and turns. Tales in which headstrong, impetuous heroines are the irresistible force thrown against the immovable object of ripped, powerful heroes.

If you like intelligent and witty romance served up with a sizzling edge? You've just found your new favorite author.

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