



Christmas
with

MY BEST FRIEND'S

BROTHERS

KAI LESY

CHRISTMAS WITH MY BEST FRIEND'S BROTHER

A CONTEMPORARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

KAI LESY

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“**Y**ou’re here!” My best friend Kat squealed as she opened the massive, wooden door to a house that could have passed for a small castle. Kat hugged me so tightly it felt like I couldn’t breathe for a second.

“Wow, your hair is so... green,” I said as my friend finally let go of me. Neither one of us could quit smiling.

Kat’s hair was cut into a very short bob and colored a dark, emerald green that almost looked black if the light didn’t hit it just right. She had gained a new septum piercing, as well since the last time I saw her, which I was sure her traditional mother just loved.

“I thought it would be festive. And with your red hair, we’ll be extra Christmassy when we’re sitting next to each other.” She chuckled before grabbing my arm and pulling me inside the house. “Let me show you around.”

A quick glance to my right, through French doors, was a sitting room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Mont-Blanc in the distance. It still hadn’t fully hit me yet that I was in France; the last few days had been a complete blur.

“How was your flight? And the train from Paris?” she asked me.

“It was good, I slept most of the flight, thankfully. I hadn’t slept in days, but you know me, as soon as you get me into a moving vehicle of any kind, I sleep like a baby. And the train ride was beautiful, like a dream.”

“Good, I’m glad,” Kat replied as she led me up a spiral staircase to the second floor. She squealed again, and I nearly jumped backward. “Sorry, I just always imagined you being here with us, and I’m so happy I can finally show you where I used to spend all my Christmases as a kid.”

Kat and I had grown up together, friends since kindergarten. It was a good thing we met that young, because back then, we didn’t know that we lived such vastly different lives. Kat was the daughter of a prominent politician with a trust fund most of us could only dream of. Christmas in the French Alps, summer vacations in exotic locations that my child brain had never even heard about until she brought back photos and showed them to me.

My life wasn’t quite so glamorous. The daughter of... well, no one knew my father. My mother couldn’t even be sure who he was, though she thought it was some guy who used to work at the bar down the road from our house. She only knew his first name and he had left town as soon as my mom told him she was pregnant with me. My mom and I hadn’t spoken in years, her choice mostly. She never really wanted kids and I was an accident, a ‘blight upon her life’ as she once told me. As soon as I was legally on my own, that was it.

Most people might have envied their best friend because of the mansion or the luxurious vacations, but to be honest, I mostly envied the fact that she had a family.

“This is Jackson’s room, right next door to ours,” Kat said, rolling her eyes and pretending to gag herself as we walked by. “Aiden and Nathan are down the hall, and Mom is on the first floor, in her own private wing.”

Kat opened the door to the room we would be sharing – sharing because I was a last-minute add-on and the home they rented *only* had five bedrooms.

“Jesus, Kat. This room is the size of my entire house growing up,” I said as I stepped into the bedroom. Considering that Kat was the youngest, it would make sense that she got the smallest room, but if that room was the smallest, then the others had to be ridiculous in scale.

A king-sized bed was centered in the middle of the room. The walls were a dark-colored wood and the bedding a rich, forest green which reminded me a lot of Kat's current hair color. The comforter was thick and soft to the touch when I ran my hand over it. The pillows were large and fluffy. I yawned imagining collapsing into the big, cozy bed.

"You even have a fireplace," I said, imagining how warm the room would be, curled up in bed with a fire crackling while staring out the large windows overlooking the snow-covered mountains.

"We have our own bathroom too," Kat said, showing me the way.

Of course there was a bathtub large enough for four people, and a separate shower. Also with views of the beautiful mountains.

"This bathroom is bigger than my apartment in New York, you do realize that, right?" I laughed, but I noticed Kat wasn't laughing.

"I know, I'm sorry about that," she said. "I know my family has insane amounts of wealth and it sickens me, too."

I went to my best friend and hugged her. "I didn't mean it like that; you have nothing to be ashamed about. I'm just surprised at how big it is for a bathroom."

"I wanted you to come here because I knew you needed to be pampered and spoiled," she said, squeezing me tightly. "After everything you've been through, you deserve some luxury."

She was right. I needed to relax and to forget about New York and everything that had gone wrong for me there.

Kat was actually supposed to be with me in New York right now, getting into the black dress she had picked out to stand by my side as my maid of honor.

"Thanks for inviting me, and I have to thank your mom for paying for my ticket."

“She was happy to do so, she knows how special you are to me, bestie.”

“Your mom is truly one of the kindest people I have ever met,” I told her. And I meant it. Growing up, her mother always took care of me when needed, making sure that I had shelter, food and nice clothes to wear. Sometimes it felt like she had adopted me as another daughter, and I owed a lot to her.

“It’s almost dinner time, and Marie is making coq-au-vin—trust me, it’s to die for.”

“Marie?”

“She’s the chef on staff here.”

“You know, I could really get used to living like this,” I said with a laugh.

“You’re always welcome to join us on trips, Harper.”

Between college and working a lot to survive, I often didn’t have the time, but maybe I would have to start *making* the time.

We heard voices coming from down the hall and my entire body froze. Another reason I often avoided family get-togethers with Kat was standing right outside the bedroom door. My heart raced and Kat must have seen the look of panic on my face.

“They aren’t as bad as they used to be,” she said quickly. “I mean, they’re still assholes, but less obnoxious with each passing year.”

Kat took my hand and led me out of the bedroom where we ran smack dab into her brothers. I wasn’t even sure which one was which at first since they all looked identical. Identical in the literal sense seeing as they were triplets.

“Harper? What are you doing here?” one of them asked.

His gray eyes were like the stormy seas, his hair chestnut brown and cut in a modern style. He had a jawline that would make the chiseled statues of Greek Gods jealous. Towering over me, I noticed he had grown, and not just in height—his

build had filled out and he was larger, stronger than I remembered.

“Well, you guys got in late last night, and left early this morning for the slopes, Jackson. I didn’t have time to tell you.”

Ah, so that was Jackson Bishop. The cockier, more arrogant of the brothers. He had a sharp tongue to go with that jawline and always seemed to know how to dig deep enough to hurt while still making it out to be a joke. Last I heard, he’d graduated law school and used his daddy’s hookups to get him a prestigious job out of Charleston, not too far from where we’d grown up.

My eyes moved past Jackson and fell on one of the other brothers. His thick arms reminded me of tree trunks, and he seemed to be even more muscular than Jackson. His hair was military short, and I put two-and-two together.

“And you’re Aiden, did I get that right?” I asked.

“You did,” he said with a crooked smile. He had a slight southern twang, they all did, which made them sexier than ever when they spoke. “Good to see you again, Harper.”

Of the three, Aiden was the least obnoxious. A bit of a black sheep himself, he joined the military and was ready to leave his family behind before the “accident” that earned him an honorable discharge. But Aiden still had that sharp, Bishop tongue and, just like his brothers, his favorite pastime was picking on Kat and me growing up.

“And I’m obviously Nathan,” the third brother said.

My eyes shifted to Nathan’s, and the same gray gaze as his brothers stared back at me. The only difference between him and his brothers was his hair was a bit longer, softer at the edges. I offered Nathan a quick smile before looking away.

“So Carly isn’t joining you?” I asked.

The hallway went silent.

“Oh crap, I forgot. I’m sorry.”

It had been years since I had seen the brothers, and Kat and I didn't talk about them too much outside of general updates, but I suddenly recalled that Carly and Nathan hadn't been a thing for a few years.

"It's fine, she's actually getting married," he said, in a tone that indicated he was far from fine.

Kat filled in the blanks for me. "She's marrying Brett."

"Brett Echols? Nathan's—"

"My *ex*-best friend, yes."

Nathan wasn't too bad on his own growing up. He just happened to have the meanest friends in all of our school. It was because of them that Nathan was the one I had the biggest beef with, and one of the reasons I fled South Carolina as soon as I was old enough to do so.

"I'm sorry to hear that." I said. *But also not surprised, all things considered.* Carly and Brett deserved each other as far as I was concerned.

"Anyway, Kat was just showing me around the house—"

"Dinner is almost ready," Jackson said, interrupting me. "Mom asked us to get right back down there."

"Alright then, guess we're headed to dinner." Kat grabbed my arm and led me back toward the spiral staircase we had come up before. My heart was still racing as I went over the few minutes we conversed with her brothers in my head. They hadn't made one sarcastic or teasing remark the entire time. That had to have been a world record. Maybe Kat was right, they were getting older and less obnoxious. *They certainly are getting hotter*, I thought as I watched the guys start down the staircase.

I nearly missed the steps gawking at her brothers, but thankfully Kat was there to grab my arm. "Careful," she said with a laugh. "I know the wood is slippery. They really should get a runner for these things. I fall down the stairs every time we visit. I once took all three of my brothers down with me when we were younger."

“Oh, what I would pay to have witnessed that.”

We were both laughing as we stepped onto the main level and Kat led me past the formal sitting room into a dining area with a carved wood table and enough room for about twelve place settings. A fireplace roared to life behind the table. The place had been decorated tastefully for Christmas. There were poinsettias on the table and a small Christmas tree on the mantle above the fireplace. Nothing in-your-face, but elegant and classic.

Kat took a seat and I sat beside her.

“Marie is possibly the best chef in all of Chamonix, I have no idea how my mother was able to book her over the holidays. Speaking of which, here she comes.”

Kat stood up as her mother entered the dining room and I did the same.

Rose Bishop reminded me a lot of Jackie O. Classic elegance might as well have been her middle name. Her gray hair made her look more dignified and was pulled back into a low chignon. Even though she was on vacation, she was wearing a powder blue suit with a white turtleneck underneath. Her makeup was impeccable yet hardly noticeable. Her skin, well, let's just say she didn't skimp on the plastic surgery, but she didn't overdo it, either. She looked younger and refreshed, but not stretched and her brows weren't frozen in place.

“Harper, dear, I'm so glad you were able to join us for Christmas this year.” Rose, as she had always insisted I call her, reached for my hands. A thin, dainty bracelet clung to her sleek wrist, and I noticed that her wedding diamond had been replaced by a large sapphire ring. She wasn't shaking my hands, however, she took them into hers and gave them a firm yet warm squeeze while staring me straight in the eye and smiling genuinely. Rose had the charisma and charm to make anyone feel welcome and at home, and I had always envied Kat for having a mother as loving as she was.

“Thank you, Rose,” I said, offering a genuine smile of my own. “I'm so happy to see you, and I want to thank you for paying for my travel.”

She brushed it off with a flick of her wrist. “It was nothing, dear. I’m just happy you’re here, and I know Kat appreciates spending the holidays with her best friend.”

Voices in the hallway turned our attention to the entry, as all three of Kat’s brothers entered the dining room.

“Harper, have you ever been to the French Alps before?” Nathan asked, pulling my attention to him. As soon as my eyes fell on his gorgeous, chiseled features, my cheeks flushed.

“No, uh, I’ve never been to France before, actually.” *Or anywhere outside of the United States for that matter.* I kept that thought to myself.

“Really?” Jackson walked over to a bar near the dining room table and poured himself a drink from a very expensive-looking glass bottle. “I would have thought a girl as well-read as you would have loved to have visited France, at least Paris. Weren’t you a fan of *Les Misérables* growing up?”

“I was, yes, and still am,” I said softly. Kat remembered her privilege and didn’t rub it in my face or act surprised that I didn’t live as luxuriously as they did, but her brothers, especially Jackson, seemed to forget that I didn’t come from money like they did. Either that or he simply didn’t understand what it was like for us “normal” folks.

Kat sat back down and patted the seat next to her, so I joined her, turning my attention away from the brothers. Jackson sat across from me, sipping a brown liquor. Nathan sat beside him and Aiden on the other side. Their mother sat at the head of the table, and there was an empty seat on the other end.

A man entered with two bottles of wine in hand, a red and a white. “Would you like some wine, dear?” Rose asked me.

“Oh no thank you, I don’t drink alcohol,” I said.

“Still?” Aiden asked, sounding surprised as ever.

“I tried it once; it just wasn’t for me.” My eyes fell on Nathan for a split second before I looked away, trying not to remember the reason I had given up drinking even before I was legally able to imbibe.

Kat slipped from her seat. “I think I’m just going to take a cue from Jackson and have something a bit stronger.” She walked over to the bar and poured some clear liquor into a glass before heading toward the kitchen.

“Katherine, let Gerard get whatever you need,” Rose said.

“It’s fine, I can get my own mixer,” she replied.

Rose pursed her lips but didn’t argue with Kat as she exited the room. A moment later, she was back with a bottle of juice in hand. She plopped down beside me. “Want some? The juice, I mean. It’s a tropical fruit blend, passion fruit and papaya and some other shit.”

“Katherine Jane, language, please.”

Kat laughed but apologized to her mother before holding the bottle of juice up for me. “There’s also every soda you can think of, sparkling water, other juices...”

Kat poured as Rose said, “You can have anything you want, Harper. Gerard can get it for you.”

“Tropical juice sounds good to me,” I said with a smile. I didn’t want to be too difficult, besides, Gerard seemed to be busy pouring the wine and letting the brothers taste it as they chose between the two bottles.

“The 1912 is far superior to the bottle we had last night,” Nathan said as he sipped a glass of red wine.

“Agreed,” Aiden said, downing a large amount of the wine in one sip and getting a glare from his mother. He laughed as he tapped his glass and requested more from the server standing nearby.

Having had dinner with the Bishops a few times in my life growing up, there were no surprises so far. They enjoyed the finer things in life, especially a good wine and a good meal. Kat and I looked so out of place with our pinkish orange drinks in fancy wine glasses that I had to silently chuckle to myself.

That night, we were served a hearty French onion soup. While it might sound simple and not too fancy, it was easily

one of the best soups I had ever had in my life. The broth warmed up my insides and was flavored perfectly, the onions cooked just right. I ended up finishing before anyone else at the table.

The main course was the *coq-au-vin* that Kat had mentioned earlier. Chicken cooked in a burgundy wine sauce, bits of bacon known as *lardons*, mushrooms and carrots. The smell as soon as it was placed in front of me caused my stomach to awaken and forget all about the soup I had eaten moments before.

I waited until Rose started on the meal before digging in myself.

“I thought about giving up meat,” Kat said. “Then I came here and experienced Marie’s cooking, and I just can’t... I don’t even understand how French vegetarians exist with all this amazing meat at their disposal.”

“So, you’ve never been to France?” Jackson asked me again, staring at me in disbelief. “Didn’t you take like four years of French in high school when most of us took Spanish?”

“Yes, that was me. I was hoping to read some of my favorite French novels in their original format.”

“And have you succeeded?” Jackson asked. Why did it feel like I was being interrogated by him?

“Well, somewhat. It’s a lot harder to become fluent, especially in the US education system.”

“You should have studied abroad,” Nathan piped in.

“I would have loved that, but my family could never afford to send me.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I’m sorry, Harper,” Nathan said.

“It’s fine,” I said, waving it off. “I don’t need to be able to read French literature in French, the translations are good enough and there’s plenty of English books for me to study anyway.”

“Kat said you were studying literature?” Jackson’s tone told me all I needed to know about his views on my choice of degrees.

“Yes, well, I’ve always loved reading, it was an escape for me back when, uh, school was hard, as you know.” I turned and stared right into Nathan’s eyes as I said those words. The boys may be nicer to me now, but I remembered the way they treated me back then, and I wasn’t about to let them make me feel inferior anymore. Nathan looked away.

Jackson seemed oblivious to what I was getting at. “Still... what can you do with a literature degree besides teach?”

“What’s wrong with teaching? Didn’t our teachers set you up for success, Jackson?”

He smirked. “Sure, but you were valedictorian of your class, Harper. You could have gone to medical school or law school.”

“I’m not the lawyer type, Jackson,” I said coolly. “Besides, I don’t plan to be a teacher, I plan to be a professor. I’m working toward a PhD, so in that regard, I will be a doctor.”

“Academia is tough,” Nathan said.

“It is.” *Tougher than you even realize, I’m sure*, I thought to myself, but I held my tongue. I didn’t want to come off as feeling superior to them because I wasn’t. But I also wouldn’t let them talk down my career choices simply because I didn’t pick the same paths they did – ones that would lead to money, success and praise. I didn’t need all of that.

“I think it’s great. Sounds boring as fuck, but good for you,” Aiden said as he finished off his dinner and sat back in the chair with a satisfied look on his face.

I managed a polite smile. Boring as fuck, huh? Yeah, well, I wasn’t surprised considering Aiden seemed to despise school.

Rose had some choice words for his language, though. Much like her scolding of Kat earlier, she said “Aiden, please. Don’t use foul language at the dinner table.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Aiden motioned for Gerard to pour more wine, and then Jackson pulled him over to pour him a glass. He continued asking him to pour more and more. Rose looked at her son with a frown but didn’t say anything about how much he was drinking.

“Do you like skiing, Harper?” Nathan changed the subject.

“I’ve never actually been.”

“Really?” Nathan then caught his mistake and said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean, ugh.”

“Not used to talking to people like me, I get it.” I finished the last of my meal and felt like I was ready to burst. My eyes were growing tired. It was early, but I was jetlagged from my long flight.

“I may head up to bed,” I whispered to Kat.

“What, before the cheese course? You can’t miss the cheese course.”

“Yeah, as you can tell, Kat hasn’t missed too many cheese courses herself,” Jackson said with a smug smile.

“Fuck off, Jackson.”

“Children,” Rose said, her voice remaining calm somehow.

“I know, I know Mom, language,” Kat muttered. “But seriously, I can’t believe swearing is considered worse than fat shaming someone.”

“Neither are okay, and both of you should know better at your age,” Rose replied.

“It was just a joke,” Jackson said while rolling his eyes. His words were a bit slurred as he reached for even more wine.

“Jokes aren’t an excuse to be an asshole,” I said, speaking up about something that had bugged me ever since we were children. “I mean, you always claim you’re just joking, and

maybe you think you are, but your jokes aren't funny. They're just mean."

I realized I had said "asshole" and waited for Rose to come down on me, but she actually smiled. "Well said, Harper. I couldn't agree more."

"Why does she get away with swearing when the rest of us get treated like children?" Kat asked.

"Because she's a guest, Katherine. And unlike the two of you, she's not swearing simply to be foul or insulting, she's making a point. One with which I agree."

"Mom always did like you better than me," Kat said with a wink, seeming to take it all in jest rather than being insulted.

Gerard along with a few other staff members came in and cleaned the table off, replacing our dinner plates with smaller ones and a variety of different kinds of cheese.

"This cheese right here is called the Prince of Gruyeres, and that is an absolute understatement," Jackson said, pointing to one of the cheeses with a pockmarked yellow rind. This one here is made with raw milk and has a hint of fruity flavor. It's called Beaufort."

Kat rolled her eyes and whispered to me, "Jackson likes to act like he's an expert on cheese and wine or some shit. Just ignore him."

I had to admit though, as pretentious as he may have sounded, I did find the introduction and explanation of the cheese to be rather fascinating.

"I personally prefer the Tomme de Savoie," Nathan said, pointing to another of the cheeses.

"Not a bad choice, brother," Jackson said. "Both have their place, even if I find the Tomme a little less exciting than the Beaufort."

"Well good thing I can try both," I said, even though my stomach was full.

"And finally, we have le Tamie," Jackson said, pointing to a cheese with a beautiful gold color. "This is a very special

cheese as it's made by the monks in the abbey of Tamie." He didn't say much about it, no raving review or discussions about the flavor.

"Well I guess I will try a little of each then."

"Smart woman," Kat said from beside me. "You won't be disappointed."

Each cheese was unique and flavorful. I only had a small piece of each one since I was already feeling like I might burst, but each bite was a little piece of heaven.

"So, what's the verdict?" Jackson asked. "Which one is your favorite?"

I had to stop and think about which cheese was which. I picked up le Tamie. "This one, I think. It was mild, but still a little nutty."

"Ahh, yes, I can see why you like it. With hints of fresh cream, it is a good choice." Jackson's voice had shifted, something was off.

"It's my favorite too," Aiden spoke up, speaking about the cheese for the first time. "I think that the fact that you can only buy it from a local abbey just adds to the appeal."

"I think that might be it for me too, knowing I may never be able to have it again."

"Well, Harper, dear. You are welcome to join us on our family trips and eat as much cheese as you like," Rose said with a friendly smile.

I noticed Jackson was looking down. He finished his glass of wine then glanced over at the end of the table, the empty end.

Kat finally broke the silence. "That was our dad's favorite cheese, too."

"Oh," I said softly.

I leaned back in the chair, as if I could melt into it and disappear. I didn't know what to say. Sorry wasn't nearly enough for the trouble I had caused all those years ago. Not

that they were aware of it, or else I doubt I'd be welcome there at the table.

I stared at my hands. "I might go to bed now."

"Before dessert and coffee?" Rose seemed genuinely disturbed by the idea of me missing dessert.

"I'm sure it's very lovely, but I've had too much to eat already. I don't know if I could eat another bite—"

Before I could finish, however, Gerard placed a chocolate mousse in front of me.

I had never been the type of girl who could resist chocolate.

"Okay, maybe I'll stay for dessert."

"Good girl," Rose said. "It's nothing too heavy, since we had a big meal and all, just something light and sweet to end with."

The mousse was exactly that. Delicate and light, with a rich, dark chocolate that delighted my tastebuds.

"Worth sticking around for, right?" Kat asked as she licked the last bit of mousse from her spoon.

"Definitely. Oh my God, this is amazing."

"And next up, we have some coffee," Rose said softly.

Jackson didn't say a word, he continued staring over at the empty chair. His brothers seemed to have lost some of their luster, as well. I had a hard time keeping my eyes off of them, though it made me feel terrible to be sitting directly across from them knowing what I had done.

As the clock ticked on, my body grew heavier and tired. "I'm not sure if I'll make it up the stairs if I stay another minute," I said as I slipped from my seat. "I hope that's OK."

"It's more than OK, dear," Rose said. "You've had a long trip. Please get some rest and hopefully you can enjoy the local scenery tomorrow."

"Thank you again, for everything."

I had a hard time meeting Rose's gaze then. Would she be better off not knowing? Her family might still be together, though it would have all been a lie. Unless, of course, she knew about the affairs and everything else, simply putting up with it until it went public. I wasn't sure if I deserved her kindness or not.

I said goodnight to everyone as I headed toward the stairs, forcing my legs to walk. As I reached the top, I noticed that the hallway was dark. I staggered down the hall and grabbed what I thought was the doorknob for our room.

"Hold up," a voice surprised me from behind. "Wrong room."

"Jesus, Kat. Did you tippy-toe up the stairs? You almost gave me a heart attack."

She chuckled. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. But you almost entered Jackson's room."

"There's so many doors."

"Right? I almost do that every year we're here, but thankfully, I never walked in on my brother naked or anything equally traumatizing."

The idea of Jackson naked wasn't traumatizing to me in the slightest. In fact, once I had the image in my head, I stood there in the hallway and forgot where I was for a moment.

"We're right here, the room to the right of his," she said, opening the door to our gorgeous space.

"Thank God," I muttered as I collapsed into the bed. I groaned as I writhed against the comforter. "It's so soft, it's like sleeping on a cloud."

It didn't take long for my eyes to close and I fell asleep, clothes and all.

JACKSON

Harper Olson. Damn. Had you told me that geeky ginger-haired girl with freckles and braces would turn into an absolute bombshell, I'd have called you a fucking liar. I couldn't even put my finger on what it was about her that drove me absolutely wild the moment my eyes fell on her. Maybe it was her sexy librarian look, the way her curly hair was pulled back into the messy bun, tendrils framing her delicate face, or those stylish yet simple glasses which made her blue eyes appear larger and doe eyed.

She was exactly the distraction I needed right then—watching her leave the room, her curvy hips swaying with every step—made me forget all about the fact that there was an empty chair at the table.

What I wouldn't give to bend her over a desk and—

“Jackson?” My mom's voice cut through my fantasy. “You okay, dear?”

“I'm fine,” I said. More than fine, except that all the blood in my body had rushed down south and I was trying to adjust myself without my mom or brothers noticing the tightness in my jeans.

“I know that your dad not being here is difficult for you.”

“It's fine,” I snapped. I reached for my glass only to realize it was empty. I motioned for Gerard but quickly realized that he had left the dining room already. Everyone had finished their coffee, their places had been cleaned up, and it was just me and my family sitting around, like old times. Except when

Dad was around, we might have a game of Monopoly, his favorite, and play late into the night while he humbled us by kicking our asses every single time. None of us liked playing with him, come to think of it, but it was a near nightly requirement during our vacations.

I grabbed the glass from earlier, walking over to the bar for some more whiskey when I noticed all eyes were on me.

“What is it?”

“We’re worried about you, Jackson,” Mom said.

I scoffed. “Maybe *you* are, but I guarantee those two are just waiting for me to fall and make an ass of myself.”

I waited for my mom to scold me, but this time she didn’t look upset at my language. She looked worried. Deep frown lines set in on her face, lines that I had thought were erased via Botox long ago.

“Your brothers love you, Jackson. And like me, we’re all a bit worried about how much you’ve been drinking.”

“I’m on vacation, Mom. It’s been a rough year with the bar exam and all that.”

I poured myself a drink and headed for the door, not wanting to discuss my feelings. My dad’s words echoed in my ears, “Feelings are for girls. Feelings are dangerous. They show weakness. That weakness can be used against you.”

I wasn’t about to show my brothers that I was weak. Fuck no.

“Jackson, can I speak to you for a second?” Aiden asked.

I stopped and turned to face him. “Go for it.”

“I mean, alone.”

“Whatever you need to ask me can be said in front of Mom and Nathan.”

Aiden cleared his throat. “Fine. I was hoping you might be able to give me some legal advice.”

I nearly choked on my drink. “You mean about that mess you got yourself in?”

“I didn’t get myself into any mess.”

“Yeah, you did. You tried to fu– I mean, sleep with some senator’s wife, your own client.”

“I didn’t try to sleep with anyone.” Aiden spoke through clenched teeth, his hands balled up on the table. “Not a single word of it is true.”

“Sure, man. Just like it wasn’t true when you slept with Chase’s girlfriend in high school.”

“They were on a break, and I only denied it because Val asked me to. She said it would make her look bad.”

“Nah, you were just trying to save your ass then, and you’re just trying to save your ass now. Pretty typical behavior for you, isn’t it?”

Aiden slammed his fists down on the table as he stood up. “Typical that you’d believe anyone but your own brother. You clearly have taken after Dad in the loyalty department.”

“Hey now, don’t you dare talk about our father–”

“BOYS!” Mom raised her voice, something that rarely ever happened. Aiden and I stopped arguing, mostly out of sheer shock. “I will not have you two arguing and ruining Christmas. You best learn to get along as long as you’re under this roof together.”

“This is bullshit,” Aiden muttered, heading toward the door. “Jackson insults my character, and yet I have to learn to get along with him? No one in this family fucking believes me.”

Aiden left and Nathan stared at me, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“What are you staring at?”

“I’m staring at my brother, wondering how someone so confident and smart could turn into such a mean drunk.”

“Fuck off, Nathan.”

Nathan was always the calm one, having taken after Mom. I knew I had poked him, hoping he might react.

He shrugged. “Whatever, man. I just think you need to get help.” He pulled out his phone and started tapping on the screen, his sign that he had no interest in engaging any further.

Mom was silent sitting at her spot at the table. She was looking at me, and I didn’t like the look on her face at all.

“Jackson, I know it’s hard being back here. But I thought enough time had passed that we could get back to acting like a family.”

Out of all of us, Mom was the one who had been hurt the most. She was also the one person in the entire world that I couldn’t raise my voice at, I just couldn’t.

So I let her continue. “Please go easy on Aiden. You may not see it, but he’s not the same kid he used to be, he’s grown into a really good man. The military really straightened him out.”

“I hope so,” I said softly. “He needed to be straightened out.”

“He did. He got into a lot of trouble in high school, and there were nights I feared that the police would call, telling me he had been arrested or worse. But *this* Aiden, he’s different, and it would mean a lot to me if you at least listened to him, to see if you can help him.”

“I’ll try,” I said after a long silence and a sigh. Aiden and I had our issues, but he was still my brother.

“I’m going to talk to Aiden now,” she said. “And I really would appreciate it if you two could at least try to get along. If anything, for my sake.”

She slipped from the room before I could answer her, and my eyes once again fell on the empty seat where our dad used to sit. I finished my whiskey, imagining the sound of his booming voice telling me to make him a drink. The same drink I now enjoyed. I stared at my empty glass.

“I think I’m going out,” I said, speaking to Nathan.

“Where?”

“Somewhere in town, just to get a drink.”

We had plenty of alcohol in the house, anything you could ever want. But it wasn’t about the alcohol, it was about getting out. Why did Mom think it was a good idea to bring us back to the same house we had spent every Christmas as a family when Dad was still around? Couldn’t she have picked another location besides this one?

“Mind if I come along?” Nathan asked.

I placed the glass on the table and shook my head. “No, I need to be alone. I need to get out of this house and away from everyone in it.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yeah, I have a driver, I’ll be fine.”

I headed for the door, stopping at the coat closet and glancing into the formal living room all decked out with the Christmas tree covered in glowing, flickering lights. A stocking for each of us hung from the fireplace, even Harper had one.

I opened the big, heavy door and stepped out into the snow, the cold hitting my face and making me feel better almost instantly.

How am I going to survive this trip? I asked myself. I had to make it through Christmas and into New Years, with my family in this house.

And they wondered why I drank so much.

“**Y**ou have what we need yet?” I paced my room as I spoke to the man on the phone. “Chuck, what am I paying you for if you can’t get me what I’m asking? I don’t care how—”

There was a knock on my door. My mom’s soft voice called from the other side. “Aiden?”

“One second,” I called back before lowering my voice and finishing my call.

“Just get it for me, Chuck. Or I will find someone who will.”

I hung up the phone and opened the door to find my mother standing in the hallway.

“Everything okay?” Mom was usually in the library with a book at this time of night so her visit concerned me.

“I just wanted to check on you, after what happened downstairs. Mind if I come in?”

“No, of course not. Come inside, Mom,” I said.

“I know Jackson can be a bit... well, hard-headed sometimes.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it.” I laughed to try and make it into a joke, but it wasn’t funny to me. Jackson had always been a bit of an asshole. A cocky, arrogant asshole who was becoming more and more like our father every year.

Mom pursed her lips but didn't argue with me. She walked over to the window and took a seat in one of the chairs there, patting the chair next to her.

I sat beside her in silence for a long time, staring out at the snowy landscape.

"I believe you, Aiden. I know it feels like no one is on your side, but I am. I'll always be on your side, I'm your mother."

For most of my life, though warm and loving, our mother kept to herself. She let our father do most of the parenting, seeming to be a background character more than a main one, even in her own story. She always took care of us, but we were never a family that had heart-to-hearts or expressed outward affection for one another. That is, until Dad was out of the picture.

Mom had changed a lot since she left Dad. She came out of her shell. It took her some time, but she took over as matriarch of the family, handling most of the family affairs until Nathan stepped in to help her once he finished college. She blossomed, and I loved to see it.

Didn't mean it made me any less uncomfortable to talk about my feelings.

Twenty-something years of being told to suck it up and to keep it all inside took its toll on you after a while.

"I think I'm going to take a walk."

"This late?" Mom asked.

I glanced out the window. Although night had fallen, the moon shone brightly and illuminated the snow, allowing for a mildly dark appearance.

"I've walked in worse conditions in the Army, Mom," I reminded her.

"That was before your—" she cut herself off, but her gaze fell on my legs.

My jaw clenched as I was reminded that my injury would always make others see me as damaged or changed, even

though it barely affected my mobility at all.

“I’m sorry, I’m your mom, Aiden, it’s my job to worry about you.”

“I know, but I’ll be fine,” I reassured her. “I won’t go far; I just need to get some air.”

“Alright,” she said after a long pause and a sigh. “But please be careful.”

She left the room as I changed into warmer attire and headed down the stairs toward the door. Nathan’s voice popped up from the living room.

“Heading out?”

I paused just long enough to answer him. “Yeah, going for a walk.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

He was already at the door with me before I could object.

“Did Mom put you up to this?”

“No, not at all. I’m just a bit bored.”

I wasn’t sure if I believed him, but I also didn’t feel like arguing.

“Alright, but only if you can keep up with me.”

“I think I can manage,” Nathan laughed as he grabbed a coat from the front closet.

I was enjoying the silence of the mountains around me. When we got a few feet from the house, however, I recognized Nathan was struggling with something.

“So what’s up, man?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“Suit yourself,” I said and continued walking. If he didn’t want to talk, I wasn’t going to force him.

Nathan didn’t speak for a few moments but finally heaved a deep sigh.

“I got an invitation to Carly and Brett’s wedding.”

Hearing the words caused me to stop in place and turn to face my brother. “What the hell? Really?”

“Yeah, after not talking to either of them for three years, they just invited me out of the blue.”

“They’re assholes. I never understood why you hung out with them.”

We continued walking slowly. Nathan shrugged. “They weren’t so bad, or so I thought.”

“What they did to Harper was fucked up, you have to admit that.”

“Yeah, it was and I should have dumped Carly after that, but she convinced me it was just a joke, she hadn’t meant to hurt anyone.”

“Did she pull that bullshit when you caught her with your best friend too?”

“Something like that,” Nate muttered. I knew that catching his high school sweetheart in bed with his best friend had done a number on my brother, but after three years, I had expected him to be over it. Then again, maybe he was, but the invite seemed to open up fresh wounds.

Neither of us were raised with the ability to talk about our feelings openly, and I wasn’t sure what to say to my brother. I could see he was hurting but wasn’t sure what he needed or if he even wanted me to say anything about it.

So, I decided to change the subject to something a little more pleasant.

“Harper is pretty hot. Who knew that girl would grow up to look like that.”

Nathan chuckled but kept his gaze fixed in front of us.

“What? You don’t think so?”

“No, she’s gorgeous,” Nathan said. “I really didn’t expect her to show up looking like that either after all these years.”

“But?”

“But what?” Nate looked over at me.

“There’s a *but* in there, I can hear it. I’m not Jackson, man. You can talk to me.”

“Just that she hates my guts, that’s all. Not that I blame her.”

“That wasn’t you.”

“She thinks it was.”

“Well, clear the air between the two of you.”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“What I know is that I would give almost anything to get her into my bed, even just for a night.” The words slipped out.

Nate looked over at me with a strange look. “She’s our sister’s best friend.”

“Yeah I know. Not like I’m going to actually do it. Harper may hate you most of all, but I’m a pretty close second.”

“I think Jackson takes that spot.”

“Well, that might be true,” I said, rubbing my knee as my pace slowed. The snow was heavy and thick at times, and we were headed up a hill that was testing me. I knew I could manage, I had done far harder courses, but that was before the bombing.

“We were pretty mean to her growing up,” Nathan said softly.

“We treated her like we did Kat.”

“Which was also pretty mean if you think about it. I know we thought we were being funny, but we often pushed it too far.”

“I can’t argue there.” My face twisted in pain as we reached the top of the hill.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I snapped.

“I think we should head back.”

“If you want to go back, go back. I told you not to come along if you can’t keep up.”

“I’m not the problem here, Aiden.”

“Well you’re the one talking about quitting.”

“You know who you sound like right now? Dad. Whom you claim you hated, but here you are, acting just like him. Stubborn as hell and refusing to admit that you’re hurting.”

“Fuck off, Nate. I’m not like Dad.” My voice echoed through the air.

I walked down the other side of the hill, which was almost as bad as going up. My damaged leg was screaming in pain as I reached the bottom and tried to leave Nathan in the dust, to prove to him that I wasn’t broken.

I glanced back to see Nate was still behind me, but he stayed put. Good. I wanted to be left alone.

Every time I took one step forward to bonding with my brothers, something always happened that pushed me two steps back.

Sometimes I wondered why I even bothered.

Aiden still wasn't back. Neither was Jackson. As far as I knew, Mom, Kat and Harper were all in bed. The chateau was silent. Too quiet. I studied the bookshelves in the library, but not a single book caught my interest. I checked my e-mails but being that I had let everyone know I was going on vacation, there wasn't much to distract me. I walked the halls of the house, remembering times when they'd be filled with childish laughter. My brothers and I loved playing hide and seek in the house when we were very young. We'd shut off all the lights to add an extra challenge, until one of us fell down the steps and Mom insisted we be more careful. Lights stayed on. No more running. The wood floors were slippery, and we weren't allowed shoes in the house, so we'd slip and slide down the halls on our socks.

Those were the days.

At first, I wasn't sure what Mom had hoped to accomplish by bringing all of us back to the chateau. Maybe she had hoped to recapture some of that joy, but we were older, and life had jaded us. Jackson had the early signs of a drinking problem. Aiden had PTSD. We weren't children anymore.

After we arrived, however, I got it. She hoped being back in the place where some of our happiest memories were, that maybe we could forget about the scandal with our dad and become a family once again. *If only it were that easy*, I thought to myself.

Memories of childhood were all over the place, but so were memories of Dad.

And memories of Carly.

I had first brought her with me when we were seventeen then every year after that. I had planned to propose to her on Christmas, right there with my family and the views of Mount Blanc in the distance, but just a few weeks before, I walked in on her and Brett in the bed she shared with me.

It had been three years since that fateful day, and I was over her. I knew Aiden was right—she was an asshole. I tried to see the good in her because she was absolutely smitten with me, or at least she pretended to be. She and Brett deserved each other though, especially after what they did to Harper.

I found myself pacing the hallways upstairs, sliding around on my socks just for good measure. I stopped outside Kat's doorway. There was no sound coming from the room, but I knew my sister, she was never one to go to bed early. Harper, on the other hand, had just flown in and was likely jetlagged and exhausted.

I wanted to knock and to tell Harper I was sorry for everything we'd done to her, and to explain that it was Carly and Brett that was behind the prank.

Yet I also didn't want to wake her.

"Nathan?" Mom's voice took me by surprise. "Is that you?"

"Yes, sorry," I said. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"No, I can't sleep. I keep hoping to hear Aiden come back from his walk. I thought I asked you to go with him?"

"I did go, but then he told me to leave him alone, so I came back."

Mom pursed her lips as she tightened her robe around her. I knew she worried about Aiden. She worried about all of us.

"What are you doing out here in the halls? Not sliding down on your socks like you did when you were a child, are you?" A hint of a smile tugged at her lips.

"No," I lied. I had done it earlier, but just once. "I was thinking of talking to Harper. To apologize."

“Oh,” Mom said. “After all these years?”

“Better late than never. I have wanted to for years, but I never knew how to go about it or when the right time would be. I know she won’t ever forgive me, and that’s fine, but I think I need to apologize just the same.”

“Well, the first thing you need to ask yourself is, are you apologizing to ease your own guilt or because you want to help Harper to heal from the incident?”

“I want her to heal,” I said honestly. “But of course, I’ve felt guilty ever since I heard about it.”

“You know, Nathan, you might have made some mistakes when you were younger, like hanging around with those horrible people for example, but you’re a good man.”

“I’m not so sure about that, Mom. After all, I chose to keep company with them.”

“Carly never cared about anyone but herself. She saw that you were a good man who would give her the world and she exploited that. Look at you now, with your finance degree; you could have gone to work for any big Wall Street business you wanted, but you chose to stay in South Carolina, to help your mom, to sit on the board of our nonprofit and forgo the lavish corner office.”

I shrugged. “I want to help you and our estate, Mom. I’m not giving up anything.”

Mom stepped closer to me and put a hand on my arm, staring up into my eyes. She might be small, but she never felt little even compared to my brothers and I due to her fierce nature.

“You gave up a lot, and I’ve always wondered if you did it because you felt guilty, like you had to somehow make up for it.”

She knew me too well.

“That’s not the whole story, but yes. I’ve decided to focus on making the world a better place, to make up for my wrongs. My mistakes made me want to be a better man.”

I'm just not sure it's enough.

“You’re an amazing young man, Nathan. I’m proud of you, and I think Harper may be more open to hearing your side of the story than you might think. But it’s probably better to do it in the morning, since the poor girl was exhausted.”

Mom was right, of course. I just hoped I could find the words to tell her.

The house was quiet. I sat in the dining room by the large picture window, my feet curled up underneath me sipping some of the best espresso I had ever had in my life. Kat was still asleep, she was never a morning person so it was far too early for her, but I was happy to have some time alone to come to terms with the craziness of the last few days.

This is exactly what I needed.

A luxurious getaway with my best friend after the biggest heartbreak of my life was definitely essential. I was so grateful to Rose for paying for my flight so I could have the experience.

Fresh snow was falling outside, and there wasn't another house as far as the eye could see. Just snow and mountains and trees. I never realized how badly I needed to get away from everyone and everything until I was sitting there, in that moment, alone with my coffee.

The day before, instead of preparing for my Christmas wedding, I was flying across the world, leaving my fiancé, my *ex-fiancé*, behind. I knew eventually I would have to face him, and everyone else, too. I had sent out a notification to our guests that the wedding was canceled and fled as quickly as I could.

What a whirlwind of a week.

Tears stung at my eyes, but I wiped them away, not wanting to shed even one for that bastard.

His words echoed in my ears.

“Come on, once we’re married, I can stop sleeping around because I’ll officially have you.”

He honestly believed that was a valid excuse? My stomach twisted just at the thought of seeing the two of them naked, her down on her knees at his desk, her mouth on his... *Stop it, Harper. Stop torturing yourself. He was a jerk. You’re better off.*

I didn’t regret breaking up with him, I just wasn’t sure what to do next. We worked together. Closely together. Everyone that had been invited to the wedding either worked with us or knew both of us, and I wasn’t sure what rumors he had already spread about me at the university.

I guess you’ll find out after the holidays.

I sipped my coffee and stared out the window.

“Good morning,” a voice pulled me out of my thoughts and caused me to tense up.

“Good morning, Jackson.”

His hair was messy, and he yawned as he made himself a coffee at the espresso machine in the corner. He smirked at me. “You remembered which one I was. Good job, Freckles.”

Hearing one of the many mean nicknames he used to taunt me with didn’t feel good, and his condescending tone didn’t help. I finished my espresso and stood up from the corner seat by the window. There went my quiet, relaxing morning.

“I’m sorry, did I say something wrong?”

Hearing Jackson Bishop say that he was sorry stopped me in my tracks. “Excuse me?”

“I’m asking, did I say something to upset you? You seem angry all of a sudden.”

“Not angry, just not interested in being made fun of for my freckles.”

“You know it’s a joke, right? I think your freckles are cute.”

“Sure,” I said, rolling my eyes. “That’s why you used to make fun of them constantly in high school, saying that I looked like a pepperoni pizza.”

“Hey, I happen to love pepperoni pizza.”

I shot him a look.

Jackson chuckled and ran a hand through his thick hair, trying to settle the bedhead down a bit. “Alright, you got me. I was an asshole back then. You were around a lot, and I picked on you like I did Kat. I didn’t mean any harm by it.”

“You know Kat didn’t appreciate it either, right? Just because you’re her brother doesn’t make it okay.”

“I know I can be a dick. I take jokes too far sometimes without meaning to, but they are only jokes. I don’t mean anything by them.”

“Well a joke is only funny if both parties are laughing, and with your jokes, that’s rarely the case.”

I was headed into the kitchen with my empty coffee cup when Jackson stopped me and pointed to a sign that said, “Staff Only.”

“Kat went in there last night.”

“Kat is not someone who follows the rules, I thought you knew that about her already.” He laughed and took the empty cup from my hands, setting it down on a tray next to the espresso machine. “The staff will handle it.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about leaving my cups and dishes around for others to pick up, but I glanced back at the little sign that almost blended into the wallpaper if you weren’t looking for it. I didn’t want to break any rules.

After Jackson finished making his cup, he turned to me, taking me by surprise. “Listen, I know I can be a dick sometimes. I’m sorry. I am trying to be better.”

Deep down, I knew that Jackson treated others a lot like his dad had treated people, including his mother. He wasn’t raised with a strong, *kind* masculine influence in his life.

Hopefully he meant it and he truly was trying to be better, because after a certain point, there's really no excuse for it.

Hearing Jackson apologize to me was something I never imagined would happen, but there I was in the dining room with him, alone, and hearing the words coming from his mouth. I wasn't sure yet if I forgave him completely, his actions from there on out would have to prove to me that he was a changed man, but I realized that maybe he actually had transformed, and hopefully for the better.

Jackson's dark eyes stayed locked on me and sent a shiver down my spine. I couldn't recall him ever looking at me like that, or for that long, and there was something in that gaze that gave me butterflies in my stomach.

Stop it, Harper. It's Jackson. There's no way you're going to do anything with your best friend's brother.

"Oh hey, you're up early," a voice pulled my gaze away from Jackson, and toward the other brother standing in the doorway.

My body tensed as I recognized Nathan, and I almost bolted for the door, but he was standing between me and the exit.

"I'm always a morning person," Jackson said.

"Not you, her." Nathan smiled at me. I averted my gaze entirely since his smile was always a weakness of mine.

"I'm a morning person too, and I fell asleep early," I said, not that I owed him an explanation. "Anyway, I was just heading back upstairs and—"

"Can we talk?" Nathan interrupted me.

"Uh, sure, I guess." I crossed my arms in front of me in a defensive posture.

Nathan ran a hand through his hair, reminding me of Jackson's same movement only moments before.

Nathan looked over at Jackson who seemed to be oblivious at his brother's hints to leave. He sat down in the same place I was earlier, coffee in hand, and stared out the window.

“I just wanted to apologize,” Nathan said. “For what happened when we were younger. Carly and Brett, well, they’re assholes and—”

“Stop, Nathan. I really don’t want to relive that time in my life. It’s the past. If you’re truly sorry, prove it to me by being a better person, not apologizing years too late for something that happened when we were kids.”

I was on my way out when more voices filled the hallway, including Kat’s. At least with my bestie there, things would hopefully be a little less tense. Aiden entered the dining room first, however, and when he saw me, he said, “Morning, Freckles.”

My jaw clenched tightly, and I was ready to tell him the same thing I had told Jackson earlier. But Jackson surprised us all by speaking up. “Not cool, man.”

“What do you mean?” Aiden’s tone was strained.

Kat stepped in and said, “Uh-oh, are you fighting already?”

Before I could say anything, Jackson said calmly, “It’s not cool to call her Freckles. She doesn’t like it, so we need to cut it out.”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry, Harper.”

A smile pulled at my lips as Kat looked at me with a weird expression.

“What happened to my brothers? Did you switch them out overnight with kind, compassionate men instead?”

Laughing at her comment, I couldn’t do much else other than shrug. Instantly the tension in the room lifted for me though. I may not have been able to forgive them for all of their wrongs on day one, but it gave me hope that we could exist peacefully. Maybe they had grown into decent people after all.

JACKSON

Harper pulled the pins from her French twist, letting her wild curls fall over her shoulders and mine. Her eyes were the color of ocean waves as she stared deeply into mine, nibbling her luscious pink lips.

Jackson, please, she whimpers as I rip off her clothes, exposing those amazing curves...

“Good morning,” Mom chirps as she steps into the room. “I’m surprised you’re all up before me today. I slept in later than I thought.”

Hearing Mom’s voice pulls me from the fantasy and back to reality. Harper is now sitting next to Kat and the two of them are deep into conversation. She’s smiling and twirling a loose curl with her finger. Her glasses sit perched on her nose; her eyes crinkle as she laughs.

God, she is beautiful... and I don’t even think she realizes it.

Harper’s gaze briefly turned my way, her smile wavering before she turned back to Kat and continued with her conversation.

She hated my guts, and I couldn’t blame her, not entirely. I had been a dick to her. Hell, I’d been a dick to everyone back then, and I knew I could still be that way. But I had meant what I said to her earlier—I was trying to be a better person. I didn’t want to treat people poorly anymore. I knew I wanted to settle down and find myself a wife, and I definitely didn’t want to treat my wife the way Dad treated Mom in the end. I

wanted to be a good husband and partner, and eventually a good father to my own children.

Harper's comments made me realize I still had a lot of work to do if I wanted to be better. I appreciated her blunt honesty; she had grown into a confident woman. Her younger self wouldn't have had the guts to speak up to me. I didn't know what happened over the last few years, but whatever it was, it was hot as hell.

Mom was talking to Gerard about breakfast, so I moved to the table, sitting across from Harper and Kat. Their conversation ceased as I got closer.

"You don't have to stop talking on account of me," I said.

"Yeah, we do. Because you'll just make fun of us for our girl talk," Kat said coldly.

"No, I won't. I promise," I said.

Kat rolled her eyes. "You might have Harper snowed that you're a new and improved Jackson, but you're not fooling me, big brother. I know you too well for that."

I opened my mouth to argue with her but then thought about what I was going to say. Insulting Kat in a witty comeback would just prove her point, that I was still an asshole. If I wanted to be better, I needed to do better.

Thankfully, Mom interrupted us and changed the subject.

"So, are you going skiing today, Harper?"

Harper had just taken a sip of orange juice, and she snorted, spraying juice on the table in front of us. "Oh God, I'm so sorry—"

A snarky joke came to mind, but I pushed it aside. Harper's cheeks were bright pink, she was clearly embarrassed. A joke would only make her feel worse. Instead, I leapt up and grabbed some napkins, handing them to her. "It's no big deal, I vomited all over this table as a kid, a little orange juice isn't going to cause much harm."

"Thanks," Harper took the napkins and began dabbing up the mess before turning back to Mom. "Uh, no, I don't think

I'm cut out for skiing, I'm afraid. I have the dexterity of a drunk toddler. I fall *up* the stairs on a regular basis and barely know how to work my own two feet. I can't imagine trying to control them attached to skis."

"Yeah, skiing is overrated," Kat said. "Dad used to make me go, but now that I have a choice my favorite view of the mountains is from the heated pool on the patio rather than going down the slopes."

"That sounds lovely," Harper said. "I think that could be part of the plan for today."

"You don't even want to try? You might surprise yourself, dear," Rose said.

Gerard carried in platters of fruit and placed them on the table, Maria following behind with croissants and baguettes with homemade jam. Harper's eyes grew so wide, it was adorable.

"And I can teach you," I said.

Harper's eyes moved over to me, a tense smile on her lips.

"We both know that I'm the better skier, Jackson," Nathan said. "If there's anyone that should teach her—"

"Actually, I remember smoking you both down the slopes yesterday," Aiden interjected. "And that's with my injury, what's your excuse?"

"We let you win," I replied with a coy smile, grabbing a clementine from the fruit bowl and peeling it.

"Nah, you would never let someone win," Aiden said. "Your ego just can't handle losing."

Mom broke up the bickering. "Well, there's no reason all three of you can't teach her. I'm sure having three instructors is better than one."

The three of us shrugged.

Nathan spoke up. "Harper hasn't even expressed interest in skiing with us, and here we are bickering about which one of us is going to teach her. Maybe let her decide."

Harper's response both surprised and excited me. "I mean... if you're patient with me, I would like to try it. I'm all about new experiences."

She grabbed a croissant and some jam, offering me a sweet smile from across the table.

"Ugh," Kat let out a low groan.

"What?" Harper asked.

"Well, if you want to go, I guess I'm going too because there's no way I'm leaving you alone with my brothers, they'll eat you alive."

Eat her alive... now that's an idea, I thought to myself as I imagined being between those thick thighs of hers, imagining how she might taste.

"You don't have to," Harper said. "I can handle myself."

"Nah, you're my best friend. I'm sure we'll be able to make it fun regardless."

"Yay!" Harper said, jumping from the chair. She grabbed another croissant. "I have to get ready. What does one wear for skiing anyway?"

"Don't worry, dear, we've got plenty of ski-appropriate clothing if you need anything. It's in the hall closet next to Nathan's room."

"Thank you, Rose."

Kat finished her clementine then followed her best friend upstairs to get ready, leaving just my brothers and Mom.

"So, are you coming out with us today, Mom?" Nathan asked. "If I remember, you're a pretty accomplished skier yourself."

"Oh no, not for me," she laughed. "My skiing days are over, I'm afraid. I have to be careful with my old bones and the osteoporosis, remember."

"Ah, yes, that's right," Nathan said. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t be sorry. I have a relaxing day planned.” Mom’s voice sounded extra chipper and she smiled brightly. “I’m going to the spa in town today and having lunch with a friend.”

“A friend?” I asked. “You know people here in France?”

“I have friends and a life you don’t know about, yes, Jackson.” She chuckled to herself and stood up, and I noticed she was dressed even nicer than usual for a trip to the spa. Her makeup was done, as was her hair, when normally she would let them do her hair and she’d skip the makeup since there was no point of it when in the sauna.

I wanted to ask her if it truly was just a ‘friend’ but wasn’t sure if she would answer me. After all, it wasn’t any of my business. She hadn’t given Dad a chance to redeem himself. She moved on pretty quickly once his scandals came to light and trusted the media and the obviously doctored images over her own husband.

Whoever tore apart my family... well, I would never forgive them, and they better watch out if I ever found out who they were. They ruined our lives; I’d be more than happy to ruin theirs in return. An eye for an eye.

Mom left and as soon as she was out the door, Aiden let out a low whistle.

“What?” I scowled at him.

“Harper. Imagine her in a little snow bunny outfit.” Aiden had a shit-eating grin on his face.

The thought of Harper decked out in tight ski gear was enough to pull me out of my funk.

“Okay, my mood just drastically improved at that thought.”

“Guys,” Nathan said with a sheepish grin., “This is our sister’s best friend we’re talking about.”

“Yeah, so? She’s hot as fuck,” Aiden said. “I see the way you look at her with those puppy dog eyes, Nate. Admit it, you’d totally love to get with her.”

“She’s heartbroken,” Nathan said, not denying Aiden’s statement at all.

“You know what they say, Nate. The best way to get over someone is to get underneath someone else,” I teased.

Nathan rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You guys are crude.”

“But you haven’t denied that you like the thought of it,” Aiden countered.

“No, because the idea is enticing, sure—”

“And it would help you get over Carly,” Aiden added.

“What do you mean? That was three years ago, I *am* over her.”

Both Aiden and I looked at Nathan.

“I *am* over her,” Nathan reiterated.

“Sure, Nate. Let’s say you are. Still, the idea of Harper, in bed, that curvy body naked in front of you... that doesn’t appeal to you at all?”

“Oh, it appeals to me. I’m a warm-blooded man, after all. I just think we need to be careful here, tread lightly. She’s our sister’s best friend and she’s been hurt recently. We don’t want to cause her more harm than we already have.”

“It’s not like it’s going to actually happen,” I added, sitting back in the chair with a grin. “But wouldn’t it be nice if it did?”

“Yeah, it’s a fun fantasy, but it needs to stay that way—a fantasy,” Nathan said, though he didn’t sound too sure of himself. He had always been the brother who spoke logically. But I could tell part of him really wanted to be with Harper in the same we did.

“Sure, a fantasy,” I said, shrugging it off.

Because let’s face it, there was no way sweet, innocent Harper Olson was going to sleep with any one of us.

Much less all three of us.

Fuck skiing.

Seriously, fuck it.

I never told a soul how much I hated skiing because Dad would have shamed me for it and since my brothers loved it so much, I didn't want to be the odd one out. I was already the black sheep for so much other shit, but for some reason, I kept skiing so I could spend time with my family and hopefully win my father's favor.

It never worked. The winning Dad's favor, that is.

Besides that my brothers and I often fought the entire time so I wasn't sure why I thought this time would be any different.

Then Harper came down the stairs dressed in form-fitting snow pants and suddenly, I was ready and willing to spend all day on the slopes.

Her red hair was pulled back into a braid that fell over her shoulder. She had on pink and white ski pants that I'd never seen before and a matching pink jacket. It was a little snug, especially up top since she was pretty curvy, but I sure as hell wasn't complaining.

"How do I look?" Harper asked.

"You look gorgeous." The words slipped from my mouth before I could stop them.

Her cheeks flushed a bright pink, nearly matching the jacket, and she averted her eyes from me.

“Stop hitting on my best friend, jerk,” Kat said, playfully punching me in the arm.

I hated to admit it, but I hadn’t even noticed my sister had entered the room. My eyes had been on Harper.

Kat was grinning, clearly joking. God, I had missed her. I had been away for the last few years, serving in the military, and it really made me realize how much I missed my little sister. I had picked on her a lot growing up, and I felt bad about it now, but seeing her be able to stick up for herself filled me with such pride.

“How do *I* look?” Kat asked. She turned around in circles in her all-black ski attire. It had been years since she’d worn it and it was a bit snug for her, too.

“Looking good, Kat,” I said, raising my hand for a high five. Kat looked shocked but hit my hand with hers.

“Are we ready?” Jackson asked.

“I think so,” Harper said. “Do I need to bring anything?”

“Nah, we rent the skis and everything, it’s just easier that way.”

“Perfect.” Harper nibbled her lip, and she looked a little uncertain.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said. “You’ll do fine.”

“You seriously overestimate my abilities, Aiden.” She laughed and it was an adorable sound.

God, she was just so fucking sweet and innocent. Like pure sugar with pink unicorn frosting. What I wouldn’t do for a taste....

My mind went back to what Jackson and I had joked about earlier.

A foursome with Harper.

The idea of it was hot as hell, I had to admit, and if she were anyone else other than my sister’s best friend, I might seriously have considered it. But I reminded myself that it had to stay a fantasy.

As we headed out, Jackson pulled me aside while the others went ahead.

“Hey, I wanted to talk to you about something really quick, to clear the air.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Alright... I’m listening.”

“I’m sorry for doubting you earlier. I don’t know what happened and haven’t even listened to your side of the story, yet I wrote you off as a liar. That’s not cool.”

I nearly froze in place. Was Jackson apologizing to me? There was a first time for everything, but I had to wonder what caused the sudden change of heart.

He continued, “So I’d be happy to look into your case for you and see if there’s anything I can do to help clear your name.”

“Really?” I was so stunned, I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Really, Aiden. I mean it. Mom says you’re a changed man, and I believe her. I want to believe you, too.”

Well, clearly he still had his doubts, but it was a start.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

The day was already off to a better start than I expected. Maybe there was hope for some family bonding after all.

Not to mention, the way that Harper glanced back and smiled at me, checking on us, was enough to keep me headed toward the slopes.

Kat rushed back to me and asked, “You okay? Jackson not giving you too much trouble?” She looked right at Jackson when she asked.

I laughed. “No trouble at all, actually.”

“Good. I’ve got my eyes on you,” she said, taunting Jackson.

Being around my family again felt good. I had missed everyone while in the service—Mom, Kat, even my asshole

brothers. The one person not on the trip I hadn't missed at all, and I made a note of that. We seemed to be a lot happier without him. Not that it should come as a huge surprise.

“**W**atch out!” Harper shouted. I turned around just in time. She was barreling toward me, arms flailing with a look of panic on her face. “I can’t stop! I can’t stop!”

I didn’t move. She wasn’t going fast enough to knock me off my feet. I grabbed her and stopped her, wrapping my arms around her. She was breathing heavily, her face flushed.

“Thank you, Nathan,” she said. “I just don’t know how to make my legs do what they’re supposed to.”

We had shown her over and over again how to stop, to turn her skis inward, but for whatever reason, it wasn’t working. Harper had taken to simply falling over like a fainting goat when she wanted to stop or run into something, or in my case, someone.

“Where are the kids? I thought you said we were going on the kiddy slopes?”

Jackson chuckled and we shared a look between us.

“What?” Harper’s eyes were wide.

Kat pulled up beside her and said, “Sweetie, we aren’t even on the slopes yet. I don’t think you’re ready for the kid’s slopes.”

“Oh,” Harper’s cheeks flushed. “I’m worse than a five-year-old, aren’t I?”

“It’s not your fault,” Kat said, patting her best friend on the arm. “Some people are just more coordinated than others. But

with enough practice, I believe in you. You will soar past those five-year-olds in no time.”

Kat stuck her tongue out at her friend and Harper playfully scowled as she bent down to pick up some snow. I grabbed on to her so she wouldn't fall over. She made a snowball and hurled it at Kat, missing her by a mile as her legs began shaking.

“I'm going to take these off for a bit,” Harper said. “I need to have control of my legs again.”

Jackson, Aiden and I helped her remove the skis and as soon as she was free, she made another snowball and ran after Kat. “You're not going to get away from me now!”

A snowball pelted the side of Kat's jacket and Harper jumped in the air in celebration. “Yes! I got you!”

She was so stinking cute, it hurt. My lips were numb from smiling.

“Oh, you think that's funny?” Kat asked. A second later, a snowball flew past my head.

“It's on now,” I said. I removed my skis, grabbed a handful of snow and hurled it toward my sister, hitting her in the shoulder.

“Watch out, Nate!” Harper called out again, but this time it was because Aiden had a snowball and was aiming it directly at me. I moved out of the way as it sailed past me and quickly formed a snowball to throw back at him.

Even Jackson got into it after Harper threw a snowball at him, hitting him in the chest. He was chasing down a squealing Harper and Kat, pelting them with snowballs as they laughed and did their best to get him back.

I couldn't remember the last time we all played and acted like kids together. We'd all grown and gone our separate ways, escaping home as soon as we were old enough to do so. And the few times we all got together, there had always been drama and tension.

This was nice.

I had missed it.

Harper and Kat fell into the snow laughing.

“Enough!” Harper said, breathless. “I’m exhausted! I can’t breathe from laughing so hard, and I haven’t run like that since I was a kid.”

She was smiling wide, her eyes twinkling and her cheeks pink from the cold and from laughing. At that moment, I realized I had never seen a more beautiful woman.

“Alright, we’ll call a truce,” I said. “It’s about time for lunch anyway.”

“Did someone say lunch?” Kat asked, sitting up and reaching out a hand for Aiden to help her up.

I offered my hand to Harper. She stood up and dusted off the snow.

“I am definitely down for lunch. Should we start heading back toward home?”

“I was thinking we’d indulge in some *apres-ski* fondue,” Jackson said. Aiden and I shared a look and I rolled my eyes at Jackson acting all pretentious as usual, going the extra length of faking a terrible French accent.

Harper raised her eyebrows. “I wouldn’t say no to that.”

“Good, I know just the place,” Jackson replied.

We returned our skis and headed into town. Harper had asked if we could walk, and she took in the scenery around her like a little girl in Disneyworld for the first time. It helped me to see the French Alps in a new light, a sight I had taken for granted since we came here every single year when I was a child. I had never understood how privileged and spoiled I was.

“You know, you always see these videos on TikTok with mountain towns, where this massive mountain is right there, on the edge of the town and the scale is unbelievable. I always thought they had to be fake... but here I am, looking at it right now and I still can’t believe it.”

I almost told Harper in that moment that she was adorable, but I kept my mouth shut. Still, while she was eying the world around us, I was stealing glances at her, admiring how happy she looked.

“Here we are,” Jackson said. “They usually only open for dinner, but I know the owner and sent him a message and asked if we could come by.”

“The place is closed though?” Harper asked.

“Yeah, for everyone but us.”

Harper, with her jaw on the ground, looked over at Kat. “I guess it pays to be rich, huh?”

The door opened.

“*Bonjour mes amis,*” the man said warmly. I had to wonder how much Jackson was slipping the guy under the table for him to open the place up just for us in the middle of the day. “Come in, have a seat anywhere you like. The place is yours.”

There was a large dining room with floor-to-ceiling windows all around it and a view of Mont Blanc. He seated us at clearly the best seat in the house, with a full-on view for all of us to enjoy.

“My name is Jean-Luc, I am the owner and chef of the restaurant, and I will be personally serving you this afternoon, with the help of Charlotte, who is assisting me today.”

A young woman stepped beside Jean-Luc and offered a polite, “Bonjour,” and we returned the phrase.

Yeah, Jackson dropped a lot of dough on this.

Jean-Luc and Charlotte stepped away to grab our food, already ordered in advance by Jackson. We didn’t have to worry about a menu or anything.

“Ooh what is all this?” Harper asked. “I’ve never had fondue before.”

Jackson, of course, took over for Jean-Luc in explaining everything as it was presented. “This is *Fondue Savoyarde,*

featuring Alsace white wine, and a mixture of cheese—Beaumont, Comte and a little Swiss cheese.”

Aiden added his own little bit. “It’s cheese, you put it on things, potatoes, bread, whatever you want”

The fondue was served on a little stove on our table, keeping it warm and toasty. We each had tiny forks plus bread and little potatoes to dip into the cheese.

“Also, *salade verte*—” Jackson continued.

“You mean a green salad,” Aiden said dryly.

Jackson ignored him. “And a charcuterie spread featuring *prosciutto, saucisson sec, jambon*—”

“Cured meats,” Aiden interrupted him. “Can we eat, please?”

“Sure,” Jackson said, pursing his lips together as he picked up his fork. “So how you do this—”

“I think Harper can figure out how to eat fondue, Jackson,” I said with a laugh.

“Yeah, I think I got it,” Harper said. “But thank you, Jackson. Your lesson was very informative.”

Harper dipped her fork into the fondue and the entire table waited as she tasted it. Her eyes closed and she let out a sound of pleasure. “Oh God, this is the best thing I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

Jackson, next to me, coughed to cover up a laugh. I pretended to wipe away something from my face to hide the look of amusement. Aiden just grinned like a fool, not hiding the fact that he enjoyed the sexual innuendo. A look from Kat made him keep his mouth shut, however.

Harper opened her eyes, looked around the table at all of us staring at her and asked, “What?” It seemed to hit her then that her words may have come out wrong. She covered her mouth, “Oh God, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay, sorry my brothers are pervs,” Kat said as she stuck a potato in the cheese.

Maybe we were pervs. The idea of Harper's luscious lips around my *saucisson sec* caused some tightness in my pants. I was grateful for the tablecloth hiding my lower half from view.

My brothers all seemed to be equally uncomfortable, watching Harper eat as if it were the most exotic porn of their life.

Even if I stood a chance with Harper and could get Kat's approval to date her, I still had my brothers to consider. And she might be civil to me, but I highly doubted she could ever get over the past completely.

Still... if she could, the foursome that Jackson had insinuated earlier didn't sound bad at all. If that ever became a possibility then we could all win—there would be no contest, no rivalry.

Would I be okay with a foursome? I had never thought about it before, not seriously. I didn't like to talk about it much, but Carly had been the only woman I'd been with, and she wasn't very adventurous. The idea of my brothers and I sharing Harper though... that filled my head with some vivid and appealing imagery.

The wine was flowing as we continued our meal. The food kept on coming. Anytime we ran out of bread, there was a fresh platter of it ready for us.

"Is that—" Aiden stood up and walked over to the windows overlooking the street. "It's Mom, and I think that's the friend she was talking about."

Jackson got up and walked to the window, frowning. "Who's that guy?"

Kat got up and walked over as well, followed by Harper. I decided to see what all the fuss was about.

Mom was at a café across the street, sitting on the terrace. An older man sat across from her, and the way she was smiling, I had a feeling they were more than just acquaintances.

“Who is that?” Jackson asked again, his voice sounding tense.

“I have no idea, but good for her,” Kat said. “He looks loaded.”

“We don’t need more money,” Jackson grumbled.

“No, but at least we don’t have to worry about him using Mom for hers.”

“What do you mean using her?” Jackson snapped.

“As in, if they were to—” Kat began but when she noticed the way Jackson held his fists at his side and the look on his face she stopped in her tracks. “Never mind. They’re probably just friends, or maybe they’re fuck buddies.”

Harper choked, turning a laugh into a cough.

“Mom does not have a fuck buddy,” Jackson said through gritted teeth.

“Why not? She’s a woman, she has needs,” Kat said, shrugging as she walked back over to the table. She resumed eating. “She looks happy, Jackson, so I’m happy for her.”

She did look happy.

It wasn’t until after Dad left that I realized how little my mom smiled. She was smiling now; that was clear even from a distance. She looked happier than I had ever seen her with Dad.

“Good for her,” I said, going back to the table.

Aiden followed. “Yeah, good for her.”

Harper joined us as well, leaving Jackson to continue staring out the window at our mother. I looked at Aiden and he seemed to read my mind.

“Hey, man, let’s finish lunch and we can hit the slopes again,” Aiden said loud enough for Jackson to hear. We both feared that if someone didn’t reign him in, Jackson might go over there and make a scene. He was fuming mad.

“I’m done skiing. I just want to go back to the house now. Everything is paid for, leave when you’re done.”

“You’re not going back alone,” I said.

“I need to be alone, Nate.”

The mood ruined, none of us stayed too much longer. I thanked Jean-Luc and Charlotte and made sure to tip them extra well, even though Jackson probably had it covered.

As soon as we entered the house, everyone went their separate ways except Kat and me. “The pool is calling, what do you say?”

“I really need a shower,” I replied.

“There’s showers down there,” she said.

“My entire body hurts, and I think I’m still jetlagged—”

“You’re saying no to a heated pool? The same one you were super excited about this morning?”

“I’ve got plenty of time here still,” I said. “And today might have been enough activity for my poor, aching body.”

“Alright, you don’t mind if I head there, do you? Just for a bit.”

“Oh no, please, go swimming. I think I’m going to shower and nap.”

“Get some rest, bestie,” she said with a smile, heading down the hallway and out of sight. I looked at the stairs in front of me and groaned. My poor, aching legs... I felt thirty years older at that moment, from all of the falling over I did attempting to stop.

But it was fun, I had to admit.

I walked up the stairs, taking them slowly. As I reached the top, I headed down the hall and grabbed the door handle to our room and turned it. Stepping inside, I noticed that the bedding was different.

That's odd, but maybe the staff changed it, I told myself.

The shower was running.

I laughed. This house was truly a maze. I knocked on the bathroom door and called out.

“Change your mind about the pool? I’d just like to know how you beat me up here! I knew that I walked up those stairs slowly, but geez, you’re fast...”

Just then, the door swung open, and it wasn’t my best friend.

It was her brother.

Jackson Bishop stood there in all his naked glory, not even a towel around his waist. He blinked at me. “Harper, what are you doing here?”

He sounded less upset than I would have expected.

“Oh Jesus, Jackson, I must have walked into the wrong room! This place is such a maze, I’m sorry.” I covered my eyes, but ended up peeking out between my fingers because damn, those abs couldn’t be real, could they? I don’t think I ever saw such a perfect six pack in my life, I thought they had to be photoshopped to look like that.

I slowly backed toward the door, trying my best not to look. Jackson didn’t even bother to cover up. Maybe it was the shock of me walking in on him.

I backed into the bed and scrambled to regain my balance. “I’m sorry, I can’t see when my eyes—”

“You have nothing to be sorry about.” His voice was deep and strong, and it sent a shiver down my body.

I froze as Jackson walked over to me. He peeled my hands away from face and I found him staring down at me with a sexy smirk.

“Jackson, I—”

“Shh,” he said, and before I knew what was happening, he pressed his lips to mine.

At first, I wasn't sure how to respond. I just stood there like a deer in headlights, with my best friend's brother's lips against mine.

A soft groan escaped my mouth and I opened to him. His tongue slipped between my lips and met mine, and my heart thudded hard against my chest.

I had kissed my ex, but that was as far as we'd gone... I had been "saving myself" but what good did that accomplish? He ended up cheating on me anyway.

The way Jackson kissed me, the way his hands moved over my hips, pulling me into him, I could feel for myself that he wanted to do more than kiss. His erection pressed into my belly as he cupped my ass.

My panties were beginning to get soaked, and I wanted nothing more than for Jackson to carry me over to the bed and have his way with me.

"We can stop," he said, his lips only an inch from mine, his breath hot against my face.

"No," I said, closing the distance between us. "I need this."

And I did.

I had been so good for so long, and what did it cost me? Everything I had worked hard for.

It was time to give in to my most basic desires.

Jackson was already naked, that part was easy, but I was still in my ski attire. Good thing he knew what he was doing. I might have been a virgin, but it was clear this wasn't Jackson's first rodeo.

He unzipped my jacket, then my pants, and helped me step out of them as we moved back toward the bed. He grabbed my sweater and broke the connection between our mouths for only a split second as the garment came off over my head.

So many layers to remove... and my body ached for him more and more as each second went by. My skin was begging

to feel his naked flesh against mine, to feel his mouth against me, to feel him inside of me...

“Jackson, please...” I whimpered as he took his time removing my bra.

A deep laugh vibrated through his entire body. “I had no idea you wanted me this badly, Harper. You should have said something sooner.”

To be honest, I didn't know I was this horny for Jackson either. My feelings and past had clouded my judgment, but seeing him like this... *feeling* him like this... I'd go crazy if I didn't have him now.

My bra slipped from my body, and my breasts fell into his hands. He stopped kissing me and moved lower, his mouth pressing against the sensitive flesh around my nipples, his dark eyes staring up at me. He took my nipple between his lips and sucked gently, his fingers playing with the other, and it felt like an electric shock that caused me to shudder against him. My juices really started flowing, and I was still in my panties as Jackson lowered me to the bed.

“Please...” I begged again.

“Tell me what you want, Harper,” he said, as he moved down my body, stopping at my belly and staring up at me.

“I want you,” I said.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“I want you to—” before I could finish the thought, he moved even lower, dropping down to the floor and between my thighs.

Jackson slipped my panties off of me as he waited for my response. “Yes, Harper?”

“I want you to...”

He circled his fingertips gently against my inner thighs, all the while watching me with an amused expression.

He liked watching me beg.

“Please—” I writhed against the bed, my back arching upward as if to silently tell him what I wanted. I had never felt a man’s touch against me in that way, and never knew how badly I needed it until that moment.

Maybe it was my desperate tone, or the way my body was shaking with need, but Jackson closed the distance between his mouth and my flesh, holding my thighs apart as he kissed the outer lips, his tongue parting them and finding my most sensitive spot.

I cried out, then clasped a hand over my mouth, afraid that someone might hear me.

“These walls are thick, you can scream for me, Harper.”

I removed my hand, though I tried to control my sounds of pleasure just in case. It was hard to do though, as Jackson worked his tongue all around my clit, teasing and sucking. Slowly, he slipped a finger inside of me, then two.

“You’re so fucking wet for me,” he growled.

He filled me with three fingers, moving them in and out slowly as he continued licking my clit.

I grabbed hold of the bedding, my back arching upward as pleasure washed over me, wave after wave of it, the most intense feelings I had ever felt in my life. Who knew Jackson Bishop was so damned good with his mouth?

He made sounds of pleasure as if I was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted. With his free hand, he grabbed my ass and pulled me upward toward him to get a better angle, his fingers moving deeper and deeper inside of me. My body felt like it would explode with pleasure, and I could feel myself inching closer and closer to orgasm.

“Jackson,” I moaned his name over and over again until I could no longer speak. Only a cry of pleasure came out of me as the bed seemed to shake. My toes curled and every muscle in my body tensed as I came.

After my body relaxed against the bed, Jackson eased back, staring up at me with wet lips. He smiled. “Good girl. Now, tell me what you want to do next?”

I partially sat up and reached for him, trying to pull him on top of me.

“Tell me, Harper. I want to hear you say it.”

“I need you inside of me,” I whimpered.

“Louder, I couldn’t hear you.”

“I want you inside of me, Jackson.”

He smirked and climbed on top of me, just as I had wanted. He towered above me, all muscle and flesh. I couldn’t keep my hands off of him—I had to feel that he was real, that I hadn’t just fallen asleep in my bed and was dreaming this.

No, Jackson was really above me, his mouth pressed against mine. I could taste myself on his lips.

He pressed into me, and I wrapped my legs around him, arching upward to meet his body.

I repeated my plea, “I need you inside of me.”

Jackson stared deep into my eyes with his usual cocky smirk as he slipped his member between my thighs. The sheer size of it took me by surprise. I gasped as he pressed the head against me.

“Please...” and without having to utter another word, he slipped between my lips and gently thrust into me.

I was soaking wet, but I was still a virgin, this was all new to me. The sensation of him stretching me open took me by surprise. It didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would, but I felt the tension. I don’t know if he knew I was a virgin or if he was simply pacing himself, but he stayed there, sheathed inside of me, for a few moments, allowing my body to get used to the fullness. I tried to relax as much as possible, savoring the sensation of him inside of me, while still unable to believe that I was having sex. And it was with Jackson Bishop. My head was spinning, and I swore I saw stars when he slowly started moving in and out of me again, taking his sweet time with me which I was surprised by but definitely appreciated. .

Each thrust took me by surprise and brought a gasp from my lips, but with each one, it became easier and less tense.

The little pain I had felt in the beginning began to subside as Jackson moved in and out of me, his movements gentler than I ever thought possible from him.

He grabbed ahold of my hips, and with one fluid movement, rolled the two of us over so now I was on top of him. I must have looked panicked as I stared down into his dark eyes.

“It’s okay, I’ll help you,” he said. His hands still on my hips, he began moving me back and forth, grinding me against his body. His cock pressed against my walls, my clit rubbed against him. Before long, I was moving myself, finding the rhythm that felt the best as Jackson allowed his hands to explore my body. He took my breasts into his grip and leaned upward, his lips once again finding one of my nipples. He sucked gently, and like before, it was like an electrical signal straight to my clit. The pleasure was so intense, I had never felt anything like it. I cried out in ecstasy as my legs began to shake from another climax.

“Jackson, oh God... I’m—” I didn’t have to say the words, my body and my screams told him that I was coming. With one hand, he helped me keep up the rhythm that got me to the edge, drawing out the pleasure for as long as possible. I thought I might black out as the waves of ecstasy started to slow down. I fell forward against his body, resting upon him for a second as my heart rate returned to normal.

Jackson stroked the hair from my face and kissed me as I shuddered against him.

“That was amazing,” I whispered.

“Are you finished?” he asked me.

I didn’t have to think about my answer, not even for a second.

“Not even close,” I said, smiling as I sat upright once again. “I want more.”

“Mmm, good girl,” he growled as he grabbed my hips and guided me up and down on his cock. I wanted to please him, for him to feel the same pleasure he had given me. He started

thrusting upward with each downward movement, filling me up deeper and deeper as I rode him. His own movements became more desperate, and I begged him, “Yes, Jackson, yes... come, please...”

The idea of Jackson filling me up with his seed brought me to the edge once more. Just the mere thought of it was enough to get me close. I was on birth control—I had started it because I had planned to be on my honeymoon in a few days and didn’t want to get pregnant straight away, so I felt like I was safe.

“Come inside of me,” I whimpered.

Jackson thrust upward into me, hitting the deepest parts and a warmth filled me from the inside. The look on his face... his brow was furrowed and his eyes almost closed. A low groan escaped his lips.

I came along with him, my body shaking even more wildly than before. Our bodies stayed like that for a few seconds, intertwined and writhing together as we rode out the pleasure, until I couldn’t take it a second longer and collapsed on top of him again.

He stroked the hair from my face as we both caught our breath.

“Not too shabby for your first time, I hope.”

I turned to look into his eyes. “How did you—”

He smirked. “I can just tell. Besides, you were always a sweet, innocent girl. I figured you were saving yourself.”

My cheeks flushed and I averted my gaze, but he took my face in his hands and forced me to look at him.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Harper. You were amazing. And I’m honored I got to be your first.”

He pressed his lips against mine, and we both got lost in the kiss and the endorphins from our orgasms. We were so lost in each other, that we hadn’t even heard the knock on the door.

“Holy shit,” a voice said, pulling us both from the kiss.

I hopped off Jackson in a hurry and grabbed the sheet, trying to cover my body. Aiden and Nathan were standing in the doorway.

They were both smirking.

“Lucky bastard,” Aiden said.

“You can ask Harper if she’d like you to join in,” Jackson said, speaking so casually that I stared at him with a slack jaw.

“What do you say, Harper?”

My body tingled at the thought of having all three of them at once.

But that was crazy. There was no way they would be okay with sharing me, right? I mean, they had grown up sharing pretty much everything, but that didn’t necessarily translate to a foursome.

Or did it?

Aiden licked his lips and looked ready to hop into the bed, I just needed to say the word. His eager eyes seemed to devour what I couldn’t cover up with the sheet.

Aiden was the bad boy everyone in our high school had always dreamt of, including me.

I bit my lip, thinking it over as my eyes fell on Nathan.

Nate didn’t look me in the eyes, though. His hands were shoved in his pockets, his cheeks clearly flushed. The total opposite of Aiden, and one of the reasons I actually believed he may have wanted to date me back in high school. Because he always seemed to be the sweet one, the one with a good heart. Which is why I was so hurt when I found out his friends had tricked me into thinking he was interested in me.

Was he, though?

He briefly looked up and I could see the hunger in his eyes.

“So, Harper, are you up for another round or two with my brothers? It’s your call.”

In a moment of bravery, I let the sheet fall from my body, exposing my breasts and offering a shy smile.

“If they want to, sure.”

“Why wouldn’t we want to?” Aiden asked.

I shrugged. “Because I’m the geeky girl you used to make fun of.”

“Well, you’re no longer that geeky girl, you’re hot as fuck,” Aiden said.

“Then come over here,” I said with a sly grin.

Aiden didn’t take long. He began to undress as he walked over and before he got to the bed, he was only in his boxers. Unlike Jackson, he had tattoos on his chest and arms, and he was even more fit than his brother. The military had really done him right.

His lips crashed into mine, and his hands were on my body in record time. Aiden held my face in his hands, so I couldn’t turn and look, but I felt lips on my bare back, moving up toward my neck.

I opened my eyes and looked where Nathan had been standing last, and he was gone. My stomach dropped, fearing he left. I hoped we hadn’t made him uncomfortable...

But then I felt movement to the right of me. A third person. I couldn’t turn to look, Aiden still had my face in his hands as he lowered me down onto the bed, but someone’s hands started exploring my thighs.

Aiden stopped kissing me and I looked up to find all three of the Bishop brothers staring down at me.

“Decided to join us after all?” I asked Nathan.

He smiled a sweet smile. “How could I resist?”

I leaned upward and kissed Nathan’s lips. His were softer, his kiss less forceful than his brothers. His fingers moved through my hair, stroking my curls as if they were fine silk.

Had they done this before, I wondered to myself?

I didn't dare ask. I wasn't sure I wanted to know, because in that moment, I felt like a goddess, like the most special woman in the world, at least to those three men.

And I was about to enjoy every second of it.

I GOT LOST in their hands and mouths. I wasn't sure who was touching me where. Someone's hands were between my thighs, fingering my opening. I was kissing one of the brothers, then the next, while another had his mouth on my neck, sucking gently and teasing my nipples with his fingers.

It was almost sensory overload, but in the best possible way. I laid there as the three of them worked their magic, exploring my body, taking their time teasing me.

Aiden dipped between my thighs, parting my legs and burying his face against my pussy.

Nathan moved up my body, his mouth against mine and his hands in my hair as his brother went down on me. Lips pressed against my nipples as Jackson growled, "You taste so good."

Unlike Jackson who focused on my clit while he fingered me, Aiden let his tongue do all the work, exploring every inch of me. He slipped his tongue in and out, fucking me with it, the warmth of his mouth against my sensitive button.

"Oh God..." the familiar shaking feeling in my body returned as I reached orgasm, all three of the men doing everything they could to ensure that I had an earth-shattering climax.

My body was still writhing from the pleasure when the brothers nudged me onto my side. Nathan laid in front of me, and I wrapped my body around him, but then Aiden slipped in behind me, sliding his cock against my wet lips.

I could feel both of them against me, hard and ready. But it was Aiden that slid into me from behind, holding my hips steady as he guided himself inside me. I cried out as he stretched me open, a sensation that was still unfamiliar to me. I searched for Jackson and found him at the end of the bed,

smiling at us, enjoying the show. If I had any concern of jealousy, that went right out the window from the way he watched his brothers have their way with me.

Aiden's cock slipped out of me, and in its place, Nathan's slid in. They took turns, one after the other. Nathan's tongue explored my mouth while Aiden moaned in my ear.

Everything began to blur together; it was almost too much pleasure. I felt like a ragdoll, letting the boys have their way with me, but enjoying every second of it. They knew how to make me feel good, and it was clear my pleasure was their utmost priority.

Aiden thrust deep into me, letting out a low growl as his body shuddered against mine.

"Yes, yes," I whimpered, knowing that he was filling me with his seed.

And then Nathan was next, with Aiden spent and resting, his hands still exploring my body as his brother fucked me. Nathan rolled me over so he was on top of me now and buried himself balls deep as I was hit with another orgasm. Nathan stared deep into my eyes as he pumped me full, his cock throbbing inside of me.

Clearly spent, Nathan collapsed beside me, but pulled me into him, my head resting on his chest. Aiden was behind me again, spooning me, and Jackson managed to squeeze his way in awkwardly, resting his head on my belly.

I ran my fingers through Jackson's hair, struggling to believe this was reality even though I could feel the aches in my body and the tiredness in my muscles. My eyes were growing heavy as I lay naked and sated with the Bishop brothers.

* * *

AS MY EYES OPENED, I began to piece together what had happened, as I tried to figure out what time it was. It felt like I had slept for an eternity. I tried to sit up, but that was not an

easy endeavor with three very large men curled up on me. They had fallen asleep, as well. Jackson snored softly, his head still using me as a pillow. I hated to wake them, but I knew that we were playing a very dangerous game. If it was dinner time, we could get caught. What would Rose Bishop think of me if she walked in on me with all three of her sons? Or worse yet... what would Kat think?

Shit, Kat.

What had I done?

I had torn their family apart once as it was.

I moved, trying to slip out of the bed, and in the process, each brother slowly woke up.

“What time is it?” Nathan asked.

“The better question is, what year is it?” Aiden muttered, his eyes still closed as he snuggled deeper into me, making it harder to get up.

Jackson sat up first and reached for his phone, which was charging on the bed next to us. He yawned as he glanced at it. “It’s almost five.”

“PM?” Aiden asked.

“Of course. You think Mom would ever let us miss dinner?” Jackson asked.

“I—I need to get up,” I said, the realization of what we had done hitting me hard.

Nathan moved first, sitting up and giving me ample space to escape the bed.

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said quickly, even though I wasn’t sure if I was.

What if Kat had walked in while we were sleeping? What if she was waiting to tell me what a horrible best friend I was for sleeping with her brothers? Oh God... I couldn’t lose her. Not after everything else I had lost. I couldn’t lose my best friend, too. I had already done enough damage to last a lifetime.

Tears welled in my eyes as I searched for my clothes amongst the mess on the floor. I picked up some jeans, but they were definitely not mine.

“Those are mine,” Nathan said, reaching for them as if he’d read my mind.

“We shouldn’t have done this,” I said as I slipped my sweater on. It took me a second to figure out I had put it on backward and I quickly adjusted it.

“Why not? You know it’s okay to be naughty sometimes,” Jackson said, a cocky grin on his face. Aiden was getting his clothes, as was Nathan. But not Jackson. He sat on his bed, buck naked, without a care in the world.

“Because I’m your sister’s best friend, and you guys... you’re brothers.”

“We’re all consenting adults,” Jackson said.

“Yeah, we consented, but maybe we shouldn’t have,” I muttered as I found my panties and slipped them on. I let out a groan of frustration.

“Why?” Jackson asked.

“Because what if this causes drama?”

“Why would it cause drama?” he scoffed.

Nathan and Aiden shared a look, they at least seemed to understand what I was saying.

“It won’t cause drama between us,” Nathan reassured me.

“We can promise you that,” Aiden agreed.

“Thank you, I appreciate that. But I have to think about Kat too.”

Aiden helped me straighten my sweater. Both he and Nathan found their clothes almost as quickly as they had lost them.

“Kat is a big girl, and besides, why does she have to know?” Jackson asked, laying back on the bed and stretching out now that he had it all to himself. I stared a bit too long at

the view before remembering I needed to get out of there before we got caught.

“I don’t know how I feel about lying to her.”

“It’s not lying.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Lying by omission is still lying.”

“I don’t know the details of my sister’s sex life; I wouldn’t *want* to know. She probably doesn’t want to know about ours, either.”

He had a good point, but it still didn’t feel right. “I need to think about it. And this can’t happen again. As amazing as it was...”

“It was pretty fucking amazing,” Aiden agreed.

“Yeah, it was,” Nathan added from beside him.

“It would just complicate a lot of things,” I said. “For everyone.”

“Whatever you think is best,” Nathan replied.

Aiden nodded.

Jackson just smirked from the bed as if he knew something I didn’t.

Fully dressed, I knew I needed to get out of there before I did something else I regretted. I left the room without another word and hurried to the room Kat and I were sharing. Kat was curled up in bed with a sleep mask over her eyes. As I closed the door, she stirred and removed the mask.

“What time is it?” she muttered.

“About five.”

“So not time for dinner yet?”

“No...”

“Alright, wake me up in half an hour if I’m not up yet.”

She curled back into bed, and I thought that might be the end of it, but then she removed her mask and sat up. “Wait a

second, where were you?"

"I— um, well, I was hanging with your brothers." I bit my lip and couldn't meet her eyes.

"Oh, that must have been fun for you," she muttered sarcastically. She glanced at the clock and frowned. "What were you doing for three hours?"

"We were talking, and then because of the jet lag, I fell asleep." God, I hated lying to her. Why didn't I tell her the truth? Because it felt so awkward, and I wasn't sure how.

"Well, that sounds dreadful, I'm sorry." Kat yawned and laid back down before I could work up the guts to tell her the truth. "Thirty more minutes, k?"

"Sure, get some rest," I said softly before getting into the hottest shower I could stand and scrubbing the evidence of my indiscretion from my skin.

JACKSON

I zoomed in to the photo like I had done countless times before, but I knew that eventually, I would find signs that the photos were doctored.

There was a knock on the door. I let out a growl, hoping that whoever it was might leave.

A soft voice called out, "It's Harper."

I turned in my desk chair as soon as I heard her voice. "Come in," I called back.

Harper stepped into the room, cleaned up from our earlier encounter. Her hair was damp and pulled back into a bun. She was back in her more usual attire—an adorable brown and pink plaid knee-length skirt, a pink sweater, and tights. Her glasses perched on her nose.

There was the sexy librarian look again; the look that had driven me wild.

She stared down at me, her arms crossed in front of her. Then her eyes flicked to my laptop screen, and she frowned.

"Are those the photos the media released of your dad?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Why are you looking at those?" Her eyes fell to the floor. "I mean, it was years ago, I would think it would be easier to just move on."

“I’m always trying to find out if there’s anything new, Harper. I can’t just let this drop.”

“Oh,” she said softly, without looking me in the eye.

“Are you okay?”

She cleared her throat and stood tall again, meeting my gaze. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just think we need to talk about what happened.”

This sexier, more confident Harper was a sight to behold.

“What’s there to talk about? If you don’t want it to happen again...” I noticed her cheeks flushing, which told me she absolutely wouldn’t mind it happening again, but I knew when to not push things. “We don’t ever have to do it again, nor do we have to acknowledge it happened, if that’s your wish.”

“No, I mean... what are we going to tell Kat?”

“Kat? Like I told you before, I don’t tell her about my dating and sex life, and I don’t expect her to tell me about hers. I would really rather not know,” I said with a shrug.

“I disagree. I’m her best friend, Jackson. She deserves to know the truth about what happened between us.” Harper took a seat on the bed, but only for a split second as if she was afraid we both might end up there again if she got too comfortable.

I stood up and offered Harper my seat, which she took. I pulled over one of the armchairs from the sitting area so I could be closer to her as I thought out my response. After a couple minutes, I replied, “I mean, I find that weird, but if you feel more comfortable telling her, you have my permission. Just be prepared for it to cause some drama.”

“See, that’s the last thing I want to do to your family, Jackson. I figure telling her is better than her finding out on her own some other way.” Her eyes flicked to my laptop screen again before she continued. “After all, the truth always comes out, doesn’t it?”

“If you’re referencing what happened with my dad, the truth has not come out yet,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the media lied about it all. Or someone else did, and I’m determined to prove that the photos and all the info they have on him is fake.”

“Jackson” Harper looked stunned. “You think your dad is innocent, after everything that happened?”

“Of course I do.” My jaw clenched tightly. “I know my dad better than anyone, and he had a strong moral compass. He might not have been the nicest person around, but he wasn’t a cheat, and he didn’t scam anyone.”

“But the photos—”

“They’ve been doctored, and I’m going to prove it.”

Harper stared at me much like everyone did when they heard my rant. With pity. No one believed my dad was innocent, not even Nathan or Aiden who should know as well as I did that Dad wasn’t any of the things the media painted him to be.

“Okay, well, that wasn’t what I came here to talk about anyway,” Harper said, her voice soft and gentle. “I just think it’s best if Kat hears it from me, I believe there will be less drama that way.”

I shrugged. “Whatever. I don’t care.”

And I didn’t. I didn’t care what Kat thought of me. Not that she ever liked me anyway. She always had a vendetta against Dad, and after he was out of the picture, she turned against me for defending him.

“Are you sure, Jackson? I do not want to tear this family apart again.”

“What do you mean, again?”

“I just—” she stammered for a second and stared at me with the look of a deer caught in the headlights. “I just mean after everything you’ve been through, the last thing I want is for your family to be hurt again. You deserve to heal and come together, and I don’t want to be the cause of any issues.”

I studied Harper for a few moments. Her soft, glowing skin. Her beautiful turquoise eyes. Her sweet, plump pink lips. She was utter perfection. Beautiful. Smart. And she had a strong sense of ethics, which I admired. I had always tried to live my life as morally as possible, but I knew I had fallen short. Harper was the type of woman who could help me become a better man.

I had wanted to settle down eventually, find a wife that would help me be better. And for a brief second I thought, *what if what I was looking for all along was in front of me the entire time? What if Harper Olson was the woman for me?*

I needed to remember however, that she just told me that what happened between us couldn't happen again.

Maybe not the foursome, maybe that would be a one-time deal, but...

"You have my permission to tell Kat," I repeated, keeping my voice level. "I see how much it means to you, and I promise you that my brothers and I will not resort to fighting, nor will you tear my family apart if I have anything to say about it."

"Thanks, Jackson. I really appreciate it," she said, standing up from the chair at the same time I did. We were now just a few inches apart. She smelled like vanilla and orange blossoms, and I couldn't resist getting closer, touching that soft skin. I cupped her chin in my hand and lifted her face to meet mine, prepared to seal our agreement with a kiss.

Harper leaned in just for a second, then backed away.

"I'm sorry, Jackson. I meant what I said. It can't happen again."

She rushed toward the door before I could say another word.

AIDEN

“Are you sure you can’t get me more info than that?” I rubbed my temples and closed my eyes to try and stave off the headache that I could feel coming on. “I need to know names. Not code names, not pseudonyms, but actual goddamn names. Why is that so difficult? I—”

A knock at my door caused me to shut up.

“Hold on,” I whispered into the phone. “I have to call you back.”

Being around family made things a lot harder. Someone was always poking around or nearby. I needed to remember to keep my voice down.

They knocked again. “Aiden? It’s me, Harper.”

Right away, all the tension left my shoulders and I felt better simply hearing her sweet voice.

“I’m coming,” I said. I got up from the desk and walked over to the door to unlock and open it for her.

I found her smiling back at me. “May I come in? I think we should talk.”

“Sure, come on in,” I said. “Don’t mind the mess.”

There were papers everywhere, all over my desk, some files on my bed.

“It’s okay,” she said, her eyes darting around the room. “Did I come at a bad time? Are you in the middle of working a case or something?”

“Nah, this is all personal,” I said. “I haven’t had any PI work lately, ever since, well, you know, my own little scandal.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said, and from the sound of her voice, I think she actually meant it. Few people believed that I was innocent, especially since my own dad’s scandal was still fresh in their minds. “Like father, like son,” I replied except I was nothing like my dad. The very idea of being like him disgusted me.

But I absolutely despised pity, so I quickly changed the subject.

“So, what do you want to talk about?” I asked, motioning for her to take a seat. I cleared off an armchair once I realized most every surface had papers or files on it.

She sat and I sat down across from her.

“Well, I want to tell Kat what happened between all of us. I already have Jackson’s blessing, but I wanted to talk to you as well. Since there could be some drama from it—”

“Drama? Why?”

“Well, because you’re Kat’s brothers and I’m her best friend, and a foursome between us is likely going to upset her.”

Harper spoke so sincerely, I felt that she honestly believed that Kat would be mad at her.

“I don’t mean to imply that you don’t know my sister well... but I don’t think this is going to bother Kat as much as you think it will.”

Harper’s brow furrowed and created an adorable expression. “How could it not?”

“Because she’s a modern woman, and she has very modern views on sexuality. Listen, I don’t know much about her sex life, and really don’t want to, but I’m pretty sure she brought two guys home from a friend’s wedding a few years ago, so I don’t think she will be too upset at you for having sex with more than one guy at once.”

“But you’re her brothers, Aiden. There’s a big difference between me sleeping with three random guys I met at a bar and sleeping with her triplet brothers, especially considering the history between all of us.”

“History?” I cocked a brow. “The stuff with our dad?”

“Yeah, but mostly the fact that some bitter feelings remain between her and the three of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you guys used to make her life a living hell, just like you did mine, and she may not be so forgiving because of that.”

“Really?” I was genuinely perplexed.

Harper appeared to know something I didn’t—she stared at me with a shocked look on her face. “You really didn’t know how she felt about you guys?”

“We bickered, like siblings often do, and maybe we aren’t the best of friends, but I wouldn’t say we made her life a living hell. We were always just joking around.”

“To Kat, they weren’t jokes, Aiden. You guys often went way too far.”

“We were kids.”

“Kids or not, you guys really hurt her... often.”

My chest tightened just thinking about it.

“I’m sorry. I guess I never really saw it from her point of view before.”

“Of course not. And I have to say, out of the three of you, Kat favors you more than Jackson and Nathan. She knew that your dad often picked on you, and you were just trying to appease him, but there’s still some hard feelings there.”

Maybe I was more like my dad than I thought.

I had never realized it until Harper pointed out the cruel things I had done to my sister. My mind started going through incidents of the past, and even though Kat eventually stopped

crying after we finished messing with her, it dawned on me now that she was still hurt by us.

“I’m going to apologize to Kat, and hopefully make it right. And I’m sorry to you too, Harper. I was a little jackass; I realize that now.”

Harper’s face softened. “Thank you, Aiden.”

“No, thank you. I appreciate your blunt honesty.”

I couldn’t believe this was little Harper Olson. The shy little redheaded girl with the glasses was now a grown woman who told me the cold, hard truth. Some men might be offended by that, but the last thing I wanted in life was to turn out like my dad.

Someone like Harper could make me a better man, I thought.

She smiled, and my insides turned to goo. It was a feeling I had never experienced in my entire life, and for a brief moment, I felt ashamed of that feeling. But I pushed my dad’s hateful words out of my head and allowed myself to feel my emotions.

Harper was truly something else. She was more than a beautiful, curvy body. She had brains. She was confident. She was well-spoken and mature. I could write a novel about all of the traits I admired in this woman.

And the way she looked at me... I had to admit, there was a spark there. It made me wonder if she could be the one.

“So you don’t mind if I tell Kat then?” she asked, returning to the subject at hand.

“Not at all. I agree with you, honesty is the best policy.”

“Thank you, Aiden,” she said again as she stood up. I walked her to the door, but before opening it for her, I leaned in for a kiss.

She turned her head so I kissed her on the cheek instead.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t do this. We have to be realistic, and the last thing I want is to cause problems for your

family.”

I hated hearing those words, but I respected the hell out of her for it. It just made me want her even more.

She left my room, and I watched after her for a long time, enjoying the view. To say I was impressed with the woman she had grown up to be would be the biggest understatement of my life.

NATHAN

Nate, it would mean the world to me if you could be there. I know that what happened with Carly and me was fucked up, but it's been three years. Can you at least be happy for us?

Happy? I felt a lot of different emotions in the moment after I received the message from my former best friend, but happiness was not one of them. I knew he was right. It had been three years, I should be over it already. But within one second, I lost my best friend *and* the woman I thought was the love of my life at the time. Would I ever be able to forgive them? How could they even expect me to show up at their wedding after what they had done to me?

I wasn't sure how to respond to Brett. I stared at the message but couldn't find the words to answer him. I hadn't talked to him in years, why would I want to start now? I wasn't sure how to make it any clearer that I wanted nothing to do with either of them; they were most certainly not getting a wedding gift from me.

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts. I slipped my phone into my pocket and said, "Yes?"

"Nathan? It's Harper."

A smile pulled at my lips as I remembered how beautiful she looked naked in Jackson's bed earlier. I had never done anything as adventurous as what we'd done with her. I had to admit, I loved every second of it.

“Come in, it’s open,” I said, standing up to greet her at the door.

Harper slipped into the room, and she was even more beautiful than before, if that was possible. I had always thought she was cute, and when she started growing from awkward pre-teen to a teenager, I had to admit that maybe I had a teeny, tiny crush on her. But I was with Carly and squashed any and all thoughts of her at the time. Now that we were both adults and both single... it left open a world of possibilities.

“Hey there, I hope I’m not interrupting anything. I just wanted to talk before dinner,” she said.

“Of course, have a seat.” I walked her over to the sitting area near the window. My room had some of the best views of all the bedrooms, and I watched as Harper looked out the window taking in the mountain scenery. She was quiet, so I prompted her. “What did you want to talk about?”

Harper surprised me. “You were cheated on too, correct?”

“I was. Why?”

“I heard about it after it happened, Kat mentioned it to me. But I had no idea at the time how much it could possibly hurt to be cheated on. I never liked Carly, Nathan, and you definitely didn’t deserve what they did to you.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. “And I’m sorry that you were cheated on as well.”

Tears filled Harper’s eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. “Oh, it’s fine,” she lied.

“No, clearly, it’s not. I remember when the wounds were fresh. I could sometimes convince myself, and others that I was fine, but I wasn’t. It felt like someone had ripped out my insides every time I thought about what I saw.”

I stepped into the bathroom and grabbed some tissues, handing them to her. She thanked me and dabbed at her eyes. “You caught them together, too?”

“I did. In my bed, nonetheless.”

“God, I can’t even imagine... I walked in on him with her on her knees, they were in his office. She was one of his students.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, and can you believe what he told me? He told me it was because I wasn’t meeting his needs, since I was saving myself for after the wedding,” she said softly.

I had no idea that she had been a virgin when we were together earlier. That meant that Jackson was her first.

“He told me that once we were married and I was giving him sex regularly, he wouldn’t need the other women.”

My blood began to boil hearing those words.

“What a prick,” I said. My teeth clenched, as did my fists at my side. I had never been one to have anger issues like Jackson or Aiden, but suddenly I found myself wanting to punch something... preferably her ex’s face if he hadn’t been on the other side of the world. “You deserve so much better than that, Harper.”

“I know, I knew right away that what he had done was unforgivable and I refuse to be treated like that, which is why I called off the wedding. But to think he was willing to throw everything we had away for a blowjob? Did I really mean so little to him?”

“He’s not worth it, Harper. This is on him; he’s a selfish asshole and it has nothing to do with you not being good enough.”

From what I had seen of her in that short amount of time, she was absolutely amazing. Any man would be lucky to marry her.

“I’m sorry for letting it all out, I haven’t really talked about it much with anyone. Not even Kat. I mean, she tries to understand... but unless you’ve lived it, it’s really hard to comprehend the feelings involved. I have to apologize for not reaching out to you after I heard what happened with Carly. It was just... well, I was feeling a bit selfish myself, and still not over what had happened, but you didn’t deserve that.”

“Thank you, Harper.”

She pulled herself together and cleared her throat. “Anyway, that’s not why I came here. I wanted to ask you about your feelings on telling Kat what happened between us.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Kat may not take the news well.”

“I know. Jackson is fine with it and Aiden seems to think she won’t mind because she’s a modern woman and all that, but I don’t think they fully grasp how angry she still is with the three of you.”

Hearing those words, that my little sister was angry at me, was like a gut punch, but it was also no surprise. We had been little assholes to her growing up and well into young adulthood. It wasn’t shocking to hear that she wanted very little to do with us.

“I think you’re right. She is a modern woman with modern ideas about love and sex, but we are her brothers and that comes with a lot of complex emotions.”

“I agree,” Harper said. “But at the same time, I don’t think I can keep it from her. I’ve kept too many things from her already, I have too many secrets and it makes it hard to look at myself in the mirror sometimes.”

“What kind of secrets?” I was shocked that sweet Harper Olson could have anything so big and bad hidden away in her closet that she would feel that much guilt.

She averted her gaze. “They’re secrets for a reason, Nathan.”

The tears began falling again, and she searched for the Kleenex I had given her earlier, but it had fallen onto the floor. We both reached for it at the same time, but I got it first. I began to wipe the tears from her cheek, but she grabbed my hand and stopped me.

“I need to go,” she said, quickly standing up. “Kat wanted me to wake her in half an hour, and it’s been longer than that. I need to know what you think, Nathan. Are you comfortable with me telling her or not?”

She walked toward the door but stopped short of it and turned to look at me.

“I want you to do whatever you feel is best,” I said.

“Thank you.” She smiled gently and turned to leave.

“But—” She stopped and looked back at me, concern etched onto her face as I continued. “Just some food for thought, Harper. We still have a couple weeks together, and if she takes the news badly, it could make the holidays incredibly uncomfortable. Not just for you two, but the rest of the family, as well. This is the first Christmas that we have been together as a family in years, and it means a lot to my mom. I simply ask, if you’re going to tell Kat about what happened, could you wait until after the holidays, so that we can at least have one normal Christmas after all the bullshit?”

Harper’s face fell as she mulled over my words. She seemed to think about it seriously before responding. “I think I can manage that.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“For your mom’s sake? Yes, I think so. I wouldn’t want to ruin her family Christmas, not after the last few years that she’s had.”

“Thank you.”

Harper was a good person; I had always known it. Even when she was a kid, she seemed to have a heart of gold. I don’t know why my brothers and I had to pick on her so much... probably because we were little assholes who wanted to impress our asshole father. But seeing her now, I had a hard time imagining her doing anything that would make it hard for her to look at herself in the mirror.

It made me want to get to know her better, to learn of those secrets, but also because she fascinated and excited me in ways no woman had done since Carly.

Hell, she made me ask myself, “Carly who?” as soon as she stepped into the room.

Harper left and I thought back to the text from Brett. Was I happy for them? No, but did the two of them deserve each other? Absolutely. Catching them in bed, while hurtful, was one of the best things either one could have done for me.

It made me realize what shitty people they already were before I started hanging around them and became as mean and terrible as them. It allowed me to grow into a nicer person.

A good person.

Maybe a person that was good enough to date someone like Harper.

When I got back to the room, Kat was already awake. She was scrolling on her phone and looked up with a smile. I thought she might ask where I was, but instead she said, “Wanna go for a swim before dinner?”

“Didn’t you go swimming earlier?” I sat down beside her on the bed. My heart was heavy with all the secrets I was keeping from her, but I remembered what Nathan had said and agreed with him. This wasn’t just about me. Their entire family could be affected if I came clean before the holidays.

“I did, but I could spend all day in that pool. It’s amazing, you’ll see what I mean,” she said with a wink.

She slipped from the bed and started changing right there in the room. We had always been pretty open about that sort of thing, nothing to hide from each other. Kat was covered in tattoos, which made sense since she was a tattoo artist. But every time I saw her, I swore there was a new one.

“You coming or what?” she asked me. Her face fell. “Please tell me you brought a swimsuit. I told you to bring one. I might have some extras, but my boobs aren’t as big as yours and—”

“I brought one,” I said with a laugh. I peeled myself from the bed and reached for my bag.

I began stripping out of my clothing when I noticed a red mark on my thigh. Fingerprints. Someone had grabbed me a little roughly. I noticed a matching set on the other side. They

would likely bruise. I wondered if I had any other marks on my bodies left by the boys.

“Looks like someone got lucky,” Kat said with a low whistle.

I caught her staring at the red marks on my body. “What... how... I mean what do you—”

“Calm down, I’m joking,” she said with a cheeky grin. “I know that you fell a few times out there on the slopes, I’m sure you’ll be a bit bruised up and sore tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah, I should probably not fall over like a fainting goat, as Aiden called it, huh?” I forced a smile. That was a close one.

“Yeah, if you really want to learn how to ski, learning to stop is a valuable skill,” she said. “But who needs skiing when you have a heated pool?”

I slipped into my bikini and glanced in the mirror, checking for any more marks on my skin. My bikini was a Tiffany blue with tiny white polka dots, and a high waist that made my curves look really nice.

“You look hot as fuck. My brothers better not be down there or else they may never be able to pick their jaws up off the floor.”

Kat laughed, and I tried to join in with her. The guilt still weighed heavily on me. Why couldn’t I let it go?

“Ready?” Kat asked me.

I grabbed a towel, but Kat told me, “We have all that down there. You don’t need to bring anything,” she said.

She took my hand and led me out the door and down the stairs. As soon as we opened the door to the pool area, I was hit with intense humidity.

Kat hit a switch and the windows rose and opened the pool up to the outside, the frigid air mixing with the warmth and steaming the place up.

“There we go,” she said with a pleased look. “I love the mountain air.”

The pool was infinity style, flowing right to the edge of the deck.

In the distance, there was Mont Blanc and the French Alps, frozen and white with snow. But where we were standing, it was still nice and cozy, even in our bikinis.

“Wow.”

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely amazing.”

It wasn’t just the views but the extravagance of it all that caught my attention. I had experienced a lot of luxury while with my best friend and her family, but this was a whole other level. I looked around and spotted a couple of hot tubs, one right there on the deck overlooking the mountains.

“Let’s get in the pool, it’s getting a bit chilly for me, but once you’re in the water... it’s so nice.”

Kat walked down the graded entrance to the pool, slowly lowering her body into the water until she was covered up to her shoulders. She turned and looked at me. “Are you coming or what?”

I slowly walked into the pool, the water an absolute perfect temperature. It didn’t feel hot or warm on my skin; it was almost as if it were perfectly tuned to my body temperature.

I swam out to Kat who was now at the edge, her arms hanging over the side. I matched her stance and looked all around, taking in the scenery and breathing in the chilly air.

“This is amazing,” I said again. I felt like I was saying that a lot, but I was at a loss for words.

We were on top of the world, or so it felt like it. Even though Mont Blanc was higher, we still overlooked the beautiful valleys below. The sky was clear and blue, making the snow almost a blinding white around us.

We stayed there in silence for a few moments, just taking in the landscape, when we heard voices from the entrance.

Kat groaned.

“Looks like the peanut gallery decided to join us,” she said.

I turned to find the Bishop triplets standing where we stood only moments earlier.

I had seen them naked only a couple hours ago, and yet, seeing them in their swimsuits nearly did me in. My heart raced, and I felt warm, too warm. My stomach flipped and flopped, and I could feel my cheeks burning. I was afraid Kat would notice the way I was looking at her brothers and say something.

“Hope we’re not disturbing you two,” Nathan said with a smile.

“You always disturb us, but we don’t have dibs on the pool,” Kat said.

“I’m not here for the pool anyway,” Jackson said. I noticed his gaze fell on my cleavage, which was barely floating above the water.

Kat must have noticed too. “Perv, can you not make my BFF uncomfortable with your gawking?”

Jackson just smirked and walked over to the hot tub off to the side. His brothers joined him, though Aiden hesitated, as if considering joining us in the pool. He looked over at Kat, and I remembered our conversation from earlier. I wondered if he had meant what he said—would he make amends with his sister? I hoped so. I knew the two of them were both considered the black sheep of the family; they had a lot in common, and at times that brought them together, so I had hope that maybe they could have a decent relationship someday.

It was hard trying not to steal glances at the boys ripped abs over in the hot tub, so I focused my attention on the scenery outside instead.

I floated on my back, feeling weightless and breathing in the mountain air.

“A girl could get used to this,” I muttered out loud.

Kat was floating beside me.

“You know, you don’t have to go back to New York City if you don’t want to,” she said.

I stood up and looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“You could stay with us,” she replied. “We have plenty of room, and my mom loves you, she would give you a room if you asked.”

A lump formed in my throat. The reality was I had to return to New York eventually and face my ex. My whole life was there. I had my dissertation to finish. I had classes that I was in charge of teaching. I had research I was working on.

But the very idea of returning to all of that filled me with dread.

“Earth to Harper,” Kat said, pulling me back to the present.

“Yeah, sorry, I was just thinking.”

“About my proposition?” she asked, hope in her voice.

“About everything I have to do once my vacation is over. Ugh, I have so much work waiting for me, Kat, and I don’t want to deal with any of it.”

“So don’t.”

She meant it too. She was actually suggesting I walk away from my PhD. I had worked hard to secure grants and funding, and coming from a poor family, that hadn’t been easy to do. I had to do a lot of schmoozing and working my ass off to get where I was. How could she suggest I just walk away from all of it?

“You don’t understand, Kat. It’s not that easy.”

She’d never had to struggle. She could go to school and then quit and study whatever else she wanted to once she

realized her first choice had been a mistake. Something she had done several times before deciding to become a tattoo artist.

I couldn't do that.

Not to mention, it wouldn't be right to just leech off of her family. Especially considering what I had done.

“Why not? You've been telling me for months that you were burnt out and worried you had made a mistake.”

“But what other choice do I have? What can I do with a degree in freaking literature, besides maybe teach or something?”

“Why not teach?” Nathan piped up from the hot tub.

I looked over at the triplets. I had no idea they had been listening to our conversation, and I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

“You know I'm not one to agree with those losers, but I actually agree with Nate this time,” Kat said. “Why not teach? You're enjoying the graduate classes, aren't you?”

I looked at my best friend and pondered her question.

Kat continued. “You've always talked about how thankful you were for teachers helping you discover your love of reading, so why not pass that down to the next generation?”

“You know, Kat has a point,” Jackson spoke from the hot tub.

“See? Even Jackson agrees with me, and we never agree on anything.”

“I can't... I've put so much work into my PhD, I can't just quit now.”

“You're a smart girl,” Aiden said. “So I'm sure you've heard of the sunk cost fallacy. You sure this isn't a case of that?”

As much as I hated to admit it to myself, they did have a point.

Harper was floating on her back, not too far away from me. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Yes, I had seen her naked only hours before, but something about that bikini and the way it pushed her cleavage up and hugged her every curve drove me absolutely fucking wild.

Not to mention, to hear her talking about her academic career was enough to make me want to get down and propose to her on the spot.

I was never much of a romantic, I looked at relationships a little more practically. I felt like if two people were committed to each other and had the same priorities in life, you could make anything work out. I was ready to settle down and start a family of my own, but I had yet to meet a woman that had everything I needed.

But Harper, was she that woman?

“So what is your dissertation on?” I asked.

She stopped floating and was quiet for a few moments before answering me. “I doubt you really care about all that.”

“I asked, didn't I?”

“But you made fun of me for always having a book in hand.”

“That was a long time ago and I was an idiot.”

She stood up and swam to the edge of the pool closer to where I was lounging in the hot tub . Aiden and Nate had moved to the sauna, giving me a little one-on-one time with

Harper if I didn't count Kat, who seemed to be in her own little world and not at all interested in our conversation.

"Well it's really geeky," she said with a shy smile.

"I like geeky," I said. At least when geeky looked like her. "I know I used to be an asshole about your love of reading, and I'm sorry. But I have to admit, going to college and taking a classic literature course really made me appreciate it a bit more. I realized there's a lot I missed out on, and I now read pretty regularly, and not just for work, believe it or not."

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm impressed."

"So tell me, what are you studying?"

She sighed and swished her hands around in the water. "Who knows if I'll ever finish it or add anything new to what has already been discovered, but I am looking into the work of Victor Hugo, specifically *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—"

"You mean the Disney movie?" The look on her face made me crack up. "Sorry, sorry, I was just kidding, I know that it's more than a Disney movie. Go on."

She chuckled. "You had me there. You have no idea how many people think that" she said. "But the research I'm looking into involves a possible inspiration for Quasimodo. There was a hunchbacked sculptor that worked at the Cathedral around the time it was built, and I'm trying to find more about his life, and Hugo's inspirations for the novel."

"Very impressive. So tell me, you haven't been to Paris before, right?"

"I have not, except for the brief stop on my way here, but I didn't even leave the train station, sadly."

"We might have to change that. You can't be studying a work like that and not visit Notre Dame Cathedral."

"I would love that, but I just haven't had the money to be able to afford that kind of trip. I had hoped after the wedding, well, I had hoped that with our combined incomes, we could possibly make it work. I had applied for some grants before I left as well, hoping that maybe I could get some funding from

my school, but considering what happened between Tony and I... he's close with the board that makes such decisions, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry. It sounds like a lot of drama. Are you sure you want to go back to that?"

Harper averted her gaze and swam backward onto her back again. She stared up at the ceiling in silence for a long time. "As I said earlier, I don't think I have much of a choice."

"You have a lot of choices available to you, Harper. You just have to be willing to take the leap."

"Jackson, my life is nothing like yours."

I was just about to offer to help her with all her problems on one condition—if she was willing to transfer schools. I would pay for her to visit Notre Dame as often as she wanted. I would spoil her rotten and let her focus on her passions.

"Hey, is he bothering you?" Kat asked, swimming over to us.

"No, he's not bothering me," Harper replied.

"Good, but I've got my eye on you, Jackson." Kat pointed to her eyes then over to me. She was laughing, but I knew she was at least partially serious. "Anyway, we should probably get cleaned up and get ready for dinner."

"You're right, I lost track of time," Harper said.

The two of them left the pool, and my eyes never left Harper. I was prepared for Kat to scold me again, but she didn't even notice. She ran over to her phone and picked it up. I noticed a smile on her lips as she stared at it, but she quickly slipped it back into her bag before asking Harper, "Ready to go?"

Harper smiled and waved as the two headed back up the stairs. My heart pounded in my chest.

I have to make her mine.

I wasn't sure how, and I knew it sounded crazy, but I wanted her. I needed her. I regretted being such a dick to her

when we were kids. We could really have something beautiful, and I imagined our future kids—a little girl with her curly red hair and a boy that looked like me. We'd make some pretty babies, and with our brains, there's no way they wouldn't accomplish anything they put their mind to.

Nate and Aiden stepped out of the sauna, and I knew we needed to head upstairs. Mom didn't like us being late for dinner and we still needed to get cleaned up before we dared show up in the dining room.

My brothers and I walked up the stairs together, mostly in silence. Nobody made mention of what happened earlier with Harper, though it didn't seem to make anything awkward, which was a blessing. As we walked past the dining room toward the stairs to our rooms, I heard Mom's voice.

“Please set up one more place setting, Marie.”

I stopped. Aiden and Nate looked back at me. “What's wrong?”

My heart sank into my stomach. Did they hear the same thing I did? If they did, they seemed unfazed by it. Of course they were, they were never as close to Dad as I was. They didn't believe him the way I did.

“Nothing,” I muttered, continuing up the stairs.

I needed to find proof, and I needed to find it fast.

I had to clear my father's name and bring my family back together before it was too late.

AIDEN

As soon as I stepped into the dining room, I knew there was going to be trouble.

The man we saw earlier at the restaurant with mom was sitting at the table.

In Dad's place.

The man had gray hair but looked to be at least a few years younger than our father. More handsome too, I had to admit, with a chiseled jaw and clean-shaven face. The first thing I noticed though was that he had kind eyes. He smiled at me as I entered, and I liked him instinctively.

I froze in the doorway, the first of the family to walk in and see him.

"Aiden, dear, please come meet my friend, Charles," Mom said, standing up and walking over to where Charles was sitting. Charles also stood up and offered his hand to me. I firmly shook it.

"Good to meet you, Charles," I said.

"Nice to meet you too, Aiden. Your mom has told me a lot about you." I was surprised he didn't have a French accent, indicating he wasn't a French native. In fact, he sounded southern.

I looked over at Mom, hoping she might fill in some gaps.

"Charles is Owner and CEO of Montgomery Enterprises out of Greenville," she said.

I had heard the name Charles Montgomery before—his business, and his name, got a lot of press. All of it good, which was rare for someone with his level of wealth. At least we didn't have to worry about him coming after Mom's money.

“Oh, very nice. Real estate development, I believe?”

Charles nodded. “Yes, commercial development, to be exact.”

“I've heard about you. I love Greenville, and I've seen some of your work, it's impressive.”

Mom was beaming, clearly happy that things were going so well. Out of all of her kids, I had to admit, I was the one most open to her moving on. I knew that this level of happiness wouldn't last.

“Greenville born and raised,” the man said, smiling. “I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.”

We lived not too far from Greenville already, so at least we didn't have to worry about Mom up and leaving us.

“So, what brings you to Chamonix? Did you two meet here?”

Just as Charles was about to respond Kat walked into the room.

“Katherine, I want you to meet Charles Montgomery,” Mom said.

“Hi there,” Kat spoke, her voice sounding worried. She cleared her throat. “Did you tell Jackson we were having company?”

“I haven't had a chance yet, no.”

I looked back at Kat, with Harper at her side. We shared a knowing and concerned look for our brother's reaction.

“And this is Harper Olson, who might as well be my second daughter,” Mom said. “She's Katherine's best friend, and I've watched her grow up in front of my eyes.”

Harper shook Charles' hand and greeted him while Kat and I still shared a worried look.

Footsteps sounded outside the dining room and my heart literally stopped for a second.

It was Nate. He also froze in the entry and looked at me silently asking, *what's going on?*

Mom immediately jumped in and introduced him to her friend, as well.

Nathan seemed a little surprised, but he shook Charles' hand and welcomed him into our home. So far, no one had answered my question about what brought Charles to Chamonix. Was it a chance meeting, or perhaps he was here specifically to meet Mom, and if so, how long had they been seeing each other?

The tension in the air was palpable as each of us waited for Jackson to come face-to-face with Mom's date. The way he had reacted at the restaurant earlier that day had all of us worried.

"We're waiting for one more," Mom said, her voice quivering just a little bit, and her smile wavered. She knew she had a right to be worried about Jackson. Why did she think surprising him would be the best way to go about this? Then again, Jackson was a grown man, maybe he could act like it for one dinner.

I helped myself to a glass of wine and offered some to Kat and Harper, before remembering that Harper didn't drink alcohol. I asked the staff to bring her some sparkling water instead as we waited.

Finally, Jackson stepped into the room.

Instantly, the look on his face told me he had an idea that Mom was having a guest, and he wasn't happy about it.

"Jackson, dear, finally," Mom said with a forced laugh. "I thought maybe you had fallen asleep."

"No, I was just debating whether or not to come down," he said crisply.

He walked past Charles and straight to the bar, pouring himself a drink. He took a very large swallow before turning

and staring at Charles.

“Charles, I’d like you to meet my oldest son, he was born a whole ten minutes before Nathan.” Mom was trying to use humor to diffuse the tension, and I felt sorry for her. She shouldn’t have to do that.

“Nice to meet you, Jackson. Your mother has—”

“Can we just get to it already?” Jackson took his seat, breaking his stare at Charles. “I’m not into small talk, Charles. I thought Mom would have warned you about that already.”

“Jackson Bishop, you will not speak to my guest that way. If you can’t be pleasant, you can take your dinner in your room.”

Mom whispered something to Charles and he nodded, taking Jackson’s attitude in stride. It was honestly impressive as hell.

Charles sat and Jackson let out a sigh of disapproval.

“Does he have to sit there?”

“It’s an empty seat, Jackson. Why wouldn’t he sit there?” Mom countered, clearly running out of patience.

“You know why.” He glared at Mom.

I was sick of it. We hadn’t even started dinner yet and already Jackson was ruining it for all of us by being a big baby.

“Maybe it’s about time you realized Dad isn’t coming back,” I said.

Jackson turned his sneering anger toward me. *Better at me than at Mom*, I thought to myself.

“Sorry if I’m not celebrating that our family was broken up by lies, Aiden.”

“They aren’t lies,” I laughed. “You’re just delusional.”

“Boys,” Mom said sternly.

Nathan stepped between us, always the one trying to break up the fights, even now.

“Let’s just try to eat dinner and be cordial,” he said, looking at me.

“Tell that to the cry baby over there,” I replied, pointing at Jackson.

Jackson snorted and stood up. “You call me the cry baby? Say it again and see what happens.”

“BOYS!” This time it was Kat. We all turned to look at our sister. “You guys are seriously embarrassing. Especially you, Jackson. You were raised better than that.”

Jackson turned his anger on Kat. “Of course you would be okay with replacing Dad. We know you never loved him—”

Mom slammed her hands down on the table. “If you boys can’t act like civilized human beings and respect our guest, then leave. Take your fighting elsewhere.”

“Gladly,” Jackson chugged the rest of his drink and stormed from the room. As he left, he whispered a name that our dad often called me, “pussy.”

My fists were balled at my sides, and I’d had enough. I followed him into the hallway, grabbing ahold of his shoulder, and without realizing my own strength, slammed him into the wall.

“What did you fucking say to me?”

Jackson shoved me off him. “I called you a pussy. Because that’s what you are. Letting another man come in here and take over Dad’s spot, just because you didn’t get the praise you thought you deserved.”

Jackson’s speech was slurred, and I realized he had had more to drink than the one in the dining room. He’d been drinking for some time, maybe since after we parted ways at the pool.

“Dad hasn’t contacted anyone in over a year, Jackson. He doesn’t fucking care about any of us.”

“He’s depressed, Aiden. He’s depressed and he’s embarrassed.”

“No, he just found himself a young blonde sex toy and replaced Mom. Why can he replace her, but she isn’t allowed even an ounce of happiness?”

“You’re just mad because you know you were the disappointment in this family. You couldn’t even stay in the military—”

I pulled my hand back, but someone grabbed ahold of it before I could connect my fist to Jackson’s jaw.

Jackson headed for the stairs.

“You’re in denial, Jackson.”

I knew my words were lost on him. He didn’t even turn to look at me, just flipped me off when he got to the top of the stairs.

“There’s no getting through to him,” Nathan said, speaking softly.

“I know, but he can’t talk to Mom like that. He sounded just like Dad.”

“I know,” Nate said. “But you’re not going to get through to him when he’s drunk.”

I looked my brother in the eye. “Well, the way things are going lately, that means we’ll never get through to him.”

NATHAN

Aiden took off up the stairs as I called after him, but it was no use. He was correct—Jackson had no right to talk to Mom, or anybody else like that. He needed to get over the split. He was a grown ass man, yet he was acting like a ten-year-old upset that his parents were divorcing and seeing other people.

My phone buzzed and when I checked it, my heart sank.

Nathan, I'm sooooo sorry.

It was a new number, since I had long since blocked the old one, but I had a feeling in the pit of my belly who was messaging me.

A second later, another message popped up, confirming my suspicions.

I knw I fuckd op whn i cheatd on u with Brett. I know we r getting married next month, but i made a big mistake. Pleas call me?

Was she drunk? The typos made me believe she was.

Another message soon followed.

Im at my bachlrette party, but all i cn think about is yu. Pleas 4give me.

My hands were shaking as I waited for another message. The dotted lines appeared alerting me to the fact that she was typing, but I decided to not do this to myself. I clicked the number and hit *Block*. This was the last thing I needed right now. I was over Carly and I had been for a while; I definitely

didn't need her back in my life causing even more drama on top of what I was already dealing with.

"Are you okay?" Harper's voice surprised me.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lied as I slipped my phone into my pocket. "Just all this stuff with Aiden, Jackson and Mom... it takes its toll."

"Yeah, I get it. I'm so sorry," she said softly. She walked over to me and placed a hand on my arm, stroking it gently. "Did they go up to their rooms?"

"As far as I know, yeah."

Harper pulled her hand away. "I can let you go as well, if you'd prefer to be alone."

Her turquoise eyes were so beautiful and sincere as she looked up at me. "I'd rather not be alone, honestly, but I do feel the need to get out of here, I feel a bit..." I trailed off but I felt exposed, just standing there in the foyer, waiting for my brothers to come down and start fighting again. Something I really didn't want to deal with, all things considered. I just wanted everyone to get along.

"We can get out of here, if you'd prefer."

"I'd like that."

"Just one second, I need to grab something," Harper said with a coy smile.

She rushed back into the dining room, and I stood there, perplexed, until she came back out with two plates, each with a small slice of cake.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist. I left before dinner was finished, but when I heard there would be chocolate cake...well, I'm a sucker for chocolate."

"Marie makes a really good chocolate cake too, even though cake isn't popular here, she somehow perfected it."

Harper handed me a plate, which had a tiny little fork next to the slice of cake.

“Please tell me we can have food outside the dining room and that I’m not breaking any rules.”

“We make our own rules,” I said with a laugh. “Come on, let’s head upstairs.”

I let Harper lead the way. I wasn’t really sure where we would go. To the library, maybe? But she led me to my bedroom, which surprised me a little. I had wanted to be private but wasn’t sure if she wanted to be alone in my room after what had happened earlier.

I wasn’t about to argue though.

We stepped into my room and closed the door behind us. Tension lifted from my shoulders immediately; it felt as if all the weight I was carrying was gone in an instant.

We sat in the sitting area, overlooking the mountains and ate our slices of cake in silence. Harper stared out the window and made a sound of pleasure with each bite of the dessert.

Once we finished, I looked over at her. “Told you. If that’s not the best chocolate cake you’ve ever had, I bet it’s pretty damn close.”

“Definitely up there,” she said, scraping the crumbs from the plate. “I should have grabbed another slice or two for later.”

“Marie makes the cake a few times, you’ll get it again. It’s a special request from Mom,” I told her. My smile fell. “How was she?”

“She was doing okay. Kat was talking to her. She was upset, but you know your mom, she’s strong.”

“I should go down there.”

Harper put a hand on my arm. “I think you need to take care of yourself first,” she said. “Kat had her laughing when I went for the cake. I’m worried about you though.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said.

She gave me a look that said she doubted that. “Is that you or your dad talking?”

My jaw clenched, but then I relaxed back into the chair with a sigh. “You’re right, that is my dad talking. I just don’t know what else to say. Seeing my brothers at each other’s throats like that bothers me.”

“I bet it does,” she said. There was something in her voice that pulled me back to earlier in the day.

“Please don’t think this has anything to do with what happened between us earlier. This feud, it’s been going on forever, and it’s all about our father.”

“I know, I just... well, I still feel bad.”

“You shouldn’t; this has nothing to do with you.”

She averted her gaze as she leaned forward to place her plate on the table between us.

“How are you feeling about what happened earlier?” I asked.

She shrugged and still didn’t look at me.

“Please don’t tell me you regret it.”

“Oh no,” she said, finally meeting my gaze. “As a teen, I’d had crushes on all three of you. I never thought I stood a chance, until well, you know what Carly did.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I swear I was not behind that; I would never have let her do that to you.”

Harper looked me in the eyes and said, “I know.”

I moved to the loveseat beside her, happy to see that she believed me. Maybe she could even forgive me. “Thank you. I should never have given her my Facebook password but she had told me it was a trust thing. She gave me hers, so I gave her mine even though I told her I was never on there. I didn’t realize she would use it to pretend to be me.”

“I know, Nate. It’s an easy mistake to make when you trust someone the way you did Carly. I forgive you.”

She placed her hand on mine and stared deep into my eyes. Her smile made my heart thunder in my chest. She nibbled her lower lip, tempting me.

I cradled her face in my hand and leaned closer, pressing my lips to hers. She hesitated for a second before kissing me back.

I knew I shouldn't but once Nathan's lips were on mine, I pushed any and all doubts from my head.

The way Nathan's hands felt in my hair, pulling my face into him and kissing me deeply, passionately... my younger self would have died imagining that very scenario. The reason Carly's cruel trick had hurt so much was because I'd had a huge crush on all of the brothers and Nathan had always been the nicest to me out of the three of them.

I had wanted him so badly for years, and now I could have him. I tossed all my shame and guilt away and pushed Nathan back on the loveseat. He smiled up at me as I straddled him, and I could feel his hardness pressing through his pants against me. I rubbed myself up and down, savoring the sensation of his erection, knowing that I had done that to him.

"You really want me, huh?" I asked with an impish grin.

"Can't you tell?"

I pressed into him and a low groan escaped his lips.

"I'll take that as a yes," I said, falling forward and kissing him deeply.

As good as it felt to dry hump him, I knew that the clothes needed to come off. I needed him inside of me, to feel his naked body against mine.

His hands slipped inside of my shirt, lifting it up. I raised my hands over my head and let him take it off me, tossing it on the floor beside the loveseat. His hands worked expertly at

my bra, removing it with ease. My breasts overflowed in his large hands. He kissed my nipple before taking it between his lips, sucking it gently and sending a chill down my body.

“We should move to the bed,” he whispered against my flesh. “It would be more comfortable.”

I didn't want to move. I loved the way he felt against me, even though the clothes separating us were almost too much to bear.

I nodded, and before I knew what to expect, Nathan moved out from underneath me and lifted me into his arms as if I weighed nothing at all.

He carried me over to the bed and laid me down onto it. I sunk into the fluffy comforter and sighed as my body relaxed.

Nathan stripped down in front of me, giving me the show of my life. He didn't just rip off his shirt, he removed it slowly, showing off those six pack abs inch by glorious inch. He was teasing me, and it was working. I sat up on my elbows to get a better view, crossing my legs to ease some of the pressure building down below from the show.

He lifted it up high enough to show off his chest. I had missed him undressing earlier since Aiden had distracted me, but Nathan had my full attention now. His chiseled chest with just a touch of a pleasure trail leading down into his pants. His skin was naturally tanned and seemed to glow. I reached forward, running my hands down those ripped abs, the muscles taut underneath my fingertips.

Once his shirt was tossed onto the floor, both my hands and his went for his belt. I fumbled with it until he nudged my hands away and removed it himself.

He slipped out of his pants but left on his boxer briefs, his bulge obvious from beneath the tight fabric. I couldn't resist touching him, stroking him through the fabric. He let out a low groan as he said, “Your turn.”

“You're not undressed fully,” I pointed out, pulling his boxers down as I stared up at him. He stepped out of them and

I looked down, coming face to face with his member for the first time.

I took it into my hands, my fingers unable to wrap fully around it. The tip glistened and I lowered myself down for a taste, taking it between my lips. Nathan's hands massaged the back of my head, playing with my hair gently without forcing me down.

Slowly, I moved down a bit more, worried my mouth might not open wide enough to take him in fully. Nathan let out appreciative groans as my tongue swirled around the tip. His skin was slick and salty, and I loved the way it felt against my tongue. I gripped the base and slowly began rocking back and forth, taking a little more of him into my mouth with each gentle motion. Nate's groans were like music to my ears, and I wanted nothing more than to please him. I imagined what it would be like to make him come like that, how good it would make me feel to know that I could give him that pleasure. My insides ached, reminding me that I didn't want things to finish too quickly though.

Nate seemed to feel the same way. He gently lifted my head, placing a hand under my chin and lifting my face to look up at him.

"Your turn," he said, and this time I didn't fight him.

He helped me out of my jeans and panties, not wasting any time getting me naked.

He nudged me backward onto the bed and lowered himself between my thighs. While I had approached him with trepidation, he didn't seem to have any hesitation as he spread my lips and buried his tongue inside of me.

My back arched upward, and I let out a gasp of surprise. His tongue was warm against me, and the way he groaned as he ate me, it was clear he enjoyed every second of it. He held onto my ass, pulling me toward him, his tongue circling my clit, hitting all of the right spots.

I wasn't sure I had experienced pleasure like that ever before... at least not on my own. My thighs were draped over

his shoulders, and my hands were on his head, pushing him deeper into me without even realizing it.

“Yes, Nathan, yes,” I whimpered, my body convulsing on the bed as wave after wave of pleasure washed over me. My entire body responded to the ecstasy Nate was giving me at that moment.

As I relaxed into the bed, I knew we were only just getting started. Nathan looked up at me with my wetness coating his lips. I had to admit, that might be one of the sexiest parts of oral sex—seeing them with my juices and a smile on their face as they looked at me, proud of making me feel so good.

“Come here,” I motioned for him to get on top of me.

Having Nathan’s naked body against mine, feeling his hardness pressing into me, was a literal dream come true although better than anything I could have ever imagined when I was younger. Staring into his dark eyes and feeling my body open up for him, my walls stretching to take all of him inside of me, was almost too good to believe. I arched upward and with one gentle thrust, he was buried inside of me.

He kissed my forehead, then the bridge of my nose and both cheeks before kissing my lips, all while remaining sheathed inside of me, allowing my body to get used to him there. I squeezed my inner muscles, and a small groan escaped his lips. Knowing that he felt it was so hot, I did it again. And again. And again.

He slowly began rocking, slow movements in and out of me as his tongue explored my mouth. I wrapped myself around him and held on for dear life as he gradually sped up, thrusting deeper and deeper inside of me.

I felt an intimacy that we hadn’t experienced before. The way he looked into my eyes, the way he touched my face and kissed me... I genuinely cherished every moment with Nathan, not just the pleasure he was providing my body.

He kept a fairly slow, gentle pace, as if wanting to make it last as long as possible. As if he was cherishing his time with me, too.

Slowly, the familiar ache inside of me grew and grew until I was close. I clenched around him and whispered, “I’m going to come.”

“Yes, please come for me, Harper,” he whispered back to me. His breath became more desperate, and he seemed to be close himself. My pussy clenched around his throbbing cock as my body milked him for all he had.

Nate let out a low growl with one last thrust as he came with me, pouring himself deep inside.

My heart was racing as he slipped out of me and wet warmth covered my thighs. Nate rolled over and pulled me into him, my head resting against his chest. We stayed like that in silence for a long time, his heartbeat music to my ears as my eyes began to drift closed.

Nate continued stroking my hair and kissing the top of my head. He was so sweet. I knew that he’d been hurt badly, and once I could think clearly, I knew that I had to do everything I could to make sure he wasn’t hurt by me.

“Nate.” I lifted my head to meet his gaze.

“Yes, beautiful?”

My cheeks flushed.

“I just, well, I don’t know how much I can give. My head is a mess right now, but I don’t want to see you hurt.”

He offered a small smile. “I don’t think you have it in you to hurt anyone, Harper. You’re such a sweet person.”

Was I? I remembered how I had torn his family apart. I averted my gaze, afraid my guilt might become obvious.

“As long as you’re honest with me, Harper, and I know you are. You’re the most honest and sincere person I’ve probably ever met. It’s one of the things I admire about you.”

The shame and guilt weighed heavily on my heart. I had to tell him.

“Nate, I have something to tell you, I—”

A knock at the door stopped me in my tracks. With wide eyes, I stared at Nate who didn't seem too worried.

"Yes?" he called out.

"It's Jackson."

Nate looked at me as if to ask, "Well?"

I hurried out of bed to try and find my clothes.

"He's not going to care, Harper."

"How can he not care?"

"Because we have all had you, we shared you already. Why would he care now?"

I stopped in my tracks. "This is different," I said in a hushed voice.

Was it, though?

"Harper? Is that you?" Jackson called back.

"We've already been found out," Nathan said. "And we did say we wanted to be honest."

I slipped my shirt back on as the door opened before either of us had told Jackson to come inside. He just walked into the room.

"Hey, why did no one invite me?" he said, playfully pouting.

He seemed to have sobered up a little since the drama earlier, which was a plus.

"I'm sorry, Jackson."

"No need to be sorry," Jackson scoffed, shrugging and turning to Nate. "I'm the one that owes you both an apology for my behavior earlier."

"You don't need to apologize to me," Nathan said. "It's Aiden and Mom who need to hear it."

Jackson flinched. "I know. I'm just working my way up to talking to Mom and well, with Aiden, it's complicated, as you know."

“I know, but you still owe him an apology.”

“He owes me one too.”

“Sure, both of you need to be nicer to each other,” Nathan said.

I was still in awe that Jackson seemed completely unphased by finding me in his brother’s room. He kept sneaking glances in my direction, but he didn’t say anything else about finding me half naked with Nathan.

I walked over and picked up my pants from near Nathan’s bed. Jackson stepped out of my way for me to grab them.

“Thanks,” I muttered sheepishly.

“No problem,” he said, offering me a cocky grin. “I only wish you had invited me.”

When I stood back up, Jackson took my face in his hands and kissed me, and it felt like all the air had left my body for a second. I felt like my feet had lifted off the ground. I kissed him back until I remembered where we were. I pulled away and looked over at Nathan.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what—”

“It’s fine,” Nathan said with a chuckle. “I told you, as long as you’re honest with me, I don’t expect you to be exclusive with only me. I don’t mind sharing.”

“But Carly and—”

“That was different. They lied to me. Had she been honest with me, I think I could have been okay sharing her with my best friend, but once she lied to me I knew I could no longer trust her or Brett again. But I trust you, Harper. And I trust my brothers, even if we don’t always get along. I trust them more than I trust anyone else.”

Jackson turned my head back to him and kissed me again. I tried to relax into his embrace, but I felt bad for Nathan there on the bed, watching.

I couldn’t resist how good Jackson’s mouth felt against mine. He moved me backward toward the bed and removed

the little clothing I had managed to put back on. He stripped, but unlike Nathan earlier, he didn't take his time.

"You guys are insatiable," I said with a laugh.

Jackson grinned at me, not denying it one little bit.

Jackson rolled me over on my side so that I was facing Nathan and spooned me. Nathan slipped down on the bed and kissed me as his brother entered me from behind.

I gasped as Jackson's cock slid inside of me. He held onto my hips as he gently moved in and out. Nathan's kisses moved lower, taking one of my nipples into his mouth as his hand moved between my thighs, circling my clit.

"Oh God," I whimpered as the sensations became almost too much. My body convulsed in pleasure as Jackson had his way with me. I'd already had two orgasms with Nathan; maybe the boys weren't the only insatiable ones because I felt another building up within minutes. I came, flailing between the two men as Jackson kept a tight grip on my hips, thrusting into me over and over again as I climaxed.

"Good girl," Jackson groaned into my ear, his breath warm against my cheek. I shuddered as the orgasm waned.

The way Nate looked up at me in that moment took away any concerns I may have had about jealousy; they flew right out the window.

Jackson slipped out of me and positioned me on my hands and knees. He took me from behind again as Nate lay in front of me, his cock growing harder as he watched his brother fuck me.

"Come here," I said, motioning for Nathan to move closer to me. As soon as he was within reach, I took his cock into my hand and began stroking it. He edged even closer and I wrapped my lips around the tip. I moved Nathan in and out of my mouth as Jackson moved in and out of my pussy.

"Fuck," Jackson growled as his nails dug into my hips. "You're so fucking hot, Harper. I had no idea you were this dirty..."

Truthfully, I'd had no idea either. It was like they had awakened something inside of me.

He thrust into me harder than he'd done before, and I let out a cry of pleasure. I took Nate deeper into my mouth, my hand only at his base now. I wanted every inch of both of them.

Jackson let out a groan and I knew he was close. I remembered what I'd done earlier and clenched my inner muscles, immediately feeling his nails dig deeper into my flesh. The clenching of my muscles made me feel every inch of Jackson inside of me and sent me over the edge one more time. We came together, with Nathan's cock silencing my cries of pleasure.

Within seconds, Nathan spilled down my throat, looking at me with a mixture of awe and appreciation.

The guys helped me to lay back on the bed. It was getting late and my eyes were heavy with sleep. I was so spent and didn't want to move. They made sure I was covered up as they curled their bodies around mine. I fell asleep without saying a word, my body and mind too exhausted from the day.

I felt safe there between them. Safe and more cared about than I had ever felt with my ex.

* * *

I AWOKE TO A KNOCKING SOUND, and then a familiar voice.

"Aiden?" Nate mumbled from beside me.

My eyes bolted open as soon as I realized where I was. I was still in Nathan's room, but the sun was shining in through the window. It was dark when we fell asleep. That meant... oh God, I had spent the night there.

What would Kat think?

I jumped from the bed and ran into Aiden.

"I'm sorry," I muttered to him, hoping he wouldn't be upset finding me this way.

“It’s fine,” he replied. “I’m sorry I missed round two, that’s all.”

He winked at me.

I grabbed my pants, unable to locate my panties at first.

“Listen, I just came here to see what the plan for the day was Nate, but I can leave—”

“Why would you leave?” Nate asked.

Jackson piped up. “Because of me, obviously.”

“I didn’t come here to fight,” Aiden said.

I grabbed my shirt and was still searching for my panties, but I had to ask Aiden again, to be sure. “Are you really okay with this arrangement?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Because of your issues with Jackson, for one. And two... well, it’s kind of weird.”

Aiden shrugged. “Jackson and I have had issues our entire life, it’s nothing new. As long as you’re happy, I’m happy. Jackson and I aren’t hooking up, so I don’t fucking care what you do with him.”

Hearing that put my mind at ease some, though I was still worried what Kat might think.

I finally found my panties tangled in the blankets of Nate’s bed and slipped them into my jeans pocket. I wasn’t going to take put them on now. Fully dressed, I said, “I need to find Kat and tell her, well, I need to come up with a reason for not going back to the room last night.”

“She’ll understand,” Jackson called after me as I hurried out into the hallway.

I ran to our room and swung open the door to find the bed still made and no one in it.

“Huh...” I said out loud. I checked the time on the clock near the bed. It was eight in the morning. Still typically too

early for Kat to be up, but maybe she went to the pool or something.

I left the room and ran down to the pool area, only to find it empty as well.

Where could she be?

I was getting ready to leave the pool when I glanced into the sauna.

“Oh God!” I cried out and covered my eyes.

There was a naked, unfamiliar man passed out on one of the sauna benches. I looked around for something, anything to protect myself with just in case he was dangerous.

That’s when I noticed he wasn’t alone. A black raven tattoo caught my eye. I knew that tattoo.

I opened the sauna door and said, “Kat?”

My best friend stirred awake and blinked back at me. “Harper? Where am I?”

“You’re in the sauna...” My eyes moved to the naked man beside her. He was face down, laying on his belly, so all I saw was his ass. It was a nice enough ass, though her brothers had better. “And you’re not alone.”

“Oh Jesus, that’s right,” Kat said, her eyes wide.

“Jean-Luc, wake up. We can’t let my mom, or worse, my brothers, see him here.”

“Jean-Luc... as in...” The pieces of the puzzle came together. I recognized the dark curls now. I covered my mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Yes, the chef of the restaurant. He slipped me his number before we left,” she said. She nudged the man and finally, he made a noise to signal that he was actually alive. “Good, I thought maybe he had died from alcohol poisoning or something.”

“Just a deep sleeper,” Jean-Luc said in his very thick French accent.

He rolled over and I covered my eyes to avoid seeing more of him than I wanted to see.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize we weren’t alone,” he said.

“Can you cover that thing up, please?” I asked.

“I’ll get you a towel.”

“Where are your clothes?”

“Good question,” Kat said. “I think we started in the living room, since everyone was asleep, before moving into the library because I wanted to show him the extensive collection of cookbooks that are stored there. From there, not really sure and then we ended up here.”

“I’m covered, mostly,” Jean-Luc said.

I uncovered my eyes, but still didn’t look over at the man.

“So how did you two even meet up? I’m so confused.”

“Well, I texted you that I was going out and asked if you wanted to come along, but you didn’t respond, and I figured you were asleep so... I messaged him instead.”

Kat bit her lip and mouthed, “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, I’m glad you had fun,” I said. And glad she didn’t realize I hadn’t slept in our room the night before. I got lucky there. Even though I knew I had to tell her eventually, for now, it bought us some time so Christmas with her family wouldn’t be awkward.

A couple more days, I told myself. Just a couple more days.

“I better get going,” Jean-Luc said. “Can I borrow this for now?”

He held up one of the white robes. “Oh sure, they get replaced constantly, you can have it.”

“Are you... just going to leave in that?” I asked.

Jean-Luc walked out of the sauna answering my question.

“Wait! Let me show you the easiest way to get out without being spotted!” Kat called after him. She wrapped a robe

around herself and scurried after the man.

And I thought I'd had a wild night. I laughed to myself as I walked back up the stairs to our room. I knew breakfast was served around nine a.m., and I was starving.

JACKSON

I stood off to the side, taking it all in. Christmas music was playing softly from the surround sound, the tree was lit and glowing brightly and the fireplace was ablaze. Marie and the staff had passed around some hot chocolate and cookies. It reminded me of my childhood. Mom was laughing with Aiden and Kat on the couch. Nathan and Harper were deep in conversation, and I was in the corner, alone. I had grabbed some peppermint schnapps from the bar and poured a little into my hot chocolate.

Normally, I'd be sitting with Dad, usually not saying much as he downed his liquor. For some reason, that's just how we split off. Nathan would move between Mom and Dad, while Aiden was always by Mom's side, avoiding Dad at all cost.

But now, I was alone and not sure what to do with myself.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and brought up Dad's number. It was early in the day still for him, but I knew he was an early riser.

I stepped out of the room and went into the study nearby before hitting the call button.

It rang a few times before his voice spoke on the other end of the line.

“Who's this?”

Not even a hello, but I knew that's just the way he was.

“It's me, Dad,” I said, smiling from hearing his voice again. “It's Jackson.”

“Oh,” he grumbled.

I tried to ignore his tone, telling myself it wasn't disappointment, it was simply him.

“So, I wanted to wish you a merry Christmas,” I said.

“I can't talk long, Jackson. Meredith and I have a Christmas party to plan.”

“Meredith?” My voice cracked.

“One second,” Dad said. In the background, I heard him talking to someone. A child's voice. A little boy. “Hey, Cole, just one second, okay? I need to finish this call first.”

His tone had completely changed. Was that my father speaking? I felt a lump in my throat when Dad got back on the line.

“Sorry, Meredith's son is in a hurry. We are heading out to the mall for some party favors and a last minute trip to see Santa.”

“Who?” was all I could ask.

“Cole. He's six, and he's something else, let me tell you.”

I had to check the number. Was this really my dad speaking? He had never praised any of his sons, never talked about us like that. He actually sounded amused and happy about his girlfriend's six-year-old son.

“She's got two little boys,” he said. “Cole and Andrew, who is three...”

Two boys. He hadn't bothered to call any of us in a year, but here he was playing father to two little boys he had no part in bringing into this world?

Were we so easily replaced?

“One second, I need to help Andrew with his applesauce packet.”

My heart literally hurt. My eyes stung but I refused to cry. I couldn't cry. Dad would just call me a pussy, like he always

did. I couldn't remember him ever helping with meals or anything.

"Hey, Jackson, I really have to go. We have a busy day ahead of us."

"Yeah, okay Dad, I understand." I tried to keep my voice as flat as possible. "I hope you have a good Christmas. I love you—"

Before I could finish, the line went dead.

I sat there with the phone in my hand for a moment, stewing in my disbelief. Something was nagging at the back of my mind. Meredith. Where had I heard that name before? I googled my dad's name and what came up made my heart sink. There was an article, talking about my dad with his mistress, Meredith Carpenter. One of his political aides. She was closer to my age than she was to his, and a leggy blonde from the looks of it.

They'd been dating this entire time, even before the divorce? So the photos were real?

Everything, all the headlines, were they all real?

Was my dad the person everybody had painted him as, and this entire time, had I been lying to myself?

I chugged the rest of my hot chocolate, but there wasn't enough schnapps in it for me, so I made my way to the bar. I picked up a bottle of whisky and filled my mug with that instead. I finished it in a few seconds flat and poured myself another one.

"Merry fucking Christmas to me."

"Jackson, are you okay?" Harper asked, coming to stand near me.

"I'm fine," I said, steadying myself. "Just getting something to drink."

"You're missed," she said with a sweet smile.

I scoffed. "I highly doubt that."

“Stop it, yes you are,” she said softly. She placed a hand on my arm. Her face creased in a worried expression. “Your mom was asking about you.”

I had still not apologized to her for my shitty behavior the night before, and now knowing what I did about Dad, I felt even shittier about it.

Yet, there was Mom, always willing to forgive and love unconditionally, even when I was an absolute fuck up.

“I’ll be right in there,” I said, trying my damndest to hold back the tears.

I was a grown man and had always been told that grown men didn’t cry. Harper remained at my side and didn’t press me for any answers. I appreciated that about her.

“Come on, I’ll be right next to you, and if you say the word, I won’t leave you all night,” she said.

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart. Well... except when I have to use the bathroom.”

“I can always join you, you know.” I winked at her, feeling better already.

With a playful slap, she took my hand into hers and motioned for me to follow her, to rejoin my family.

I knew what I had to do at that moment. I followed her back into the formal living room, and seeing that Aiden had stepped away, I sat down beside my mother.

“Mom, I just wanted to say something.”

She turned to me and smiled. “I know, Jackson.”

“You know what?”

“That you’re sorry,” she said. She clasped my hand in hers. “I know it’s been hard on you, and I should have warned you before bringing Charles over.”

“No, I’m a grown man. I shouldn’t have thrown a fit like a spoiled toddler.”

“It’s okay, I forgive you.”

All these years, I had chosen my dad over my mom, and I’d been wrong. So, so wrong. But seeing the way she looked at me, I knew that I still had plenty of time to make things right.

“Gather round, everyone!” Mom called out. “I have a gift for you before we all head to bed.”

Nathan groaned but was grinning as he did so. “Don’t you think we’re a little old for matching pajamas, Mom?”

“Never,” she replied, and the smile on her face was enough to convince me, and most likely my brothers, to do anything our mother asked of us. This was the one thing that always seemed to bring her the most joy on the holidays—the whole family in matching Christmas pajamas, wearing them to bed and waking up in them on Christmas morning. We’d then have breakfast before opening our other gifts, and Mom would get tons of photos of us all matching. Dad never bought into the tradition, even though Mom often bought him a pair of his own pajamas. He never wore them.

We sat around the Christmas tree as Mom gathered the presents she had set aside for us, handing them out one by one. She handed me mine and I waited for the others to get theirs. She even handed one to Harper.

“Oh, I wasn’t expecting anything,” Harper said, her cheeks flushed. “You’ve already done so much for me. I apologize that I wasn’t able to get anyone gifts.”

“It’s okay, dear,” Mom said. “I love this part of the holidays, and it was fun shopping for you. I just hope they fit.”

“I’m sure they’ll be perfect,” Harper said with a smile.

Once everyone had a present, Mom motioned for us to open them. As expected, they were matching pajamas, which surprised no one.

This year, she even found grown-up pajamas with little feet and a hood with a reindeer face and fake antlers. They looked like something we'd wear as kids, not grown men, but I would have worn anything to make Mom smile, especially after everything she'd been through. Each of us were a different reindeer, with Jackson having the red nose signaling he was Rudolph. For some reason, that made me laugh.

Jackson kept turning the pajamas over in his hands, frowning as he stared at the face of the reindeer. Nathan just laughed as he looked at him, shaking his head with resignation. Kat stared at hers with a look of confusion at first, as if not sure what to think. Harper just grinned and said, "These are so adorable. Thank you."

She would look pretty adorable in hers, I had to admit.

"I know, they're a bit silly, but I thought we could all use some silliness," Mom said. "After the last few years."

No one dared bad mouth the pajamas, not even Jackson who seemed to be acting less obnoxious toward Mom. I hoped that he had apologized to her at least, even if he hadn't apologized to me yet.

Mom took her seat next to me again and grinned.

"So, what do you think?" she asked.

"They're... certainly festive," I said.

She laughed. "I thought y'all would look so cute in them, I couldn't resist."

"I'm surprised they make pajamas like this in our size." We weren't small men; it was hard enough to buy normal clothes for us at times, but footie pajamas for men over six feet tall? I was a bit stumped as to where she found them.

"I had them custom-made for you guys by a local tailor here in Chamonix."

"Wow, impressive," I said.

My eyes fell on Jackson who was refilling his mug with hot chocolate and slipping a little something else in there as well. Mom noticed where my gaze had landed.

“You should have invited your date from last night over, Mom.”

“Nah, this is time for family,” she said softly.

“You mean you didn’t want Jackson to throw another fit?”

She shrugged and took my hand into hers. “Jackson apologized to me for his behavior, and I understand that he’s had a hard time after what happened with your dad. He didn’t see your dad the way you did, Aiden, it’s been a lot harder on him. I should have been more aware of that before bringing a man to dinner.”

“Jackson is a grown man, Mom, and you’re allowed to move on and be happy.”

“I know, and I am. And Jackson and I talked about things. I think he realizes now that his dad and I are truly over. I see things moving forward in a more positive direction.”

“I hope so.”

“I know you two have had your differences. I just hope that one day you can put them aside and see each other the way I see both of you, as amazing, strong men.”

I didn’t want to bring my mom down on Christmas, but I wasn’t sure if Jackson and I could ever be close. I had tried over the years. God knows, I tried everything. But he always turned to personal, hurtful attacks just like Dad used to, and it wasn’t something I wanted to deal with anymore. I was tired of trying.

It was like Mom had read my mind.

“Jackson has always had a sharp tongue, and he is bad about pushing things too far. It’s because he can’t properly handle his emotions. He took after your dad too much. But I see him working through those issues, he’s growing up, he’s changing into a better man every day.”

Again, I hoped so. Jackson seemed to chug his hot chocolate, which I knew was more than just hot chocolate. Mom might have seen the positive changes he'd made, but she seemed to not notice the large amount of alcohol he was consuming. As his brother, it worried me, but I knew that there was nothing I could say to get him to bring it under control. He was too much like Dad. He might not ever admit he had a problem.

MOM YAWNED and checked her watch. "Goodness, it's getting late. We better get to bed so Santa can come... it'll be an early morning of gifts, remember."

She slipped from the room, and the others seemed to be considering their options, as well. Kat whispered to Harper, but I overheard, "You'll have the room to yourself tonight," and both girls chuckled. Did Kat have a boyfriend here in Chamonix too? I'd have to ask her about it.

Kat said her goodnights and headed upstairs as Harper began clearing away the mugs.

"Don't worry about that," I told her with a laugh.

"I know, the staff will clean it up. I'd just like to help if I can."

"You're too sweet."

Her cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink.

"I'm going out," Jackson remarked rather loudly before leaving in a huff. I had no idea what crawled up his ass, but I let it go. Hopefully he'd be in decent shape for Christmas breakfast, otherwise it was none of my business what he did with his free time.

Nathan also slipped away, saying he was tired.

It left just Harper and me.

"You tired?" I asked her.

"Not really."

"Would you like to go for a swim?"

“At this hour?” she laughed.

“Why not? The views are stunning at night.”

Harper seemed to mull it over for a second before saying, “Sure, let me just go change into my suit.”

The idea of seeing her in that bikini again sent all the blood in my body south. I couldn’t deny that it had played a big role in my proposition. I smirked as I followed her up the stairs to our respective rooms. It only took me a second to slip into my swim trunks, and a few moments later there was a knock at the door.

I stepped out to find Harper in the blue bikini from earlier, but with gray sweatpants and matching cardigan which I hoped she would lose once we got downstairs with the heated pool.

Her curls were pulled back into a high, but loose ponytail, soft tendrils of red slipping free from the elastic and delicately framing her face. She was makeup free and wearing her glasses, which I figured she would lose downstairs as well. Freckles dotted her cheeks, and I remembered a time when we used to make fun of her for them, but now I couldn’t imagine anything more adorable. Having seen her in a swimsuit earlier, something she never would have been brave enough to wear as a teen in front of us, sadly, I noticed the freckles didn’t stop at her face—they covered her shoulders as well, and I had so badly wanted to trace them with my fingers, to draw designs onto her gorgeous body.

“Ready?” she asked, oblivious to the fact that I was admiring every inch of her.

“Yes,” I said, motioning for her to lead the way so I could check out that gorgeous ass as she walked in front of me.

She didn’t stay in front of me for long, choosing to walk side-by-side most of the way to the pool.

“So... Kat went out tonight, huh?” I asked her.

She snickered and covered her mouth but didn’t confirm or deny anything. She wouldn’t tell her best friend’s secrets, I had to admire her for that.

“So she’s seeing someone?”

She pretended to zip her lips, but the look on her face was enough of an answer for me. Harper didn’t have the best poker face, her expression gave her away every time.

“Is he a local?”

Harper shrugged and reached for the door to the pool room.

So... he *was* a local. My little sister had found herself a French lover. I was amused by this for some reason, considering Kat mostly kept to herself, and she didn’t speak a word of French as far as I knew.

Nevertheless, I was happy for her. Kat tended to be by herself a lot. She never brought the boys home. It had been just her and Harper for so long, and when Harper moved away, she threw herself into her work and her art, often staying home. She still lived with Mom and hadn’t expressed interest in dating or marriage or kids. I had feared she might not have many goals other than her tattoo work, but it seemed to bring her happiness. I knew Mom hoped Kat would marry one day, just like she hoped that for all of us. It’s just how moms were, I supposed.

We entered the heated pool room and steam hovered above the water, inviting us into the warmth. Harper slipped her sweats off and dropped them on a chair near the pool. She took off her glasses and laid them gently beside her clothing.

“Can you see without those things?” I asked.

“Sure. Not as well as with, of course. I’d get a headache if I read too long without them, and some things that are far off are hard to make out, but I can see everything directly in front of me just fine.” Her eyes moved over my body as if to make her point.

“Well what do you think about this?” I asked, placing my hands under the elastic of my swim trunks and sliding them down on my hips. I moved slowly, giving Harper plenty of time to tell me to slow down or stop, but her gaze moved

lower on my body and her cheeks flushed. She didn't say a word though.

I continued sliding the shorts off and stepped out of them.

“Your turn?” I raised an eyebrow as I thought to myself... *as beautiful as she looks in that bikini, her without anything on would be even better.*

Harper nibbled her lip, as if trying to suppress a grin. She looked around the room as if making sure no one else was there, and that nobody could see us.

“Everyone went to bed or went out,” I said. “It's just us.”

Harper giggled. “Alright then. Let's do this. I've always wanted to skinny dip.”

“There's a first time for everything.”

“Can you help me with my top?” She batted her lashes at me.

“My pleasure.” She turned around and I pulled at one of the ties, releasing the bikini top. It fell to the floor and Harper turned to face me topless.

Her breasts were more than a handful. Pale, freckled flesh with small, pink nipples that were already hard despite the warm temperature in the room. She slipped off her bottoms as I stared, still mesmerized with her top half, forgetting where I was and what I was doing for a moment.

She stood before me, naked and confident. The teenager that wouldn't wear a bikini in front of us I hoped was now so proud of the woman she grew into.

My gaze moved from her breasts to her stomach. Her hips were rounded, her thighs on the thicker side. She had a nearly perfect hourglass figure and I had to fight the urge to run my hands over her amazing body.

Thankfully, I didn't have to fight the urge for long. Harper closed the distance between us and stood on her tiptoes, pressing her lips, and her body, against mine.

“It's time to cash in your rain check,” she teased.

She kissed me then, opening her mouth and slipping her tongue past my lips. I wasn't sure what to do with my hands, there was so much to explore. I started at the top of her body, running my hand through her thick curls before cupping her face and kissing her more deeply.

Instead of just my hands moving lower, my lips did as well.

I inhaled the scent of her flesh as I kissed down her neck, nibbling gently on her earlobe before going lower.

Cupping her breasts in my hands, I kissed the tops of them before moving to her nipples, taking one between my lips and sucking gently.

Harper's groan was music to my ears.

I circled my tongue around her pink flesh, savoring the taste of her.

"Mmm," she moaned. "Let's take it to the pool."

Once we were about chest height for me, I grabbed Harper and kissed her again, holding her up and out of the water. She wrapped her legs around me, my cock resting in between. She moved her body against mine, my cock slipping and sliding between her thighs.

My body ached with a need to be inside of her. I wanted nothing more than to thrust into her, but I knew that even though it sounded ideal, the moisture of the pool could make it painful for her.

So, we stayed that way, our bodies entwined, as we kissed and I touched every inch of her, exploring those curves with the curiosity of Lewis and Clark. Everything about her was new to me. I had been with other women, but none that made me feel the way Harper did. I never would have imagined my sister's best friend could have grown into this gorgeous woman, which seemed to add to the excitement.

I moved us over to the edge of the pool, lifting Harper up onto the side and sitting her down carefully. She looked down at me with a curious expression on her face, but before she

could say a word, I separated her legs and dove between her thighs.

Her body convulsed as my tongue found her clit, circling it and gently sucking it. She tasted as good as I expected, her sweetness like candy on my tongue as I buried myself deep between her thick thighs.

Her legs wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me into her, which I didn't mind a bit. If I suffocated in the midst of Harper's pussy, I would consider that a good way to go. I never needed to breathe again as long as I made her scream out my name over and over again.

I slipped a finger inside of her. So wet. So warm. So delicious.

I slipped another. And another. Her pussy clenched around my fingers as I moved them in and out of her, my tongue never leaving her clit.

"Aiden... Oh God, Aiden..." She screamed out my name, and I was thankful we were several floors down from the bedrooms, because she was loud. Her body shook wildly as her pelvis thrust upward, helping me bury my fingers deeper inside of her as her pussy spasmed around them. I knew she was coming simply from the way her body was reacting, she didn't need to say a word, which was good because she seemed to be unable to form a sentence in the last throes of her orgasm. She only managed cries of pleasure followed by whimpers of satisfaction as her body slowly relaxed to normal.

I was grateful for my military training and upper body strength, as I pulled myself out of the pool. Harper laid back against the floor and I climbed on top of her, staring deep into those beautiful turquoise eyes.

She wasted no time wrapping herself around me, lifting her body up to me and rubbing herself against me. She was insatiable, and I loved it.

I thrust into her, and her body accepted me easily. My cock slipped inside of her like a hot knife into butter. Feeling myself

sheathed inside of her, her warmth wrapped around my cock, was enough to nearly push me to the edge. I took a few deep breaths and just stayed like that; our bodies connected in the most intimate way. I kissed her, my tongue exploring her mouth as her hands kneaded my back. She clenched her pussy around my member, and a shudder ran through my body.

“Jesus...” Everything about the woman drove me absolutely batshit insane.

Before long, our bodies began moving again. I moved in and out of her, her body arching upward to meet each of my thrusts. The steam from the pool made our bodies more slippery than usual, not that Harper needed any more moisture. I moved in and out of her with ease, going deeper with each thrust until every inch of me was buried inside of her. She cried out in pleasure, and I made it my personal goal to make her scream my name over and over again.

“Aiden... Aiden, Oh God,” she whimpered.

I wanted her to scream it.

I wanted to make her body convulse and writhe with so much pleasure that she saw stars.

It didn't take long. Harper's breathing grew more desperate, and her face was contorted into a look of pure bliss as she cried out my name over and over again.

Hearing her call my name was all it took to push me over the edge. A tightness in my balls told me I didn't have long, so I thrust into her deep and she screamed out my name one more time, her nails digging into my back and her pussy spasming around my cock as I filled her with my seed.

Her cries turned to soft whimpers as our bodies slowly came down from climaxing. I cupped her cheek in my hand and kissed her beautiful face.

I knew it was too soon to have feelings for her, but it wasn't like we were strangers. I had known her for years. Still, I hadn't known *this* Harper until recently and it was still too new. At least that's what I told myself. I had thought I was in love before and it was always fleeting... I pushed any and all

thoughts of such silliness away, at least for now. Part of me thought Harper and I would make a perfect couple, but I knew it was too soon for her. She had been engaged only a few days earlier; I needed to give her time. We both needed space to sort out our feelings.

But the words were on the tip of my tongue, and I had to swallow them down before I said something that would make things awkward for both of us.

I slipped my now deflated cock out of her. I picked her up off the floor and carried her over to one of the large loungers overlooking the view.

I curled up beside her, letting her rest her head on my chest as I played with her hair.

“Aiden, I’m sorry.”

Hearing her apologize after some of the best sex of my life took me by surprise. I stared at her and raised an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For complicating everything,” she said softly.

“I told you, I’m okay with sharing you, even with Jackson. I just want you to be happy, and I realize that this might only be a vacation thing,” I said, remembering how she insisted this couldn’t be a forever thing. Even though I would have loved to have given us a chance, I respected that she had goals and dreams she wanted to work toward.

“Thank you, I appreciate that. I believe you... but I just can’t help but worry. It’s like a roller coaster, I can’t decide if I’m cool with this or if I should feel bad since you’re brothers and I just worry that if you knew the real me, you wouldn’t like me nearly as much.”

I lifted her chin to look into her eyes. “The real you? I’ve known you since we were both children, Harper. I think I have a pretty good idea who you are.”

She shrugged and sat up. “I don’t know.”

“I do,” I said.

She was quiet for a moment before offering a sweet smile and a quick kiss. “I think I need some sleep. It’s been a crazy few days.”

“Get some rest, beautiful.”

“Thanks, Aiden. You too. And thank you, for everything, seriously.”

She sounded a bit sad. I feared that maybe what we were doing, the fun we were having, might cause more harm to her than it would to our family. I was worried about her and hoped that one day she might feel comfortable enough to share what was on her mind, because whatever it was, whatever guilt she was shouldering, seemed too big to be carrying it alone.

NATHAN

The smell of cinnamon and sugar seemed to permeate the very walls of the house. I could smell it all the way upstairs in my room, or maybe it was just my imagination. I knew what to expect when I walked downstairs because we had the same breakfast spread ever since I was a child. Even though it was nothing new, I still felt excitement when I stepped into the dining room and found the table filled with goodies.

A tower of cinnamon rolls was at the center, with gooey frosting dripping off of them. I remembered being a teen and how my brothers and I made crude jokes about what it looked like, but we could never resist the deliciousness and would often eat them until we couldn't move.

It wasn't just cinnamon rolls, however. There were waffles, or as Marie called them *gaufres*, with all the toppings you could ever want. Mom preferred the waffles with a little Nutella and some strawberries, which were hard to find this time of year in the French Alps, but Marie never failed to procure some for her.

Fruit of all types, most of it not native to the area, overflowed several baskets.

Orange juice, espresso, cappuccino, hot chocolate... if it was a breakfast drink or a mug of something warm, it was there and ready to be consumed.

One of our family's charities was for hungry children, and ever since I had sat on the board of it, I realized just how much

food we wasted and how many children would kill for a fraction of the food on the table. It soured my mood ever so slightly as I stood there alone, in the doorway.

The chiming of the doorbell took me by surprise since everyone was here. Jackson probably forgot his keys and was crawling back after a wild night out on the town. I shook my head and walked toward the door, calling out to Jackson and scolding him for forgetting his keys, when Jackson spoke up from the stairs. “It’s not me, man.”

“If not you then who? Are you expecting anyone?” I thought about Mom’s “friend” and my eyes went wide. Jackson seemed to think the same thing judging by the way his face fell, but I had to give him credit because he said, “Let him in. I need to apologize.”

I didn’t even bother to check who might be standing there. It could only be Charles. I swung the door open and expected to see the older man, but my heart dropped into my stomach as I recognized the blonde on the other side of the door.

Her hair was longer than before, her bob had grown out and it wasn’t as bleached blonde, more honey colored with highlights. It made her look more grown-up than the white blonde of our teenage years. Her eyes were icy blue and filled with tears.

“Nathan—” she took a step forward with her arms open to hug me.

I stepped out of reach and put a hand up to stop her. I couldn’t find the words to speak right away, but once I could, I choked out, “What are you doing here, Carly?”

“I wanted to talk,” she said, wiping the tears from her cheeks and sniffing, which seemed super fake to me. “You haven’t been responding to my texts or answering my calls, so I thought this might be the best way.”

“I’m not answering your calls because I have no desire to talk to you ever again. What part of that don’t you understand?”

“But Nate—”

I wanted to shut the door, but she was standing in the way. I didn't want to put my hands on her, or else I would have slammed the door right in her face.

“Leave.”

“I have nowhere to go.”

“You can get a hotel,” I scoffed.

“Not this last minute, not on Christmas...”

“I'm sure if you caught a train to Geneva or back into Paris, you could find something.”

“I don't want to leave without talking to you. I made a mistake, but Nate, we could make this work.”

“How? You fucked my best friend.”

“I had wanted to ask you for an open relationship, I thought maybe—”

“You should have asked before you slept with him, I might have considered it. But you didn't ask, you fucking cheated on me, Carly. And because of that, I can never trust you again, nor do I want to. I'm over you, I've moved on and you really should, too. Get married to Brett, you two deserve each other.”

“Nate...” She sobbed, her knees seeming to go weak.

Carly stumbled in her footing just enough where I could try and shut the door, hoping she would move out of the way. But a hand on the door stopped me.

“Wait,” Mom said from behind me. “I have something I'd like to say to her.”

I looked over at Mom, who I had no idea had come down already. She was dressed in her Christmas pajamas, matching us, and she looked a bit silly, but Carly's eyes went wide when she saw her.

“You are an absolutely horrible person, Carly. I never liked you, and I'm so grateful you finally showed your true colors, because my son deserves better than you. Now get off the

property before I have security personally escort you away like the trash that you are.”

I never knew Mom had such strong feelings for Carly, nor had I ever heard her speak to someone like that. I stared in shock. Carly backed away, still crying, but she knew my mom was serious. I shut the door and turned around to lean against it, when I noticed that Mom and Jackson weren't the only witnesses to what had happened.

Everyone was there.

All eyes were on me.

They all had pitiful looks on their faces.

I fucking hated pity.

I pushed myself away from the door and hurried out of the room, down the hallway and through the maze of halls leading toward the library. I just wanted to be alone. Footsteps behind me told me I might not get my wish.

I swung around on my heels, ready to go off on whoever decided to follow me, coming face-to-face with Harper. Any desire to yell at her left my body as soon as I saw the look on her face.

It wasn't pity.

It was empathy.

Because she knew exactly what it felt like to be betrayed by someone you loved.

“Nathan, I'm so sorry.”

I held up a hand. “Don't. Please, don't feel sorry for me.”

“Alright,” she said, speaking slowly and carefully. She took my hands into hers. “I just want to tell you that you did the right thing. Your mom is right—Carly is horrible and you deserve so much better.”

Before I could even think about what I was going to say, the words just slipped out.

“Someone like you?”

Harper's eyes went wide, and she started to speak, but we were interrupted by more footsteps coming down the hallway. She let go of my hands as Kat rounded the corner.

"There you are," she said, her voice softer than usual. "I was worried about you. What a fucking bitch."

"Right?" Harper agreed with her best friend.

"The nerve of that woman to show up on Christmas like that. I only caught the end and Mom was telling her off already or I would have given her a piece of my mind, too. I wanted to punch her in her ugly Botoxed face."

I had to laugh at that last bit. I had noticed that Carly had gotten some work done, and it wasn't for the better. She wasn't the same woman I remembered, not in any regard.

Kat seemed pleased that I was laughing.

My gaze fell on Harper, and we shared a smile. She didn't answer my question, but she also didn't seem turned off by my proposition, either.

Which I had to admit, gave me a little bit of hope.

“**B**reakfast time!” Rose Bishop called from down the hall. “Don’t let that wench ruin our Christmas morning!”

Nathan chuckled. “I’ve never heard Mom use such colorful language.”

“Right? I was cheering her on,” Kat said with a laugh. She looped arms with Nathan and me and the three of us headed back to the dining room.

The smell of fresh cinnamon rolls was a weakness of mine, and my mouth began watering as soon as we were nearby.

“So we usually eat a quick breakfast, then open presents, and proceed to snack all morning as we play with our new toys,” Kat explained to me.

“That sounds amazing.” So much better than what I was used to on Christmas growing up. If my parents even remembered it was Christmas, we might have had some ham sandwiches, but as I grew older, I became the one in charge of most of the cooking. I usually just made pancakes. Gifts became more of a rarity as the years went on and my parents’ addictions got worse.

I pushed back all those memories though and was grateful I could celebrate with my best friend and her family. Nathan seemed more relaxed and feeling better. When we got to the dining room, he went and sat with his brothers, and I sat with Kat who was already reaching for the tower of cinnamon rolls.

Rose sat at the head of the table with a waffle, smiling as her kids and I helped ourselves to breakfast. Everyone appeared to be in good spirits; even Aiden and Jackson were talking, kind of. Jackson looked tired though, with dark circles under his eyes and a five o'clock shadow on his normally clean-shaven face. I wondered what time he got in the night before, or was it this morning?

I bit into the cinnamon roll and closed my eyes, letting the flavors wash over my tongue. "Holy cow, this is amazing."

"Isn't it?"

"How can one person cook so many things this well?" I asked.

"Marie is a superhero," Kat said. "I wish she'd take Mom's offer of a full-time job back home."

"I can see why."

"I think I might travel back here just for the food." Kat patted her belly and reached for a second cinnamon roll before saying, "Gift time?"

"Sure, let's move this into the living room," Rose said as she fixed herself an espresso.

I grabbed some orange juice and another cinnamon roll and we moved into the other room. The presents had been set out overnight, just as if Santa had come and delivered them. The room felt magical with the glistening tree and mountain of presents in front of picture windows with gorgeous snowy mountain views.

It was the type of Christmas that I had dreamt of as a little girl. I felt giddy, like a child, and Kat seemed to be feeling equally as silly as her and Aiden raced for the chair closest to the tree.

I stood back from the group, not wanting to intrude on their family time, but Rose patted the seat next to her on the couch. "Join us, Harper."

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I glanced at it. Frowning, I read the name, "Tony."

Merry Christmas, beautiful. I miss you. I hope we can talk about what happened when you cool down a bit.

It was like ice formed around my heart. I couldn't breathe for a second, and I was transported back to New York, to Tony's office, with the blonde on her knees in front of him...

"Harper?" Nathan asked, sitting on the other side of the spot saved for me. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," I said, turning my phone off and placing it on the table as I took my seat. If Nathan could be as confident as he was facing Carly, surely I could avoid a text from my ex. At least I wasn't staring him in the eyes.

Nate offered a sympathetic look, as if he knew and maybe he did. I so badly wanted to take his hand in mine and to seek comfort from him, but I knew I needed to play it cool.

Rose stood up and went to the tree, grabbing a package wrapped in gold and red. "This is for Harper."

"Me? Really? Seriously, you didn't have to get me anything."

"But I did. I loved shopping for you, Harper," Rose said, handing me the gift adorned with a beautiful handmade bow. I held onto it until everyone had a gift, and one-by-one, we opened them.

Kat got some new AirPods, Aiden some tech gadget that I had no idea about. Jackson got a new tie which was apparently very expensive and something he had requested, while Nathan got a new Rolex.

"Your turn!" Kat called out, pointing to my gift.

I didn't tear into the gift; the wrapping was too pretty for that. I gently slipped off the bow and removed the paper, revealing a non-descript box.

Once I opened it up, I pulled out a pink cardigan that was the softest thing I had ever touched.

"It's cashmere," Rose said with a satisfied smile. "I hoped that pink was still your favorite color."

“It is,” I said, surprised that she had remembered that all these years.

“And I hope it fits, but if not, there’s a gift receipt in there.”

I slipped it on and it fit like a glove. It was the coziest sweater I had ever worn. I had never had anything cashmere; it felt luxurious and decadent against my skin.

“I love it. This is the nicest sweater I’ve ever had.”

“You deserve it, sweetheart,” Rose said, getting back up and handing out more gifts. I got another. In fact, I got several more and I couldn’t believe that even the triplets bought me something.

“How did you guys manage to do all this shopping? The decision to come here was so last minute.” I couldn’t stop smiling. I was feeling spoiled for the first time in my life. I felt so bad for not getting them anything, but they insisted they understood.

“Well, I had already picked up your gift, I just planned to give it to you at another time,” Kat said. I knew she meant at my wedding.

Kat had picked up tickets for a Broadway show for her and me when we got back into town. Good seats, too. I had never seen a Broadway show, and the idea of spending a night on the town with my best friend made me dread going back to New York a little less.

Jackson had bought me a gift card to a spa in New York City. He apologized for it being less personal, but it was last minute. “I love it. I need to relax more when I get back.”

“I thought that might be the case,” he said with a smile and a lingering look.

Nathan bought me books, which showed that he knew me well. “These are some of my favorites,” he said. “And I wanted to share them with you.”

“Thank you,” I replied, having to fight the urge to kiss him. I gave him a soft peck on the cheek and prayed it looked

innocent enough. I was just so grateful for the thoughtfulness.

Aiden handed me his gift last, a small package delicately wrapped in dark blue paper with little snowflakes on it. I opened it and found a pearl necklace with matching earrings and bracelet.

“I remember, once upon a time, you complimented my mom on her pearl necklace,” Aiden said. “You had mentioned you always wanted one.”

“How did you remember that?” My hands shook as tears of joy filled my eyes. “I was what, fourteen?”

“Something like that,” he muttered. “I hope you still like them.”

“Of course! I’ve always wanted pearls but could never afford them. They’re beautiful,” I said.

Aiden stepped over and helped me put them on.

“Every Southern woman needs a string of pearls,” Rose said, patting my hand.

“Thank you, everyone. I mean it.” I started crying from the emotions of it all. Rose hugged me warmly, and for the first time I felt like I belonged somewhere, that people actually cared about me.

I wanted to be part of this family so badly, and there I was. We took turns hugging and thanking each other for the gifts, and I honestly forgot all about Tony’s message. But when I glanced down at my phone, it came back to me.

I had to deal with him at some point.

I needed to make it clear that we were never getting back together, and that what he did was not okay.

I was feeling better than I had in months, and I knew it was the perfect time to do that. I picked up my phone and excused myself, stepping out into the hallway and away from the sounds of laughter in the living room.

I turned on my phone and more messages popped up as it came on. All from Tony. Several missed calls too, along with

some voicemails. I ignored all of it and hit his number to return his call.

When he answered, his words were slurred. What was it about alcohol that brought people crawling back?

“Harper, love—”

“No, Tony, I’m not your love. I’m just calling to tell you that you need to stop this. You need to get over me, and I don’t care if you miss me. You should have thought about that before sticking your cock into anything that moved. I don’t want to talk to you ever again.”

I hung up before he could argue with me. There was no point in listening to any of his nonsense or excuses. I wasn’t going to do that to myself.

I let out a sigh of relief hearing my phone buzz a second later. I quickly ignored the call and went into my settings, blocking Tony’s number.

I knew that once I got back to New York, I would have to figure out what this all meant for my academic career. What was Tony telling everyone at the university? How would things play out seeing as we worked so closely together? I didn’t have the answers, but I didn’t dwell too much on it.

I wasn’t going to let him ruin the rest of my holiday. I wiped away the tears and noticed Jackson further down the hallway. Had he heard my call?

My question was answered a second later. “I’m proud of you, Harper.”

JACKSON

Harper looked like a deer caught in the headlights. Her eyes wide, her mouth open as if she wanted to respond, but no sound would come out.

“Sorry, I only heard the tail end of the conversation,” I said. Lifting my glass I added, “I was just getting a refill. You want something?”

“Sure,” she said with a sweet smile.

Truth be told, I had been wanting to get Harper alone for some time. I wanted to talk to her.

I poured us both some orange juice before turning to the bar and adding a little vodka to mine. I needed the courage.

“So, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” I took a seat in a chair near the window and patted the spot next to me. She joined me.

“Yes?”

I took a big swig of my drink.

“You and me. Where do you see this heading?”

“Excuse me?” she chuckled nervously. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“Well... I see the way you keep checking me out, and I can’t help but do the same to you. But it goes deeper than that, Harper. I like you, a lot.”

“I like you a lot too, Jackson, but I thought it was clear that nothing serious could happen between us.”

“Why not?” I took another swig of my drink.

“For one thing, I’ve been with your brothers too. I like all of you pretty equally, and that seems like a recipe for drama.”

I shrugged. “They’ll be fine.”

“Will they though?” She raised an eyebrow at me, and I had to admit, she might have some reason to be concerned, but I had no doubt we could figure it out as we went along. She quickly added, “Besides, you hardly know me, Jackson.”

“I’ve known you since you were a little girl, Harper.”

“I’m not that girl anymore.”

“I realize that, and it’s one reason I’m absolutely crazy about you. You’re confident, strong-willed, ambitious, smart... I could go on and on, but I think you get the point. I’m really impressed with the woman you’ve grown into.”

“Thank you,” she said, her cheeks flushing. “And I’m impressed with the man you’ve grown into as well, but truth be told, you really don’t know me as well as you think.”

“Nonsense. You’re amazing.” I finished my drink. I noticed Harper looking at my glass with concern etched on her face, so I didn’t hurry to refill it.

“Again, you don’t really know me, Jackson.”

“I know enough.”

She opened her mouth to say something but then clamped her lips shut and stared down at her orange juice.

“What?”

“It’s just...” she stammered. “Well, after what happened with your dad—”

“My dad?”

“Yeah, I mean, after all the drama and the scandal and what it did to your family, I...”

I stood up and walked over to the bar, refilling my glass. The mere mention of my father caused me to clench my jaw and tense up all over. I needed something to take the edge off.

“Jackson, I’m worried about you. Your drinking—”

“My drinking isn’t an issue.” My voice came out louder than intended and I slammed my glass down on the table a bit too hard, shattering it. Orange juice splashed everywhere. Harper hopped up and grabbed some napkins, rushing over to me and placing them on the cuts on my hand but I held her back. “Leave it. Just... leave me alone.”

“I’m sorry.” Harper slipped from the room, and I was grateful to be alone. I held the napkins to my bleeding hand. It wasn’t too bad, I’d live.

“Marie, can I get some help here, please?” I called out, hating that I had to ask for help, but orange juice was now spilling out onto the floor.

I bent down with some more napkins to clean up the mess at my feet. I heard footsteps, which I assumed to be Marie or some of her staff. “Can you get some rags, please?”

I stood up and found myself staring at Aiden from across the table. He had an empty glass and was likely coming for a refill but when he saw me, he turned on his heels and headed for the door without a word.

“Hey, wait, I wanted to talk to you!” I called out, rushing around the large table. He stopped and turned to face me. Suddenly, I forgot what I was going to say; my words came out slurred and I cursed how much I had to drink. “I know we both said some hurtful things, I, uh...”

“We both said hurtful things?” Aiden scoffed, crossing his arms in front of him and shaking his head. “I’m just trying to help you get over what happened with Dad, man, and you continue to insult me at every turn.”

“I’m not the only one who has said hurtful things, Aiden, but I agree—”

“I thought you were going to apologize,” he said, turning and shaking his head again.

“I am.”

“An apology where you tell me everything *I’ve* done wrong isn’t much of an apology, Jackson.”

“I think we both owe each other an apology honestly.”

“Maybe so, but not until you’re sober, man. You need help.”

He disappeared into the hallway, and I was once again left alone. Rage coursed through my veins. Why did I fuck up everything?

Just like Dad, I thought to myself. Aiden had said those words to me countless times. Maybe he was right.

Maybe I was destined to be a fuck up like our father.

As I stared at the mess all over the dining room table, it only cemented my feelings. I grabbed the bottle of vodka and decided that was enough Christmas cheer for me.

I couldn’t deal with my family sober.

New article on the South Carolina Chronicle with your search terms popped up on my phone.

My search terms were my name. Any time a new article or mention of my name popped up, I'd get a Google text alert. It had been a few days since I'd last received one so I thought maybe the journalists had taken a break over the holidays, but someone was burning the midnight oil on Christmas Eve apparently.

I sighed and pulled up the article.

Aiden Bishop: Like Father, Like Son, New Information Released.

The media was so quick to believe my guilt because of my father. They assumed I was just like him and that I idealized my dad, following in his footsteps. Nothing could be further from the truth. I had done my best to separate my life from him, to be nothing like him.

The "proof" was some text messages to the congressman's wife. They weren't from me; I knew that right away. I never messaged her, not once. They weren't even written in my style. Clearly, she was carrying on an affair with someone, but that person wasn't me.

I had no interest in his wife.

I had tried to stay quiet, because no matter what I said, the media would spin it and make me look bad. I was hoping the suit would clear my name and once all the facts were

presented to a judge and it was ruled to be slander, I would be free and clear of all this. Jackson had agreed to help me, but considering we weren't on speaking terms and he couldn't even stay sober long enough to open Christmas presents, I wasn't going to count on his help.

I had to take care of this myself.

I had no new work, and all my clients were dropping like flies due to the accusations. I was an easy target, of course, because of my dad. But this guy needed to realize someone else was fucking his wife and stealing from him and it wasn't me.

I was *not* my dad.

Every article that was published and every mention of my name ruined my career and reputation even more. Would I ever recover from this, or would this be another case of me failing at what I wanted to do?

Maybe Dad was right, I was a fuck up. Jackson and Nathan knew exactly what they wanted to do, and they managed to make a life for themselves with established careers. All I wanted was the same.

I looked at my family.

Jackson was completely wasted, his eyes glazed over. There was no talking to him, not until he sobered up. And lately if he managed to be sober for more than five minutes that was an achievement. He at least had his bottle to keep him company.

Nathan was talking to Harper, both of them with serious looks on their faces. They were deep in conversation, they seemed to be dealing with their own shit, and at least they had each other.

Mom had slipped away to take a nap, or so she said. I thought she might be seeing Charles. If so, good for her. She deserved to be happy.

Then there was Kat who was staring at her phone with a big, cheeky grin on her face. She was in such good spirits, and it was nice to see. She rarely smiled when around the family.

I plopped down on the couch beside her.

“Who has you all smiles today, sis?”

Kat looked up at me and hid the screen of her phone away.
“No one.”

“Uh-huh, sure. I know you have yourself a little boyfriend here.”

Right away, I knew I had said the wrong thing. Kat tensed up and the smile immediately fell off her face. “What? How do you know about... never mind, Aiden. It’s really none of your business who is making me smile.”

She stood up and I got up and went after her.

“Kat, I’m sorry. I was just teasing—”

“Yeah, just like you always are, how you’ve always made fun of me while we were growing up for having crushes, making me feel like shit for them,” she spat. She flipped me off and headed up the stairs.

I stayed at the bottom, staring up at her. I never meant to make her feel like shit for anything. I was always teasing. But was I like Jackson, did I take it too far sometimes? Maybe so.

When will I realize that I’m never going to fit in here amongst my family? I silently questioned.

I glanced back in the living room and Harper was smiling now. The way she looked at Nathan made me wonder if there were real feelings there. I wasn’t jealous, not really. I saw the way she looked at me and I knew that she liked me, too. But maybe I didn’t deserve someone like her, not until I got my life together.

Because God knows, I would only fuck up things with her too.

Enough Christmas for me, I thought. I knew we still had dinner to get through later that evening, but after that I was done, I was free.

I could leave.

“**W**hat is it about Christmas that brings the exes crawling out of the woodwork?” Harper sighed. She had told me about Tony messaging her out of the blue.

I pondered the question for a moment. “I think it’s because they’re lonely.”

“Tony has his choice of grad students to keep him company, he’s hardly lonely,” Harper said with a laugh.

“I don’t know if it’s about whether they’re alone or not,” I began. “Christmas is a family holiday, and in a way, both of them lost a part of their family as in me and you. I think it’s easy to feel a bit sentimental about the part you lost when surrounded by family members and their significant others. Maybe there’s a part of them that knows they messed up, but it’s purely selfish. They crave that connection and they are trying to get it back, but their efforts are purely in vain.”

Harper studied me for a long time before saying, “I think you’re right. I mean, I met Tony’s family and they are something else. They seemed to judge me from the moment I walked in the door. I should have taken that as a huge red flag.”

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty, as they say. It’s easy to see the warning signs now, since you know how it played out. But they’re easy to miss when you’re in the middle of it all. We see things through different lenses once we are out of the situation.”

“You’re absolutely right,” she said with a long, drawn-out sigh.

“It makes me think about how we treated you,” I added.

She looked at me with a scrunched up look on her face. “How so?”

“Well, at the time, we all thought it was fun and games, nothing too serious. We picked on Kat, and you were around, so we picked on you too. We were essentially modeling our father’s behavior, but we didn’t realize it at the time. Now that we’ve grown up and you’ve told us how much it hurt you, we realize that our dad played a bigger role in our development than we would have liked.”

Harper took my hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. “You were stupid kids. I realize that now, and I forgive you, especially considering the amazing men you’ve grown into.”

“Thank you,” I said. “And honestly, I should have seen the red flags with Carly. I had no idea what a terrible person she truly is. I didn’t realize she was tormenting you like that, I swear. Had I known the full extent of it all—”

Harper put her fingers to my lips. “I know, Nate. I didn’t at the time, but I realize you knew nothing of what she was doing, and I forgive you.”

It felt good to know that she forgave me, that she believed me. I knew I wasn’t owed any of that.

“Merry Fucking Christmas!” Jackson literally fell into the room, like the Kool-Aid man bursting through the wall. He had a bottle of vodka in one hand, which concerned me, but he seemed to be in good spirits. “Who wants to sing Christmas songs?”

Aiden got up to leave, but Jackson put his arm over his shoulder and pulled him back into the room. “Come on, Aiden. Let’s sing Christmas songs like we did when we were kids. Where’s Mom?”

He looked around the room, and for a second, I thought he might flip out, knowing that Mom was likely seeing Charles.

“Oh, she’s doing her thing, I guess,” he said, shrugging it off easier than expected. He took a long swig of the bottle before belting out, “Rudolph the red nosed reindeer... wait, how does it start again?”

Harper chimed in. “You know Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen,

Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen...”

I joined in, “But do you recall the most famous reindeer of all?”

“Yes! That’s it!” Jackson came bounding toward us, stumbling on his way and nearly falling into Harper’s lap. “Sorry, where were we? Aiden, where are you going?”

Aiden had tried to leave again, but he stopped in the doorway.

Harper continued the song with a laugh. “Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, had a very shiny nose...”

Jackson joined in, and pretty soon all three of us were belting out the lyrics at the top of our lungs. I’m sure the staff thought we’d lost our damned minds, but we were laughing, together, as a family. Even Aiden joined in before long, he couldn’t resist. Harper encouraged him, getting up and pulling him onto the couch as we finished the song.

“Up on the housetop, click, click, click...” Jackson started singing as the other song ended.

“I don’t know all the lyrics to that one,” Harper laughed. “What about Frosty the Snowman?”

Jackson started singing, “Frosty the snowman had a very shiny nose—”

“No, no,” Harper laughed, her cheeks flushed with color as she laughed until tears filled her eyes. “That’s not how it goes, Jackson. You’re mixing up the songs.”

“Am I? How does it go then?” He looked up at Harper with puppy dog eyes. Jackson was smitten with her. Not that I blamed him, I was pretty sure all of us had developed feelings for her.

“Frosty the snowman was a jolly, happy soul.” Harper’s voice was smooth as silk. She might not have been perfectly on key, but her voice was lovely just the same.

For a moment, we all just stared at her, listening to her sing the song. She stopped. “Well? Aren’t you guys going to join me?”

“You just have a beautiful voice,” Jackson slurred, slipping from the couch down to the floor, his head thrown back to look up at Harper.

But it was Aiden who joined in with her, and I sang along too. Jackson slurred the words, often getting the lyrics all wrong and making Harper laugh.

I had to admit, it was a lot of fun, but seeing my brother like that worried me. He was a fun drunk, for now, but I knew that things could turn ugly at any moment.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a moment?” Aiden asked.

Jackson was passed out on the floor. It was just Aiden, Nathan and me. I looked over at Nate, not wanting him to feel left out.

“Go on, it’s fine,” Nathan said.

Jackson wasn’t going to argue, thankfully, so I left the room with Aiden and walked down the hallway to a private office. As soon as the door was closed behind us, Aiden burst out, “I’m leaving first thing tomorrow.”

“Wait, why? I thought we were all staying until New Years?”

Aiden licked his lips and shoved his hands in his pockets, unable to meet my gaze. “I don’t think I’ll be missed, honestly. I promised Mom I’d be here for Christmas, that’s all that’s important.”

“Aiden,” I said as I closed the distance between us. It was clear something was bothering him. He wouldn’t even look at me. “What’s going on?”

“I have to deal with this scandal, and it seems no one cares about that. No one wants to help me. Jackson offered, but he only cares about trying to prove Dad’s innocence when it’s very clear he’s guilty. I have to worry about myself and make sure my life isn’t ruined.”

“I’m sure Jackson cares—”

“He doesn’t even believe the images were real,” Aiden scoffed. “I haven’t told anyone yet, but I might have a lead about who leaked the photos, and once I have that info and can prove they’re real, maybe Jackson will pull his head out of his ass.”

“What do you mean, you might have a lead?” My heart raced and suddenly it was me who couldn’t look Aiden in the eyes.

“I’ve tracked down the reporter who posted the initial photos. He’s willing to talk to me in exchange for some information on my case, some things to incriminate the congressman who’s trying to make me look bad. He’s hungry for that info, so I think we can strike a deal.”

My mouth felt parched, and it was as if a huge weight was suddenly on my chest. I couldn’t breathe. I felt dizzy and sat down in a nearby chair, placing my head in my hands.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just all the sweets today, I think. I need some real food.”

“I understand. Marie usually puts out charcuterie around this time, before dinner. We can grab something—”

“In a minute, I just need a minute.”

“Take your time...” Aiden knelt down so we were closer to the same level and lifted my face to look me in the eye. “Please don’t think this will be the end of things between us, unless you want it to be, of course. I can easily travel to New York City to see you.”

“I appreciate that, Aiden,” I said softly then quickly went back to the previous subject. “So, about the leaked photos... what if they were leaked, say, on accident?”

Aiden offered me a strange look. “On accident? I don’t see how that’s even possible. No, whoever leaked those photos was doing so to be petty and to break up our family. And while I’m glad the truth eventually came out, whoever did this is not a good person, Harper. Nothing you say can convince me it

was in our best interest or an accident or whatever. They had their own selfish motivations, no doubt about it.”

It felt like all the color had left my cheeks.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Let’s get you something to eat.”

“I’m fine,” I snapped without intending to. “Sorry, I’m not upset with you, it’s just – a lot right now.”

“I know, Harper, and I’m sorry. But remember, I’m just a phone call away.”

He stroked my cheek and leaned in for a kiss, but I wasn’t sure I could kiss him knowing that at any time, those photos could be traced back to me somehow. Just thinking about it made me sick to my stomach.

But once I saw the hurt in his eyes, I knew I couldn’t let him leave on that note. I placed his head in my hands and kissed him as if it were the last time I would ever kiss him again. For all I knew, it was. He may never forgive me once the truth came out.

I should have said something then, but I wanted to enjoy the limited time I had with him since he was leaving the next day.

* * *

AIDEN LED me from the office and down into the dining room, where there was a spread of meats, cheeses and breads, just as he had mentioned. Kat had come back at some point and was smiling as she munched on the food, never taking her eye off the phone. She seemed to be smitten with Jean-Luc, and I was happy for her.

Rose came in and pretended to yawn, even though we all knew she hadn’t been napping. She had gone to spend some time with Charles and tried to sneak back in, but she wasn’t fooling anybody. None of us said anything about it though, as to avoid upsetting Jackson.

Speaking of which, he was the only one missing. Nate even came in and grabbed some cheese as he sat at the table across from Kat.

“Is Jackson still passed out?” I asked.

“Yep. I tried nudging him awake but he told me to go away,” Nate said with a shrug.

Rose’s smile wavered, and I knew it would mean a lot to her to have all her kids there. I excused myself and said, “I’ll give it a try. He needs to eat.”

As I entered the living room, Jackson was where I had left him in the middle of the floor, in front of the Christmas tree, his arms and legs spread out. He had unzipped his pajamas as if he’d gotten too warm, showing off that perfect chest of his.

I sat down on the floor next to him and stroked his arm. “Jackson, it’s almost time for dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” he muttered.

“It would mean a lot to your mom,” I said softly. “And honestly, you need to get some food in your stomach.”

He opened his eyes but then scrunched them close, as if the room was too bright.

“Do you want me there, Harper?”

His words took me by surprise, but I answered honestly. “Of course.”

“Do you really? After all the horrible shit we’d done to you growing up?”

“Jackson, I forgive you. We were kids, and you’ve grown up a lot. You’re a much better person now.”

A smile pulled at his lips. “That means a lot, Harper,” he said, as he tried to push himself up from the floor. I placed a hand on his back to steady him, fearing he might be dizzy.

“You don’t even drink, and here you are taking care of my drunk ass,” he muttered.

I had lots of experience thanks to my parents, but I didn't tell him that. He clearly didn't need any more guilt.

I helped him to his feet, and once he was standing, I helped zip up his pajamas so he didn't go into dinner with an exposed chest. Seeing the massive man who used to bully me relentlessly, wearing reindeer pajamas was all too cute, I had to admit.

"I look fucking silly," he said, realizing that I was looking at his attire. He followed up the scowl with a half grin. "But it makes Mom happy. It's just one day of looking ridiculous."

"That's the spirit, and I know it means a lot to her."

Jackson's eyes were glazed over; he was clearly wasted beyond belief still. I helped him into the dining room and to his seat, praying for the cheerful spirit from earlier.

The scent of baked ham filled the room and made me drool. I had told Aiden that I was hungry earlier, and it hadn't been a total lie. Judging by the amazing smells, I knew it would likely be the best Christmas meal of my life.

As I glanced around the table, everyone was smiling and laughing. Even Jackson.

The room was filled with warmth and laughter and love, and I felt like I was one of them, that I was part of their family.

That I belonged.

I realized in that moment that I never wanted to go back to New York, but it wasn't like I had much of a choice.

JACKSON

Dinner was a blur. I tried to slow down with the alcohol but ended up having some wine with dinner and the rest of the night was just... gone.

When my alarm went off, I was surprised to wake up in my own bed. I put together the pieces, just images here and there, and had a feeling that Harper and Nate had a hand in getting me to my room. There was a trash can next to the bed, but it was clean. I didn't get sick, so that was good. A goddamn miracle too.

But as I sat up, my head began spinning. I waited until the dizziness passed before stumbling into the shower. I let the hot water rush over my body, and I hoped it would help clear my mind.

What had happened the night before?

Parts of it came flooding back. The parts before I started drinking heavily. The call with Dad, mostly. I hadn't told anyone about it, or how I had been wrong about him not having cheated on Mom. It made sense now that he really had replaced us.

I had to make an apology tour, starting with Mom and Aiden. Good thing we had a few more days together.

As I checked the time I realized how much my head was killing me, and I wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed, but I knew I needed to be there for breakfast. I needed to make it up to Mom.

All these years, I had been on Dad's side and now I saw him in an entirely new light. I still didn't want to believe it, not fully, but I knew that he had moved on and it was only right for me to apologize to my mom for making her life difficult since the news broke of his affairs.

I went downstairs and found Kat and Harper were the only ones there, which surprised me. Kat wasn't much of a morning person, but she and Harper were chatting happily about some guy Kat was seeing. She hushed her voice when I stepped in.

"Don't let me keep you ladies from gossiping about boys," I teased as I walked over to the drinks and poured an orange juice. I took a sip and realized it was missing something.

Kat rolled her eyes, but their conversation ended, nonetheless.

My gaze fell on the champagne. Mimosas were often a day-after-Christmas tradition, so I poured myself one.

"Don't you think it's a bit early to start drinking, Jackson?"

"Mimosas were meant to be drunk before noon," I said. "Besides, it's tradition."

"Dad's tradition, mostly."

"Mom too," I countered. "Not sure why I'm even arguing with you, as it's none of your business."

"When you're passed out on the floor on Christmas, it becomes my business."

"Whatever," I mumbled as I sat down and sipped my drink. "I don't plan to get that drunk again."

"Sure..." Kat rolled her eyes.

"You know what? Fuck this, I don't need this today," I said. I grabbed the bottle of champagne and headed for the door. "I just wanted to talk to Aiden, but I'll go to his room."

Harper's voice piped up. "He already left."

I stopped short in the doorway. "Left? As in, he went skiing already?"

“No, he left. He said he had business to take care of back home. He left a note for your mom.”

Aiden fucking left before I could apologize to him. The hand holding the champagne began to shake and I put it down. Running a hand through my hair, I realized what I had to do.

“I have to leave too then.”

“What?” Kat exclaimed. “Why?”

“Not that you’ll miss me,” I muttered. “And not like it’s any of your business either, but I promised to help him, and I failed. I need to hold up my end of the bargain.”

I turned on my heels and headed up the stairs. I heard footsteps behind me, and I was afraid I might turn around and have to fight with Kat, but as I turned, I saw Harper standing there instead.

“Jackson, I’m sorry. I didn’t know if I should try to stop him or what. He said it was important to clear his name.”

“I’m not upset at you,” I said. “I’m mad at myself for not manning up sooner and apologizing to him and doing what I promised to do. What time did he leave?”

“Before Kat and I came downstairs. He stopped by to tell us he was on his way out,” she said. “Maybe about an hour ago?”

“Did he say where he was going?”

“He said he had a plane to catch in Paris.”

“Paris, perfect. Hopefully I can catch up to him.”

Harper put a hand on my arm and stopped me.

“He was really hurt, he thought you didn’t care. He told me he’s been trying to find out who was behind the photo leak, to help you. He really cares about you, Jackson, even if you two have your differences.”

“I know, and I care about him too, even though I can be an asshole sometimes.”

I hadn't told anyone about the conversation with Dad, but I needed to get it out. I couldn't tell anyone else yet, as it would hurt my brothers as much as it did me. Even Aiden, who liked to pretend he didn't care that Dad didn't love him. I could still see it upsetting him that our dad seemed to care more about his step kids than he did us.

But Harper... I knew I could tell her about it.

So, I let it all out.

"I called Dad yesterday to wish him a Merry Christmas, and I realize now Aiden and Nate were right all along. I was just too blind to see it."

"I'm sorry that happened," Harper said, stroking my arm. "I know it's hard to believe, I know you were very close to him."

"I was, but I realize now that I really meant nothing to him."

"I'm sure your dad loves you, just in his own way. It doesn't excuse the way he's treated you over the years though, and you have every right to be angry."

"I do, but I took that anger out on the wrong people for years. Now it's time to make it right."

"You know that you will see him again in a few days, you don't have to leave right now."

"Are you asking me to stay?" I felt a smile pulling at my lips.

Her cheeks flushed. "There's a big part of me that will be sad if you leave, yes. But I also understand you have to do what you think is right."

"I need to do this, Harper. I need to get to work on his case and help clear his name. It's the least I can do after everything I've done to him over the years. But I can promise you, this won't be the last time we see each other."

I wanted to tell her how I felt, tell her that I saw a future between us, but I knew it would be rushing things. I was crazy

to feel the way I did about her, and maybe we both needed to sort out those feelings, but this wasn't goodbye. It couldn't be.

"I hope not. Please don't be a stranger," she said.

She leaned in, standing on her tiptoes, and even though we were in a hallway where anyone could see, I had to kiss her. I couldn't resist. I cupped her face in my hands and pressed my lips to hers.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and I wanted nothing more than to stay there with her, but I knew that I had to make things right with my brother. Sitting around, drinking myself to oblivion for a few more days, wouldn't help anyone.

"New York is only a short flight away," I told her.

I knew we had all agreed that this thing between us would end once the vacation did, but staring into her eyes, I had my doubts. How could we just walk away after all that happened?

How could I walk away from such an amazing woman?

NATHAN

Coming down the stairs, the last thing I expected to see was Jackson standing in the entry with his luggage at his side. Harper was with him.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Aiden left, and I have to go after him to apologize and make things right,” Jackson said, another surprise I wasn’t expecting that early in the morning.

Jackson looked rough—his hair was still messy, he had dark circles under his eyes and a bit of a green tint to his skin. Likely hungover, if not drunk again already.

“I’m going with you,” I said.

“What? No, you don’t need to. I’m planning to catch Aiden at the train station since the train to Paris hasn’t left yet, and then we’re going to go back and clear his name together. You don’t have to join us for that.”

“I want to though. You’re my brothers, and I want to.” Plus, Jackson wasn’t looking too good and I was worried he might need my help getting to Paris in the first place.

The chauffeur stepped inside and grabbed Jackson’s bags as we debated whether or not I was going.

“I need to hurry,” Jackson countered.

“I can be quick. I never fully unpacked anyway. I live out of suitcases, I just have to grab them.”

Jackson frowned, but looked over at Harper who said, “Let him go with you. The three of you need to work on your relationship together, and he might be a good peacekeeper if things get ugly.”

Exactly my thoughts too. Jackson might have good intentions, but when you put them in the same room together, he sometimes said things he didn’t mean, or Aiden would take the wrong way and then suddenly World War III broke out.

“Fine, just make it quick. I have a train to catch.”

Before I turned and left, I cleared my throat. “Harper, can I have a moment, please?”

“Sure, I’ll help you,” she said, letting go of Jackson’s arm and following me up the stairs. We were quiet until I got to my room, but as soon as we were alone, I laid it all out on the table.

“Look, I know we said this would end as soon as the vacation ended, and you’re still healing from the fallout of your relationship, so I want to give you space, but...” I stammered as I tried to find the words. Harper stared up at me with tears welling in her beautiful eyes, but she didn’t say anything. She didn’t try to stop me. “...But I feel like the universe put us together again for this very reason. We’ve both been betrayed, and I understand the complex feelings you’re dealing with, I really do. I’m going to be honest with you though—I see a future with you beyond this chateau. I think we could be good together.”

She started to open her mouth to speak, but I placed my fingertips against her lips. “Let me finish, please.”

She nodded and relented. “I want to give you space to figure things out on your own. There’s no pressure for us to be anything more than what we are, but I have a feeling that you’ll be in my life one way or another, and I want to let you know I welcome that. I want that.”

“Nate, I— I don’t know what to say except I want that too. I just don’t know how it’ll work out considering how, well, complicated it is.”

“I know. I just couldn’t leave here without letting my feelings be known.” I cupped her face in my hands and stared at her beauty, not wanting to ever look away but I knew I had to. I had to give her space, and I had to be there for my family. She leaned in and I took that as a sign that she wanted a kiss. I pressed my lips against hers and felt her warm tears on my cheeks.

God, I should just tell Jackson I’m staying here...

No, I need to make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.

I knew the more I lingered, the harder it might be for Harper. She needed to think, she needed to heal, before she could commit to another relationship. I feared if I stayed there much longer, there would be pressure, and that was the last thing I wanted.

If she wanted to be with me, we’d find a way to make it happen. I had to believe that if it was meant to be, our lives would once again come together. Besides, she was Kat’s best friend, it was likely we’d see each other again, though hopefully it wouldn’t be years between visits. I visited New York often for my charitable work, so I could make time for her... I *would* make time for her.

When we pulled away to catch our breath, she smiled up at me. “I’m really going to miss you, Nate. But I know this isn’t goodbye.”

“I know that too.”

I stared at her for a few moments longer, but I knew Jackson was in a hurry and we had a train to catch.

“Please tell my mom that I’m sorry for leaving so early, but I have a feeling she will relish some time alone with Charles, away from the drama for a bit.”

“I think so too,” Harper said. “Pretty sure she’s talking with him now, and that’s why she hasn’t come down for breakfast yet.”

“Good, I hope she is, she deserves to be happy. As do you, Harper. Please don’t forget that as you deal with everything after the holidays.”

I finished packing as Harper went to tell Jackson I was on my way. Watching her leave the room hurt, but I knew I was doing the right thing. I grabbed my luggage and took one last look at the room where I had spent many childhood holidays. I knew I would be back, but things would be different... as they always were. I'd be different. Hell, I was already different from when I arrived; this trip had changed me in only a matter of days.

I rushed down the stairs to find Jackson wasn't there.

"He's waiting in the car," Harper said.

"Thank you," I told her. I paused in the doorway before leaving, kissing her one last time. She held onto me for dear life as if she didn't want me to leave.

But seeing the way she looked at me, knowing how she kissed and touched me, I was feeling confident that wouldn't be the end for us.

I left and didn't dare look back; afraid I might change my mind as I climbed into the car with Jackson.

"About time, we're really cutting it close," he grumbled, not even opening his eyes as I sat beside him.

"We'll make it," I said. "And if we don't, we can catch him back home."

"He's not answering his calls, I wouldn't even know how to track him down in D.C. I doubt he's going back to South Carolina."

"You're right, I'm sorry. But we'll make it."

Jackson was quiet for a few moments before opening his eyes and looking at me.

"What did you two talk about?"

I knew he meant Harper and me. My jaw clenched and I wanted to tell him it was none of his business, but truth be told, it was. We were in this together, and if we didn't want this to cause problems for us, I knew we needed to communicate.

“I told her that this wasn’t goodbye, and I saw a future between us, but only when and if she was ready for it.”

“You see a future with her too?”

“I do. You do too?”

“Does that surprise you?” he asked.

I shrugged. “A little. I thought you were still into playing the field.”

“Nah, I’m sick of all that. I just hadn’t met anyone I really saw a future with, you know? I want someone smart, ambitious, kind...”

“Someone like Harper.”

“Right.”

We were both silent for a few moments, but I had to know.

“So what happens now?”

“With Harper?” Jackson asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, what happens now. What if she only chooses one of us? Hell, it could be Aiden for all we know, what would that mean for our family if that happened?”

Jackson seemed to ponder it, as if he hadn’t thought about it before. Knowing Jackson, he probably thought it was a given she would choose him.

“Well then, we have to respect that, don’t we? We made a promise to her that it wouldn’t cause problems for us, and while Aiden and I have a strained relationship, I intend to heal it. If she chooses him, I will accept it. But... well...” Jackson chuckled and ran a hand over his face.

“Well what?”

“Well, I see the way she looks at me.”

“I see the way she looks at me too, and the way she kisses me...”

“Who knew lips could be that soft?” Jackson sighed as if temporarily lost in a dream.

“They are,” I said with a smile, remembering fondly the way her skin felt in my hands, her lips against mine.

Jackson might be confident that she would pick him, but I think he underestimated the way she looked at me. And likely Aiden would say the same thing.

Of the three of us, Harper and I had a connection that was special, that I was sure of. We understood each other. She got me in ways no one else did. I wanted to believe that if it came down to it, she would choose me.

But then I had to ask, “What if she doesn’t choose?”

“What do you mean?” Jackson asked.

“What if, I dunno, we continued to share her? Would you be okay with that long term?”

Jackson mulled it over for a moment, but by that time we had pulled up to the train station. I never got his answer, but I knew my own answer would likely be complicated. Yet, I could see myself being okay with it at the same time.

Of course, it was all up to Harper.

Whatever she decided, we would have to respect.

I stood in the foyer of the chateau, alone and staring at the door after Nate and Jackson left. The house felt so empty. I knew their mother was with Charles. Kat was... somewhere. She told me she was going to hang out with Jean-Luc but she hadn't left yet as far as I could tell. Still, the place was so eerily quiet, and I felt a bit lonely at that moment.

Should I have tried to stop them? Starting with Aiden, of course. I would have loved to have spent more time with all three of them, which surprised me considering our past. A smile spread across my lips as I thought about our time together. My tummy was filled with butterflies as I remembered every second with them.

But they were gone now, and I likely wouldn't see them again for a while. I would have to go back to New York at some point. They'd go back to their lives. There was no way what we had could last forever, but I would have given anything for a few more days with them.

I heard footsteps behind me and found Kat coming down with a grin splashed across her face.

"Where are my brothers? Weren't Jackson and Nate here just a few minutes ago?"

I told her what I knew.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I guess it will be calmer here without their drama at least."

“So should I expect you back tonight?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

She laughed. “Maybe. Who knows? Jean-Luc’s schedule is so random sometimes.”

The way her eyes lit up when she said his name prompted me to ask, “Sooo... are you falling for him?”

“No, why would you even suggest such a thing?” she chuckled but averted her gaze to not look me in the eye. “It’s just a random hookup.”

“Mmm-hmm, I see the way you smile when you’re heading out to see him.”

“Because the sex is amazing,” she said. “Which, I know you’re saving yourself for true love and all that, but trust me, with me, it’s just about the sex.”

Crap. She still thought I was a virgin. It reminded me that I had to tell her what happened with her brothers eventually. I had waited until after Christmas, that was what Nate suggested and requested, right? I knew I would also have to stay with her until after New Year’s, but I wasn’t sure I could keep my secret from her that long.

“Um, well, about that...”

She shot me a strange look.

I decided to rip off the Band-Aid. It would be better that way.

“I slept with your brothers,” I blurted out. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breath, preparing for Kat to freak out.

Instead, she asked a simple question.

“Which one?”

I opened my eyes and found her wide-eyed, but not angry. She actually seemed... amused?

“What do you mean which one?” It took me a second to realize she had misheard me. “I slept with your brothers. As in... all three of them.”

Kat burst out laughing, doubling over as she slapped her hands against her thighs. When she stood up, I noticed tears in her eyes from laughing so hard. I didn't know what to make of her reaction, so I just waited for her to calm down enough to say something.

"You're hilarious, Harper. You had me there for a moment. I thought you might have actually slept with one of them."

"I'm not joking, Kat." I said. "I really did sleep with your brothers. A couple times, in fact. And sometimes all at once —"

She stopped me. "No way, I can't think of my brothers that way. Please don't continue." She was still smiling, but then her smile wavered as she studied my face. "You're serious though. For real?"

I nodded and clutched my hands in front of me, my nails digging into my palm as I waited for her to get mad at me.

"Holy shit, Harper. How? When? Why? Never mind, I don't want to know the details... Just, wow. I need to sit down."

She sat on the steps and just stared at me for a long time. I had no idea what to say, so I said the only thing I could think of. "I'm sorry, Kat. They insist that there's not going to be any drama between them. It was only a fling, nothing serious, and I promise not to cause any problems for your family."

"So are you going to like, date any of them? Or all of them? Or how does this work?"

"We agreed that once the vacation was over, so was whatever we were doing. So no, I don't plan to date any of them, and couldn't possibly choose as I feel that would just complicate things for everyone. So... we're just done, that's it."

Kat appeared to be thinking about what I had just told her. "And they aren't fighting because of this?"

"No, not at all, not that I'm aware of. They keep telling me it's fine."

“What about all that bullshit in the past with how they treated you?” she asked.

“They’ve all sincerely apologized to me. It was shocking, but they did and they meant it. Otherwise, there’s no way it would have happened.”

She shook her head and let out a sigh. “Well... I don’t want to think of my brothers in that way, but if it really was a casual fling and there aren’t any hurt feelings, then I don’t see a problem with it. I just fear that if you were to choose... well, it could cause some serious drama between them.”

“I know, and I don’t plan to do that.”

“Thank you,” she said. “We’re finally working toward being a family again, and I really want everyone to get along.”

“I know, and I want that too.” Tears welled in my eyes as I thought about how much damage I had done to her family already. I couldn’t do more. I wouldn’t. “I promise you, Kat. I will do everything in my power to make sure there is no drama.”

Kat hopped up from the steps and wrapped her arms around me. She hugged me tightly as I still felt guilt over what I had done years ago. I thought telling her about her brothers and I would alleviate those feelings, but her forgiving me for what we’d done only amplified it even more.

“I love you, Harper. You’re like a sister to me, and I just want you to be happy. If wild threesomes with my gross brothers is what does it for you... then I’m happy for you, but please, spare me the details.”

“I’m surprised you’re so... calm about this.” I said, wiping my eyes.

She shrugged. “I’m a modern woman. I’ve had my fair share of threesomes. Never with brothers, but, hey, I can see the appeal... just not with *my* brothers. Ewww...” She laughed as she shuddered at the thought.

“Thank you for understanding,” I said. “Actually, they all said you would.”

Her phone buzzed. “Hey, I’m sorry to have to do this, but he only had a couple hours to see me today before the restaurant opened.”

“And yet you say you’re not falling for him,” I teased.

“I’m not,” she said, but I knew my best friend well enough to know when she was lying.

“Have fun.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? You’re here alone...”

“I’ll be fine as long as I have that pool and a sauna. Have fun, see your lover while you can.”

“Thank you, Harper. You really are the best.”

I only wish I believed her.

JACKSON

We had gotten to the train station just as the train was ready to pull away. Nate and I hopped aboard the first-class section right as the doors were closing.

We had assigned seats, but I walked the aisles searching for Aiden. First the top level, knowing that he loved the views. My eyes scanned the rows until I saw his head. I recognized his haircut and knew it was him. There was an empty seat beside him so I strolled over and sat down. It took him a second to look over at me, but once he did, he pulled out his AirPods and started in on me.

“What are you doing here, Jackson?”

“I came to apologize,” I said. “I know, I should have done it sooner, but I was a drunken idiot. I realize now that I was wrong about Dad, and the way I talked to you... well, it was unacceptable.”

Nate sat in the row beside us, just close enough to overhear, but still giving us some space. Aiden’s eyes looked over at him in surprise. “You too?”

“Yep. I figured someone needed to be here in case this didn’t go well.”

Aiden looked back and forth between the two of us.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” I replied, clasping my hands in my lap. “I just wanted to make sure you knew that I was sorry.”

“You came all this way, left early just to say you’re sorry?”

“And to help you, yes,” I added.

“Help me?”

“To clear your name.”

Aiden’s eyes grew wide for a second. I think I truly surprised him, but at least we weren’t at each other’s throats. The fact that we weren’t arguing or shouting at each other was a good sign.

Aiden shook his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you’re apologizing,” he said with a low chuckle.

“There’s a first time for everything,” I said, cracking a smile. “And I am trying to be a better person. I might suck at it sometimes, but I’m trying to unlearn Dad’s toxic bullshit.”

“I appreciate that,” Aiden said. He was quiet for a moment, as if mulling over everything. I gave him the time and space to process it all. He spoke up a few moments later. “I forgive you, Jackson. I know we were raised with a shitty role model, and that we’re all trying to unlearn that behavior. I appreciate that you came all this way just to apologize and that you’re going to help me.”

I caught a glimpse of Nate from the corner of my eye, and he was grinning, clearly happy that Aiden and I were talking amicably for the first time in a long time.

“I found out as I was boarding the train that my partner found some solid evidence that might clear my name, so I was thinking I might not hurry back home. I booked a hotel in Paris until New Years, figured I might spend some time away recovering from everything.”

“Mind if we tag along and hang out?” Nate asked.

“Sure, the suite has a couple bedrooms, so there’s plenty of room. Might be good to have some brotherly bonding time. But I have to ask... how was Harper when you left?”

Nate and I shared a look. That was a curious question to ask.

“She seemed fine... why?”

“Well, I just felt better leaving knowing that you two were there with her. I know Kat is busy with her lover boy and Mom has Charles. I just worry about Harper being there all alone, after everything she’s been through.”

“Wait, Kat has a boyfriend? Since when?” I asked.

Nate and Aiden both laughed.

“I don’t think it’s a boyfriend, but she’s hooking up with someone in Chamonix. Harper won’t tell me who.”

“Okay, well, I guess I missed a lot being drunk half the damn time...”

“She’s trying to be really secretive about the whole thing,” Aiden said. “But that does mean that Harper could end up being the third wheel...”

“What if we invited her to Paris with us?” I asked.

The three of us looked at each other.

“I’d love that, but...” Nate said.

“But what?”

“Should we maybe talk about things with her?”

“What’s there to talk about?” I asked.

“Like how this can’t go on forever, we really need to be sure that whatever happens, we’ll all be okay with it, and it won’t cause any rifts between us.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’ve already made that very clear.”

“Yeah, but it’s easier to say that when we’re talking about things theoretically. The reality could be very different.”

I knew that if it came down to her choosing, she would pick me, so I wasn’t the least bit worried, but as I looked at my two brothers, I got the feeling they were pretty confident in their odds with Harper, as well.

“I just want her to be happy,” Aiden said. “Whatever that might mean for her.”

I had a feeling that he thought he could bring her the most happiness.

“We had agreed to end things after the vacation, after New Year’s. Inviting her to Paris isn’t changing any of that,” I added.

“True, and I would love to spend more time with her before we return to the U.S.”

“Me too,” Aiden said.

“So it’s settled,” I agreed.

I pulled out my phone and called her number. She answered quickly.

“I have a proposition for you,” I said by way of a greeting.

“Jackson?” There was a hint of laughter in her voice.

“Yes, it’s me. I’m with Aiden and Nate, and we all wanted to ask you something.”

“Okay...”

“You’ve always wanted to see Notre Dame and the rest of Paris, it will help you with your dissertation, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

Before she could protest, I laid it out. “What if you leave Chamonix a little early and spend a day or two in Paris, celebrate the New Year with us here, and we can show you the sights.”

“I can’t do that, Jackson.”

“Why not? I heard Kat has been spending a lot of time with some guy, and Mom has someone to keep her company... it might get pretty lonely in that big, old house.”

“It might, and I am pretty bored without anyone else here, but I couldn’t—”

“Why not?”

“Well what about Kat?”

“She can spend New Year’s Eve with her lover boy.”

Harper was quiet for a moment. “I told her, by the way.”

“You did? And what did she say?”

“She was surprisingly okay with it.”

“I’m not surprised at all. My sister is pretty open-minded.”

“But, well, it’s still her brothers and she asked me to keep things casual. Which I promised her I would.”

“Absolutely, and we still understand the boundaries and accept them,” I said. “How about this? You talk to Kat and get back to us.”

“I can do that.”

“Good, and I’ll book your tickets in the meantime.”

“Jackson! What if she’s not okay with it?”

“She will be. I know my sister. Just talk to her, and I’ll send you the tickets once I’ve purchased them. Talk soon, Harper.”

We got off the phone and I did exactly that. I booked the train tickets for her for the next day, wanting to give her enough time to pack and talk to Kat before she had to leave.

I looked up to find my brothers eager to know the details.

Three identical faces. Only our hair, facial hair, and a few tattoos to tell us apart. A devious grin spread across my face.

“What’s *that* look for?”

“I have an idea...”

“This is trippy,” Jackson said as he stared at himself in the mirror. I was right behind him, and I ran a hand over my military short hair. I had never had my hair this short, ever. But since we couldn’t force Aiden’s hair to grow out in a matter of days, we had no choice but to cut ours to match. He, in turn, shaved off his facial hair and covered his tattoos with the help of a professional makeup artist we had called on for help.

“There’s no way she’s going to be able to tell us apart,” Aiden remarked with a dry laugh as he ran a hand over his smooth-shaven face.

“That’s the plan,” Jackson replied.

It reminded me of the days when we’d play pranks on our teachers or even our parents. When we were younger, we could easily swap clothes and confuse almost anyone who knew us. It was an act we used to have down to a science. It had been a long time, but I was convinced we could still pull it off.

Clothing wise, we settled on some nice jeans and long sleeved, black Henley’s with a leather jacket. Even our shoes were the same. Every detail had to be perfect for this to work.

“Hopefully she’ll find it amusing and not creepy,” I said.

“I’m sure she will,” Jackson said as he checked his phone. “We better head over to the station to pick her up.”

One last look in the mirror and we were satisfied that we could fool even our own mother if we wanted to. We headed to Gare de Lyon.

The train station was bustling with people. Travelers coming back from visiting family for Christmas; others heading home. It was a few days before New Year's Eve and some people were visiting the city for the celebration.

Being over six foot had a lot of advantages, including being able to look over crowds of people. When her familiar red hair came into view, all three of us began waving and rushing toward her. She was dressed comfortably in a pair of jeans and a pink sweatshirt, no makeup and her glasses instead of contacts, but even dressed down like that, she was easily the most beautiful woman in all of Paris, at least to me. My heart skipped several beats as we waited to be reunited with her.

As soon as her eyes landed on us, I watched as a look of confusion passed over her face. Her gaze moved from Aiden to me to Jackson and back again as she was trying to figure out who was who. When she reached us, we all took turns bear hugging her before she even had a chance to speak or ask any questions.

“What is going on here?” she asked, pointing to our matching attire. “And this!” She rubbed my head, now free from the shaggy locks. She was grinning though, clearly amused by our antics, just as Jackson had predicted.

“We thought you would have a good laugh,” Aiden said.

“But I can't tell you apart!” She chuckled, her eyes moving between us again. She was clearly trying to figure out who was who. If we talked long enough our speech patterns might give us away eventually, but in that moment, she was clearly unable to differentiate between us.

“That's the point!” Jackson replied. “It's an old trick we used to pull when we were younger, we thought you would be amused by it.”

“I am,” she said. “Gosh, I guess I forgot how hard it is to tell you guys apart.”

“Take a guess, and then we’ll tell you who’s who,” I said.

She locked eyes with me for a second, thinking long and hard.

“Don’t worry if you get it wrong,” I added. “We won’t be offended.”

“I think you’re Nathan...”

“Wow!” I exclaimed, surprised that she got it right so fast. “How could you tell?”

“Your voice is just slightly softer, less gruff than your brothers,” she replied. “And something in your eyes... I can’t really explain it, I just had a feeling.”

“You know me well.” I smiled.

“My turn,” Jackson said.

“Hmmm well, you sound a lot like Jackson to me, but I could be wrong. You and Aiden both have more boldness in the way you speak, but my guess is still Jackson.”

Jackson grinned like an idiot at that, sweeping Harper into his arms and giving her a hug. “Lucky guess,” he teased.

“I guess that just leaves me, and I’m probably pretty easy to guess now.” Aiden winked. He grabbed her suitcase as I grabbed her duffle bag. “Ready to hit the road?”

“Yes! I’m so excited to see more of Paris. When I first arrived, I just passed through and basically saw the airport and the metro, so I can’t wait to see more!”

“We’re excited to see you too,” Jackson teased.

She punched him playfully in the arm. “I’m happy to see you guys too, of course. That should go without saying.”

We walked toward the exit of the station where we had a car waiting for us.

“How did Kat take you leaving early?” I asked. “Especially since you were leaving to spend more time with us.”

“She was fine, actually. She was glad I didn’t leave right after Christmas since she did want to spend a little more time with me, but she told me to have fun when I left. Jackson was right, she is a lot less freaked out by the four of us than I thought she would be, as long as we keep it casual. In her words, ‘I’ve had threesomes and foursomes before, it’s no big deal...’”

All three of us said, “eww” at the same time.

“She’s our sister, I’d really rather not think of her like that,” Jackson said.

Harper laughed. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking, but yes, she’s cool with us, as long as we keep things casual and don’t let feelings cause any problems between any of us.”

We were all silent for a second.

Feelings. That was a lot more complicated than just casual sex, but after spending a few days with my brothers, I knew that we all had developed feelings for Harper. We had all agreed to not let it cause any rifts between us, of course, but I still feared what it might mean for Jackson and Aiden considering their already rocky history.

I cleared my throat as we stepped out of the station. “The car is right over here.”

Harper’s eyes lit up the moment we were outside. She froze in place and took in the architecture and the views around us. “I can’t believe I’m here.”

“We plan to show you all the sights,” I said.

“I can’t wait.”

She continued looking all around her as we loaded her things into the car and climbed inside.

“Just wait until you see the hotel,” Aiden said. He had been so proud of himself for booking the suite he did. “It overlooks the Arc de Triomphe, and on New Year’s Eve, there will be fireworks that we can watch from our private rooftop terrace.”

Harper relaxed into the seat between Jackson and I, with Aiden sitting across from us in the back of the limo. She snuggled amongst us, and I placed an arm over her shoulder. She rested her head on my chest for a moment, turning her face upward and staring me in the eyes, and it felt so natural. My heart fluttered in my chest. I wondered if she could hear my heart beating faster by the second as she stared into my eyes.

“I’m so excited. Seriously guys, I loved everything about Chamonix, but Paris has been a dream of mine since I was a little girl, and it’s why I chose the subject of my dissertation. I was really hoping to get the funding to come here, but as you know, that didn’t happen. Now, thanks to you guys, I’m here.”

During the ride to the hotel, Harper stared out the window, and we pointed out landmarks as we passed them.

“You can’t get the best view right now, but over there is Notre Dame. Don’t worry, we’ll take you there so you can get a better view tomorrow.” I pointed out the window.

Harper leaned across me to get a better view, nearly pressing her face against the window in awe.

“I can’t believe I’m here,” she said softly.

Jackson stroked her back and the three of us were all smiles. I loved that we could make her dream come true.

If I had it my way, I would be making many more of her dreams come true in the future. And I knew my brothers would do the same if given the chance.

“**H**ey Aiden, it’s Dean Rochester. Just wanting to know if the deal was still on the table to find out who leaked the photos of your dad. Please give me a call if you’d still like to trade details.”

I slipped my phone into my pocket.

“Anything important?” Jackson asked.

I had originally wanted to get the name of who leaked the photos of Dad to help Jackson, to help heal our family, but we were currently together in a limo on our way to the hotel. The last day or two had proved to me that Jackson believed us, at last, that the story about Dad was true. I no longer had anything to prove, and I feared that it might just stir up more drama if I told him we could find out who leaked the photos.

Better to let sleeping dogs lie.

“Not at all. They were just calling me about my car’s extended warranty.” I cracked a smile.

Jackson did as well. “They are relentless, aren’t they?”

“Seriously,” I agreed, content with my decision to let things go.

I didn’t need to prove anything to Jackson, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I belonged with my brothers. My eyes fell on Harper and I smiled even wider.

“I see the Arc de Triomphe!” She was wiggling in her seat, nearly in my brother’s lap to try and see out of the window better. “Oh my God, I’m really here, I’m in Paris.”

My brothers, the way they looked at her... I knew they cared about her too. Yet there was no tension between us.

“We’ll drop the luggage off at the hotel and head out on the town if you’re feeling up for it,” I said.

“I definitely feel up to it,” she immediately replied.

“You’re not too tired from your travels?” Nate asked.

“I’m too excited to sleep, besides, I slept on the train.”

The car pulled up to the front of the hotel and the chauffeur came around to open the door for us. We piled out of the car, and Harper nearly jumped over my brothers on the way out. As soon as she was out on the street, she looked toward the Arc de Triomphe, peering down Champs Elysée as the hotel staff rushed over to help with the luggage.

“Just wait until you see the view from the roof,” I said with a knowing grin. I knew she was going to love the room.

I looped arms with Harper and together, we walked into the hotel lobby. The concierge greeted us and led us to the private elevator to the penthouse. Buildings in Paris aren’t that tall, so it didn’t take long for the elevator doors to open directly into our suite. Harper stepped out first with the three of us behind her.

We stepped into the foyer which opened into a living area. Leather couches surrounded a fireplace with floor-to-ceiling windows all around the room, overlooking Champs Elysée. The suite had an open floor plan with a small kitchen and dining area that led into a spacious living room. A bar and wine rack separated the kitchen and dining room from the living area.

“Wow, this looks more like an apartment than a hotel room,” she said.

“Well let me give you the grand tour,” I offered.

I led her down the hallway. “There are three bedrooms, each with a private bathroom,” I said. We entered the main bedroom; a California King bed was in the center of the room

with more floor-to-ceiling windows, which with a push of a button would darken on their own and block out the sunlight.

“Very nice,” Harper said, running a hand over the bedding and giving me a seductive look. “Plenty of room in here, I don’t think we need the other two rooms.”

“Perhaps not,” Jackson said from behind me, standing in the doorway.

She flashed a cheeky grin as I showed her the bathroom with both a shower large enough for all of us, and a separate bathtub.

“And then there’s the rooftop,” I said, taking her hand in mine and leading her out of the room. “It’s completely private.”

In the foyer, there was a spiral staircase that led to the roof. It was narrow, so we had to go up single file, but Harper was in front of me, and the view was worth walking behind her.

She stepped outside onto the roof, which also had a hot tub plus seating facing the Arc de Triomphe.

“A girl could get used to living like this,” she said softly enough that I think it was meant for her ears alone.

I took her hand and brought it to my lips, planting a soft kiss upon it.

I didn’t say anything, but this was the type of life we could offer her, that we wanted to offer her.

She just had to say the word, and the world would literally be at her fingertips. If she wanted to fly to Istanbul on a Wednesday, we could make it happen. If she wanted to celebrate Carnival in Brazil or head to Alaska to see the Northern Lights, all she would have to do is ask. I knew my brothers felt the same way I did.

But for now, Harper seemed perfectly content with Paris. She was smiling and just savoring the view.

If she wanted to come to Paris every weekend, I could make that happen, too. Or if she wanted to live there, I could see myself buying a place with an Eiffel Tower view for her.

“Ready to hit the town?” Jackson piped up from behind us.

“Yes!” Harper exclaimed, turning and giving us the sincerest, most beautiful smile I had ever seen in my life. My stomach did somersaults from just one look. “Whenever you’re ready, that is.”

“We’re ready whenever you are,” Nate said.

Harper walked over to the three of us. She stood on her tiptoes in front of me and planted a kiss on my cheek. It took everything in me to not take that kiss a step further, but she gave us each a kiss before taking my hand in one of hers, Jackson’s in her other and guiding us toward the stairs.

* * *

“I DON’T THINK I’ve walked this much in a long time,” Harper said.

“We can call a car, if you’d like,” I replied.

“Oh no, I want to see everything, and the best way to do that is on foot,” she replied.

She had my hand in hers, along with Nate’s. We ended up taking her to Notre Dame first, on the day she had arrived, and even though we couldn’t go inside due to it being under renovation, she seemed content spending time outside the building just admiring the architecture. We went back to the hotel after that, and she slept for hours.

She made sure to hold our hands as equally as possible. Sometimes, she would just stop and give us each a kiss. Sometimes on our cheeks, sometimes on our lips.

As we waited to cross the street, she turned to me and kissed me on the lips, her sweet mouth causing all the blood to rush south.

She turned to Jackson and kissed him just the same.

I saw an older woman watching us, her jaw nearly falling to the ground. Others were trying not to stare but I could tell

they were curious.

The fact that we still all looked identical I'm sure confused them even more.

“Is there anything else you want to see?”

Harper let out a yawn, and I knew she had to be tired. We had tried to cram as much of Paris into the two days we had with her as possible. I think we had accomplished showing her all the major sights, and I had plans already to bring her back as soon as possible, for a longer trip, preferably in the springtime when all the flowers were blooming.

We crossed the street, walking toward the Eiffel Tower. Harper held my hand along with my brother's, making sure the other brother was right beside us.

The fact that we would all be going our separate ways soon weighed heavily on my mind, but I held tight to the moments we did share. I savored the time we had together, hoping that once the holidays were over, it wouldn't be lost forever.

It was getting late, and my body was heavy with exhaustion from all the walking we had done around Paris. We had a nice dinner at a fancy French restaurant not too far from our hotel, the glittering lights from Christmas still shining brightly all around us. Paris really was the city of lights, and I hated that I was leaving the next day. But I had to be back and ready to work on the second of January, something I was not looking forward to in the slightest. It meant seeing Tony again, which was something I was dreading. Part of me also dreaded the work itself.

It wasn't at all what I had imagined. I thought the academic world would be perfect for me, but I was starting to have my doubts. Being away only cemented those doubts and I was struggling to make a decision about my career. I couldn't quit. Going back and finishing my research while keeping my head down around Tony was about all I could do.

We got back to the hotel and Aiden opened the patio doors overlooking the Champs Elysée. The air was chilled, but it wasn't as cold as I expected. It wasn't New York cold, after all. The noise from the street below was full of excitement as people waited for the fireworks show. I enjoyed being there, but I was grateful I wasn't in the throngs of people on the street. I stood there at the window and stared out, electrified by the energy and no longer feeling tired.

Strong arms wrapped around me from behind, a hard body pressing against me. I relaxed into the arms, unsure of who I might be snuggling against.

Not that it mattered. Any one of them could have been holding me and I would have been in heaven.

As if on cue, the other two brothers came to my side.

It was our last night together like this, and the entire time, I had hoped we would get one more chance to recreate what had happened in Chamonix.

Based on the hardness pressing against me from behind, I had a feeling I wasn't the only one who hoped for that.

His hands moved down my hips, pulling me against him. I closed my eyes as I rested against his body. Someone came in front of me and drew my lips to his. He cupped my breasts in his strong hands. His tongue pushed past my lips and tangled with mine.

Another pair of lips pressed against my neck, sucking gently at my flesh. On my other side, someone was nibbling gently on my ear lobe.

There were so many hands exploring every inch of my body, I couldn't keep track of them all. I shuddered from the sensory overload. It was almost too much—but electricity ran through my veins and every touch caused my insides to ache with desire.

“Please...” I whimpered without even realizing I was making a sound until I heard it with my own ears.

One of the guys lifted me in his arms.

He carried me into the master bedroom and laid me down on the giant bed gently. I sank into the mattress and bedding as each of the guys stripped me down, removing my clothing as their mouths and hands explored my naked flesh. I had no idea who was who, my head was spinning.

I thought that once they undressed, I might have a better idea of which brother was which, so I grabbed at one of their shirts and yanked at it, helping them to pull it off over their head. As soon as they were shirtless, I stroked their chest, free of tattoos. I could feel the taut muscles under my fingertips, but I still wasn't sure if this was Jackson or Nate.

But then I moved to the next brother, and it was the same. No tattoos.

And the next, the same.

I stared at them perplexed. Tattoos don't just disappear overnight.

They grinned at me cheekily, and there was a hint of mischievousness there. Jackson's grin was always a bit crooked, as if he was hiding something behind that smile. But as soon as the smiles disappeared, I was back staring at identical faces.

"How? I don't understand..." I stroked one of their chests, as if I could uncover the hidden tattoos.

"A professional makeup artist taught us some tricks that they use in Hollywood," the one I thought to be Jackson responded.

"To cover tattoos this well?"

All three nodded.

"I can't tell who you are like this," I said with a laugh.

"That's the point," one of them replied, bringing my lips to his. "You're going to have to figure it out in other ways."

"That sounds challenging," I said. A smile pulled at my lips. "But also fun."

"That's the spirit," I heard one of them say.

"Now finish getting undressed and let me have more clues," I said with a playful wink.

I pulled at the nearest guy's belt and he smiled down at me. At the same time, all three of them removed their pants, dropping them down to the floor and showing off matching boxers.

I let out a low groan followed by a chuckle. "Of course your underwear matches too. You guys are pros at this."

I pulled at the boxers of the nearest guy, sliding my hand down them and gripping his cock in my hands.

“I wonder if you could guess us simply by feeling us,” one of the guys said.

“I highly doubt that but it sounds fun to try.”

I stroked the cock in my hand and stared up into his eyes. It wasn't his cock that gave him away, it was the grin from earlier and the way he was looking at me. “Hello Jackson.”

“Mmm, you're good at this,” he said, closing the distance between us and kissing me deeply. “And I don't just mean at guessing.”

“My turn,” one of the other guys said, and Jackson moved out of the way. My hand slipped from his boxers and under the waistband of the next brother.

Something in the way he looked at me, and the boldness of standing up to his brother made me confident in my guess, but I still wrapped my hands around his thickness and ran my hand up and down a few times for good measure. His eyes darkened, nearly closed, as a look of bliss passed over his face.

“Aiden,” I said, speaking with confidence, giving his cock a firm squeeze and watching the pleasure wash over his face.

“Jackson's right. You are good,” he said, his voice low and husky. “I don't want to let you stop but we do have all night together.”

Aiden kissed me before removing my hand from his boxers.

“It wouldn't be fair if Nate didn't get a shot. Pretend you don't know it's him,” Aiden teased.

“Of course you're Nathan,” I said as I slipped my hand into his boxers.

I stroked Nathan's cock a few times as he leaned down and kissed me, his hands in my hair as he held my face against his.

A voice came from behind him. “Do you know what your prize is for getting it right?”

“Mmm, didn’t know there was a prize,” I said as Nate slipped my hands from his boxers. “But I’m eager to find out.”

“Why don’t you just lie back there and let us show you then,” Nate said, gently nudging me onto my back.

“Now close your eyes,” Jackson said.

“Why?” I laughed.

“Because we’re going to move around so you can’t be sure who is who again,” he said with his typical crooked grin.

A shudder ran through me and my body writhed against the bed at the thought of each of them taking turns with me. Trying to guess who was inside of me and not knowing for sure... that idea was beyond anything I’d ever fantasized about and just the thought of it caused the ache inside of me to grow.

I laid back on the bed as the guys removed their boxers. Staring at three identical, hunky men, knowing what they intended to do to me... I had to pinch myself to be sure I wasn’t dreaming.

I knew it was likely the last time we would ever be together like that. Once the New Year hit, we would have to go our separate ways and pretend like nothing ever happened. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to enjoy myself one last time.

I closed my eyes as they requested of me, and a second later, hands and mouths began exploring my naked body. Someone nudged my legs apart, and they were kissing my inner thighs. Someone else had a nipple in their mouth, gently sucking and lapping at the sensitive skin. And another mouth found mine and kissed me deeply.

I gave myself over to the pleasure.

“Can I open my eyes?” I whimpered.

“Not yet,” a dominant voice told me.

My lower lips were spread, and a tongue circled my clit, teasing it ever so gently. The pleasure coursed through my body, and it was like a fire in my veins. My thighs trembled,

my back arched, and I found myself moaning their names, one after another.

“Jackson! Aiden! Nathan... oh God, yes.”

A finger slipped inside of me, followed by another, but his tongue never left my clit.

These boys knew how to work their mouths, and it wasn't long before my body shook wildly and I was clinging onto whoever was closest, my body convulsing in pleasure as a tongue lapped at my clit.

Strong hands gripped my hips, and the three of them helped me to roll over onto my belly. I was facing the bedroom patio, which one of them had opened the doors to, giving me a view of the Arc de Triomphe outside.

It was too early, so no fireworks yet, but we were certainly making our own in the bedroom.

One of the guys helped me get into position on my hands and knees as they stood behind me, pressing against my opening. I wiggled my butt. “Yes, please—”

“Who do you think I am?” the voice growled.

Their games...

“Without looking at you, I don't know...”

“Just guess,” the voice said as the tip of his cock pressed into me. Just the tip, but it was enough to bring a moan to my lips.

I pulled a name out of thin air. “Jackson?”

He thrust into me, his hands holding my hips steady as I felt myself stretch around his member. I moaned and my head fell forward. He stayed inside of me, not moving at first, giving me a chance to catch my breath. “Was I, was I right?” I managed to ask.

He didn't answer me. Instead, he began slowly moving in and out of my body, going deeper and deeper each time.

I found myself moving along with him, pushing my ass back toward him, wanting every inch of him inside of me. The

feeling of being filled by one of the Bishop brothers was almost too much to bear.

At first, I wasn't sure where the other two were, but another brother walked over in front of me, grabbed my chin in his hand and turned my head to look up at him as his brother continued to fuck me from behind. He smiled at me, and while I wasn't sure if it was Aiden or Nathan, I had a feeling it wasn't Jackson. But even then, I couldn't be completely sure.

The brother lowered himself down to his knees so he could kiss me, his hands tangled in my hair. Just then, another set of hands found my breasts from one side, fingers gently teasing the nipple.

My tongue moved in and out of his mouth as his brother's cock did the same to my body. I reached for his cock, wanting to give him pleasure as his brother pleased me. He knew what I was trying to do and he stood up before me, his cock glistening with pre-cum.

"Yes, please," I moaned, reaching for him to come closer.

He stepped closer, and I knew I needed him in my mouth. I wrapped my lips around the tip, tasting the saltiness of him as I gripped the base with my hand. Each thrust inside of my pussy pushed his cock deeper into my mouth. Our rhythms matched perfectly.

A pinch to my nipple sent a wave of pleasure over me and pushed me over the edge. My pussy spasmed around the cock inside of me, but my screams were silenced by the one inside of my mouth. The guy behind me grabbed my hips to steady me as he buried himself balls deep inside, his cock throbbing inside of me, and from the sound coming from him, I knew he was filling me with his seed. I clenched my Kegel muscles around him, wanting every last drop of him inside of me.

He stayed like that, sheathed inside of me for a moment as I continued sucking his brother's cock. I stared up at either Aiden or Nathan whose jaw was clenched tightly. He slipped from my lips and whispered, "Not this way, I don't want to come just yet."

Just as another brother positioned himself behind me.

I was so wet, he slipped inside of me with little resistance. While he fucked me from behind, he fingered my sensitive clit, causing me to shudder with pleasure. The man standing in front of me lowered himself again and kissed me deeply. I placed my hands on his chest, feeling the taut muscle and digging my nails into his flesh as his brother moved in and out of my body.

There was an explosion, and at first, I wasn't sure if it was all in my mind. Then another. The man I was kissing stepped back and pointed out the window at the fireworks.

"It must be midnight," he whispered to me, stroking my hair as I watched the fireworks explode over the Arc de Triomphe as wave after wave of pleasure coursed through my body.

Then the familiar throbbing and groaning from behind me which pushed me over the edge again. My screams were likely loud enough to be heard from below if not for the fireworks.

The night sky lit up with beautiful colors as I literally saw stars from the pleasure rocketing through my body. I collapsed onto my belly, the cock slipping out of me as I did so.

One brother laid down behind me, spooning me. His hands held me close as his thick shaft pressed between my thighs. I lifted a leg up and helped guide him inside of me. He slowly entered me as the fireworks began more frequently outside. The other two guys took turns kissing me as we watched the fireworks together, with the brother fucking me taking his dear, sweet time, for which I was grateful. The entire experience was amazing, and I wanted it to last forever.

Just as the grand finale of fireworks lit up the Parisian sky, he thrust into me, grabbed onto my hips and filled me with his cum. I writhed alongside him, our moans melting together and drowned out by the New Year's festivities.

He held me like that and the four of us watched the ending of the show together before the other two men curled up

beside me in bed, our bodies entangled in ways I wasn't even sure was possible.

This was it. The last time we could be together. Even though I was still coming down from the high, part of me was also sad. It was a bittersweet moment, even if we had literally gone out with a bang. I couldn't sleep, but none of us spoke. I think that we all knew there wasn't much left to say.

TWO MONTHS LATER...

“Hey Harper,” I began, leaving a voice message. “I was thinking I might travel to New York at some point and thought we could grab a drink. Call me back when you get this.”

I hung up and stared at my computer screen with a sigh. I needed to get this draft opinion finished before the end of the day, and I had already wasted too much time. This job, a dream for me all my life, was a lot more draining than I thought it would be. I had wanted to be a lawyer to impress my father, and without him around, well, who was I fooling? I hated the work.

I drank from the coffee mug at my desk, but the liquid burned my throat. The satisfying burn of a good whiskey.

I hadn't heard from my brothers in a bit. We hardly talked after we left Paris after New Year's. Harper and I had a few conversations, but she had made it clear that we were to keep a distance. What we had back in France was over.

I finished my mug and reached for the bottle I kept hidden in the lower drawer of my desk. I quickly poured the whiskey into the mug then returned it to its hiding place. If I had to finish this, I needed something to keep me going or else I would be bored out of my fucking mind.

My phone buzzed and I hoped it was Harper. I needed to hear her voice.

It was Aiden.

I answered. “Hey, man,” I said, my words slurring even though I tried to sound as sober as possible. “What’s up?”

“Are you drinking at work, Jackson?”

“Just a little whiskey. All the partners have a bar in their office, it’s hardly frowned upon in this possession.” I quickly realized my mistaken word choice and corrected myself. “Er, profession, I mean.”

Aiden was quiet for a long time before he spoke again.

“I was checking in to see if you heard anything about the paperwork we filed last Tuesday?”

“Shit,” I stammered, knocking the mug over as I dug into the pile of papers on my desk. I found the envelope with Aiden’s name and case number on it and flinched. We were filing a civil suit against Aiden’s former boss and there was a deadline to file the paperwork for last Tuesday. Problem was, it was still sitting on my desk.

“That doesn’t sound good...”

“Sorry, Aiden. I will contact the judge and—”

“You didn’t submit the paperwork, did you?” He let out a sigh.

“I thought I had, but it’s still on my desk. I had given it to an intern to mail out, but I don’t know what happened.”

I looked at the mess before me. It was clear what happened. I hadn’t put it in the outbox for the intern to mail, it got lost in the paperwork strewn all over my desk.

What’s happening to you, Jackson. This isn’t like you.

I used to be so good at my job. I was organized, never missed a deadline. I used to love my job, too. My eyes fell on the mug, and I knew that the answer to my question laid inside it.

But I couldn't tell that to Aiden. I couldn't tell anyone about my drinking. As soon as I did, they would lecture me on how I needed to get help, or they'd tell me that I was turning out like Dad. At least Dad was able to build a successful career before losing himself to alcohol. I wasn't even thirty yet and already on the downward spiral, or at least that's what Kat had said to me last time we talked. She was always happy to remind me that I was a failure.

"Jackson, what the fuck, man?" Aiden had been shouting on the other end of the line, and I realized I hadn't listened to a word of it. "What are we going to do now? We spent all this time and money to build this case, and I put my faith in you ___"

"I can fix this," I said. I wasn't sure how, but I had connections. I knew I could talk to the partners of the firm, we could figure something out. "There's no way missing one deadline is going to throw out the entire case."

"You'd better be right."

I wasn't sure if I was right, and that scared me. What had become of my brain? I used to be considered brilliant. I used to be praised for my knowledge of the legal system in school. It's what secured me this amazing gig, but now I was just losing it all.

"I will sort it out," I assured my brother.

Aiden started to say something, but then stopped.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, man."

"No, it's not nothing. What were you going to say?" I clenched my jaw, prepared for the onslaught, prepared to be reminded that I was failing.

"It's just... I have to wonder if you didn't do this on purpose. That you still hold a grudge."

"Aiden, after everything we've been through, you really think that?"

“I don’t know what to think, Jackson. You’re supposed to be this brilliant attorney, and you forgot such a simple task. It just seems hard to believe that you’d fuck up this badly on accident.”

I knew he was right; I shouldn’t have fucked up something so simple. “I can assure you, Aiden, it wasn’t intentional. I have a lot going on right now.”

“Yeah, fine, I get it,” he mumbled.

“I will fix it.”

“I sure hope so. My entire reputation relies on this trial coming to light and proving that I’m innocent.”

Aiden hung up the phone, and I realized I was clenching it so tightly, I feared I might break it. The urge to throw it across the room was strong, but I resisted.

I wasn’t mad at Aiden. Not in the slightest.

I was pissed at myself for being such a fuck up.

Just like Dad, a voice said in the back of my mind.

“Hey Harper, I’m worried about Jackson. Can you give me a call back when you get this?” I hated to bother Harper. I knew she was busy with her dissertation and everything else she was dealing with back at school. The last time we talked, I had offered to visit her, but she said she had too much going on so I didn’t push the issue.

I wanted to see her, I missed her every day, but I also knew that she had put up fences for a reason. She had made it clear that nothing could happen after the holidays and as much as I wanted to see her again, I knew I had to respect her boundaries.

My next call was to Nathan.

“Hey man, I’m worried about Jackson.”

“You too?” he asked me.

“You’ve been worried too?”

“How could I not be? Ever since we returned from France, he’s just been, well, *off*.”

“He missed a deadline for some paperwork for my case, and when we spoke, his speech was slurred. I think he’s drinking again.”

“Yeah, me too,” Nate said with a sigh.

“We need to do something.”

“What if we got everyone involved?” Nate asked. “Maybe Mom and Kat have some ideas on how to help him. I think he

just needs to realize we are still a family.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“And if we could get Harper—”

“She’s busy,” I said, cutting him off.

“I know we shouldn’t bother her right now, but I think she might be one of the only ones who can get through to him.”

“One of the only ones? Who else?”

“Well Dad, maybe. But that’s probably a lost cause.”

“Is it?”

“Hasn’t the complete lack of contact shown that?”

“Well, maybe if he knew one of his sons needed help.”

“Of all the people to have faith in Dad, Aiden, I’m surprised it would be you.”

“I don’t have faith in Dad, but I know how Jackson has always looked up to him. I think if we have an intervention, we should invite him.”

Nate was quiet for a long time. “What if he doesn’t come?”

“Well, at least we tried then,” I said.

The idea of speaking to my father again after four years filled me with dread, but I knew that someone needed to get through to Jackson. Someone needed to knock some sense into him. And the one person who could always do that was Dad.

“I’ll talk to Kat and Mom,” Nate said. “I can call Dad too, if you’d prefer.”

“No, I think I need to do this.” After everything we’d been through, part of me hoped getting closure from our father would help me to move on, as well. He might never acknowledge how he fucked me up, but seeing that he hadn’t broken me, well, that might be the best I could hope for.

I got off the phone with Nathan and stared at my dad’s number for a long time. I remembered the last time we spoke,

after he and Mom had an argument, when she was kicking him out. I told him what I thought of him.

“You’re an asshole, Dad,” I said, as I stared at him, falling over drunk on the front porch. “You always have been, and always will be. You’ve let this family down for the last time.”

I had closed that door and never saw him again. I had thought I might not ever speak to him again either, but after everything my family had been through, I knew Jackson needed to heal. He needed closure more than any of us.

I pressed the call button and waited as it rang several times. I thought it might go to voicemail but finally, my dad’s gruff voice answered.

“Yes, who’s this?”

“It’s Aiden, Dad,” I said.

“Aiden?” I noted the surprise in his voice.

“I need to talk to you,” I said.

“I have things to do, so make it quick.”

“I want to talk to you about Jackson. He’s developed a drinking problem, and we are worried about him. You know I wouldn’t be speaking to you if I wasn’t genuinely concerned about him. He hasn’t been the same since the scandal and—”

“Sounds like he needs some therapy.”

“No, he needs his dad,” I said. “The family is getting together to talk to him, and we’d appreciate it if you could be there.”

“I’m not interested in talking to Jackson about his daddy issues. He’s a big boy, he can get over it himself,” my father said. “Meredith and I are in Tahiti at the moment, so I have to let you go.”

“What if I told you I had inside information on who leaked the photos?”

Dad was quiet for a moment. “Go on.”

“If you come and help Jackson, I will tell you who’s to blame for ruining your life.”

I hadn’t called the journalist back, but I knew that there was always an offer on the table. I knew that he was hungry for the type of info I could leak on the politician trying to ruin me. It could come back and bite me in the ass for my case, but if it helped to fix my family, I was willing to do anything.

“Alright. Let me know when and where and I’ll be there.”

I wanted to thank him out of habit, but I withheld any gratitude since I knew Dad wasn’t doing this out of the kindness of his own heart. Still, if he was willing to be there, if he could talk to Jackson and if Jackson thought Dad truly cared about him, enough so he would fly in from Tahiti to see him, maybe it would encourage him to get the help he needed.

That is, if all went well.

With our father, things rarely went well.

But it was a risk I was willing to take. Better than sitting back and watching my brother in perpetual freefall.

NATHAN

“**Y**ou managed to get Dad to agree to come?” I whispered to Aiden as he, Mom, Kat and I gathered in the formal living room of our home.

“He said he was on his way, so I guess we’ll see.”

“And you’re sure this is a good idea?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Aiden muttered.

Kat and Mom shared the loveseat while Aiden and I took two of the armchairs. There were two others left for Jackson and Dad.

I checked the time. We had told Jackson to be there at seven-thirty. It was seven-fifteen. Aiden had told us all to be there early to talk about how we were going to handle the discussion, but without Dad there, we were all in limbo, mostly. We had no idea what to expect.

Mom looked a little nervous, which was understandable. She hadn’t seen Dad in ages either, but she had decided that it might be what Jackson needed to move on. Kat wasn’t pleased when we told her, but reluctantly agreed.

There were footsteps and voices in the hallway, and Aiden hopped off the chair and ran to the doorway. I followed behind him and came face-to-face with our father for the first time in four years.

He looked older, more tired than before. He didn’t seem as large as I remembered him to be, less intimidating too. Maybe it was his age, maybe it was mine. His face was still the

chiseled perfection I remembered it to be, the same face that my brothers and I inherited. He had always been a handsome man, which got him far in life. Perhaps farther than he deserved, all things considered.

But Dad wasn't alone.

A pretty, young blonde woman was on his arm. I recognized her after a moment. It was the woman in the photos, his assistant at the time and his trophy girlfriend who was closer in age to us than she was to him.

And it wasn't just Meredith that was with him. Two little boys with blonde hair and big eyes trailed behind them. The oldest looked to be kindergarten age, and the other was likely barely a baby when Dad left us. A terrifying thought entered my mind as I did the math. Could they be... no, they couldn't be our half-brothers, could they?

I was unable to speak for the longest time, looking for Dad's familiar features in the boys. They had light hair like their mother, but so did my brothers and I when we were very young. It darkened as we got older.

Did Dad have another family this entire time?

I looked over at Aiden who seemed as surprised as I did. Clearly, he hadn't been informed of Dad's plans.

"Dad, I um, I didn't know you were bringing them," Aiden stammered.

"Of course, why wouldn't I bring Meredith and the boys?" Dad replied, waving him off as he entered the living room like he owned the place.

Mom's eyes widened as she was confronted with Dad's former mistress in person, but being the lady she was, she pushed that back and smiled. "Oh Meredith, I wasn't expecting to see you tonight. Welcome to my home." She had put emphasis on *my*, as if to draw some boundaries in the sand. Not that Meredith had any issues taking things that weren't hers...

Meredith smiled, but it was a nervous smile. The smile of someone who knew they were walking into the viper's den.

She was expecting drama, as she should have. As soon as Jackson got there all hell would probably break loose.

Before the thought even finished in my head, we heard the front door open and Jackson stepped into the foyer.

He stopped in the entry, and at first, I feared he might turn around and walk out. I wouldn't blame him if he did. I felt like doing the same myself.

"Dad?" he choked out. Jackson's gaze moved over everyone there and landed on the little boys before looking at Aiden and me. "What's going on?"

"Jackson, we wanted to talk to you," Mom said, speaking up since Aiden and I both seemed speechless. Kat hadn't said a word either. Was she also thinking the same thing I had thought? That Dad had another family this entire time? Was that why he had just dropped us like yesterday's news?

"We?" Jackson asked, looking at our father.

Aiden finally stepped up and cleared his throat. "I asked Dad to come here, because I hoped you would see that we all care about you and we're all worried about you."

Jackson scoffed as he pointed toward Dad. "He's not worried about me."

"See, I knew this wasn't a good idea," our father said, speaking to no one in particular.

"Why? Because you can't handle the heat?" Jackson asked. "You'd rather run away with your trophy wife and replacement kids? They're too young to be much trouble right now but just wait, one day they won't be so perfect, and where will you be? Will you beat their asses, too, and run out on them like you did to us?"

I stepped between Dad and Jackson. I wasn't sure what I could say to diffuse the tension, but I was going to try. But Dad, as usual, was having none of it.

"I don't have to put up with this," he said. "Come on, Meredith."

“Just wait, he’s going to fuck up your kids just the way he did us,” Jackson called out to the woman.

Meredith looked at us with wide eyes, reminding me of a terrified animal, waiting for the predator to strike.

Dad kept talking. “Aiden, I agreed to come, I didn’t agree to be treated like this. You still owe me a name.”

“A name?” both Jackson and I asked at the same time.

“The name of the person who leaked the photos,” Dad answered.

Aiden closed his eyes and sighed, as if he knew that things were about to get worse.

“So that’s why you came, huh? You had to be bribed?” Jackson asked. “Typical. You are only willing to help others if you benefit from it.”

“Listen here, son,” Dad said, closing the distance between Jackson and him. “My life was ruined because of that little bitch—”

“Bitch?” I interrupted. “How do you know it was a woman?”

“I saw her as she ran off. I noticed the flash and saw her take off. She was young, a teenager perhaps,” Dad said. “I thought it was harmless, just some stupid kid. I can still see that flash of red hair...”

Red hair. Teenager. My mind was spinning. It couldn’t be, could it?

Jackson was too busy speaking over Dad to hear his words, and for that, I was grateful. “It’s not her fault you were fucking around. If you weren’t there cheating in the first place,

there wouldn’t be photos to release to the public. You did this to yourself Dad, and you deserve all the fallout from it.”

Meredith had taken the boys’ hands and was slowly walking toward the exit. Jackson was blocking the way and I feared trouble as he turned his gaze toward the woman and her boys.

“Don’t let him fool you, Meredith. He’s a monster. He will ruin your life and take your boys down with you,” Jackson said, speaking calmer than any of us expected. “Get out while you can.”

He opened the door and let the three of them leave. Dad wasn’t far behind, rushing after Meredith. Jackson slammed the door behind him and said, “Good riddance.”

He then pushed past us. “I need a fucking drink.”

Aiden and I shared a look.

The guilt was clear on my brother’s face. “Hey, you tried.”

“I know, but I should have known better.”

“What are we going to do now?”

Mom and Kat had followed after Jackson, and I could hear them pleading with him not to drink, but to no avail.

No one could get through to him.

Well there was one person but she was in New York, and she hadn’t returned our calls in a long time.

I stared down at my phone. Several missed calls from the guys. Voicemails too. It ached me to hear their voices, I wanted nothing more than to run back into their arms every time we talked. But I had made a promise to Kat. Besides, there was no way I could choose just one of them, and that is what I would have to do in order for things to go long-term.

So I hadn't been listening to my voicemails from them, even though I wanted to.

I missed them.

I missed them so much.

My stomach twisted and turned. I hadn't felt well in over a week, and there was something else on my mind that I had to take care of. I stared down at the boxed pregnancy test I had picked up during my lunch break. I knew what I had to do, but I couldn't bring myself to actually do it. My period was very late, and honestly, in my heart, I knew. I hadn't been too careful. I had missed some of my birth control pills with all the traveling, and I had just started taking them shortly before the trip so they likely hadn't even taken effect yet. I had been stupid. Careless.

I picked up the test and slipped from my cubicle, making sure to cover it with my sleeve as I made my way to the bathroom. I could have waited, but then I might have lost the nerve. I took the test there at the university, in a small bathroom, setting a timer on my phone. I paced the tiny space, nibbling my nails. I had already googled "DNA test identical

siblings” and knew that if it came back positive, we’d have a big problem.

There might not be any way to determine who the father was between them.

It could be any of them.

And then, well, the choice would be up to me, and I promised Kat that I wouldn’t choose.

Calm down, Harper. Just wait for the results.

But I knew in my heart that it was positive before I even saw the pink lines. When my timer went off, I looked down and read the results.

Pregnant.

My heart sank, but there was also something else there. An excitement. I had always wanted kids. But not like this.

Not at the expense of the Bishop family.

Shit, what was I going to do?

I had to figure something out.

I knew it might mean leaving New York behind. Everything I had worked toward, gone. Not that it bothered me as much as I expected. The idea of leaving the university behind was one I had thought about since Kat mentioned it in France. I wasn’t happy there. It was stuffy, people were talking about my non-wedding to Tony, and none of them knew what really happened. Now this? A pregnancy? It would only get them talking even more.

Before I could fully process all of my emotions, there was a knock at the door.

A familiar voice called out to me. “Harper? Are you okay in there?”

“Yes, Tony,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Are you sure? You’ve been in there a while?”

“I’m fine,” I snapped, tossing the pregnancy test back in the packaging and tucking it into my sleeve again before

flushing the toilet. I washed my hands, taking my time, hoping that Tony wouldn't be waiting outside for me when I opened the door.

But he was.

I nearly ran into him as I stepped out of the bathroom, as if he had his ear to the door. "Tony, please, give me some space. Jesus."

"Sorry, I was just worried about you." He smiled at me. I remembered a time when his smile would cause butterflies in my stomach, but there was nothing now.

He was handsome in a unique sort of way. His hair was jet black, his eyebrows thick. His eyes were a rich brown and framed by glasses. He was older than me and the lines on his face gave that away, but he looked mature rather than old. His nose was a little crooked, his mouth thin, but he had a charm about him that appealed to not only me, but clearly to other women, too.

We had remained amicable at work, and I had refused to entertain any discussion about our past relationship. I tried to pretend as if it had never happened, but Tony tried to bring it up every chance he could.

He'd asked for me to come back to him.

He'd even begged a little, which took me by surprise. A man like him, he didn't need me. He could have almost any one of his grad students. So why me?

He had told me I was special, but not special enough to wait until our wedding for sex, apparently.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"No, I need to talk to Dr. Jeffries," I said.

Tony's frown lines deepened. "Your advisor?"

"Yes. Now if you'll excuse me."

As I went to push past him, my sweater sleeve rose up just enough to show the test in my hand. Tony grabbed my hand

before I could get past him and pulled the packaging from me. He held it up with a low whistle. “So you’re not fine,” he said.

“I *am* fine,” I spat back, trying to snatch it from his hands, but he was too tall and kept it just out of reach.

He offered a grin. “Seems I wasn’t the only one having fun over the holidays. What happened to waiting, Harper?”

“I realized it wasn’t worth it, not when you meet someone that is actually special.”

“You aren’t going to hurt my feelings, Harper. So, who is this lucky man?”

“It’s none of your business,” I said.

“Will there be wedding bells in your future?”

“Again, none of your business.”

“Considering we had barely been broken up, and I don’t take you for the cheating type, I’m guessing this was a fling,” he said. “And I’m guessing this isn’t a welcomed pregnancy, either.”

I didn’t answer him, nor did I continue to fight to get the test back. I wasn’t about to give him the pleasure of it. I turned on my heels to leave. He could keep the test since I already had the answers I needed.

“Harper, wait. I’m sorry. I’m just surprised, that’s all.” He stepped in front of me again.

I tried to walk around him but it was useless.

“Just hear me out, Harper. Please.”

“I don’t have much of a choice if you’re not going to let me leave.” I crossed my arms in front of my chest.

“If you need a father for your child, and the other man is, well, not available, please know that I would be more than happy to raise the child as my own. I don’t care about things like DNA—I love you and I would love your baby no matter what.”

My heart softened for a second before I remembered what he had done to me. “I’d rather be a single mom than take you up on an offer like that.”

“Harper, please, just think about it,” he said. He handed me the test back and stepped aside for me to pass. “After all, it can be very hard for a single mom in academia to make a living for herself. I could take care of you.”

I didn’t entertain his offer with another answer.

I had to meet with my advisor. He was right about one thing—academia wasn’t going to be too kind to a single, pregnant mother, and I knew that as things progressed in my pregnancy, it might get harder to keep up with everything that needed to be done.

I was going to ask for a leave of absence. I would find a job, try to earn some money in the meantime. Tears welled up in my eyes as I thought about how hard this was going to be.

I knew I would have to tell the guys. There was no way I would keep this from them, but what would it do to them to know that I was carrying one of their children?

I stopped briefly at my desk to pull myself together. I stared at my phone, and thought about calling Kat, but what could I expect her to say? I had promised not to cause her family any drama.

I opened up my voicemails, needing to hear the guys voices. I knew I couldn’t call them though. Not until I cleared my head and thought everything through.

I pulled up a voicemail from a few days ago from Aiden and heard, “*I’m worried about Jackson...*” Shit.

I had the urge to run to them, but what if I had been the problem all along?

After all, I was the one who leaked the pictures that sent Jackson on this path.

I was the one who ruined their family, and the baby in my belly could tear things apart for them all over again.

I had no idea what the right thing to do was.

JACKSON

My doorbell buzzed.

“Can you get that, Barry?” I called out to my butler as I poured myself another drink. I half expected it to be one of my brothers coming over to talk to me about what happened or perhaps Mom. I didn’t really want to see anyone, so I called out, “And tell them I’m not here.”

Her voice took me by surprise. “What’s wrong, Jackson? Why are you hiding from everyone?”

I turned on my heels, afraid that maybe I was so drunk, I was hallucinating, except I had only just started for the day.

“Harper?” I put my drink down. “What are you... never mind, come here.”

She walked straight into my arms and I held her against me, my nose buried in her soft hair, inhaling the sweet scent of her. She was real. She was there.

She turned her head to look me in the eye, her face twisted into a look of concern. She frowned ever so slightly, her lips downturned and her forehead creased with worry. “Aiden called me, said that he was worried about you,” she said. “I’m sorry I didn’t get the message sooner. I was, well, I was dealing with a lot of things, but as soon as I heard something could be wrong, I rushed down here.”

“But what about the university?”

She shrugged. “I’ve asked for a leave of absence. I thought it might be good to take some time to find myself. I don’t

know if I'm where I'm supposed to be. And—”

She cut herself off and looked away from me.

“What is it?” I stroked her cheek and nudged her to look up at me again.

“I have something to tell you, and everyone else as well, but I'd rather talk about it when we're all together, if that's okay.”

“Of course,” I said softly. My lips pulled back into the first smile in days. “I'm just so happy to see you.”

She smiled back at me. “I'm happy to see you too, but also worried. What's going on with you?”

For the first time since France, I felt better. I felt safe. I felt like I could truly talk about everything I was dealing with. Harper was the one person I could be myself around.

I kissed her, holding her in my arms and cherishing the feeling of her lips on mine.

She pulled back and there was a serious look in her eyes.

“Talk to me, Jackson.”

“What do you already know?” I asked.

“Very little,” she answered. “Just that Aiden and Nate are worried about you, and I suspect it might have something to do with your drinking. I thought you were doing better when we parted ways in Paris.”

“I was,” he said. “But then coming back to real life, here, alone. My family had all gone back to their lives, I went back to work, and it was just a reminder of everything I'd lost. It's like I don't even think I have a family anymore. I'm just on my own. And I blame my father for that, of course.”

Her eyes deepened and she frowned, but she let me continue. I told her what had happened with Dad at the “intervention” that Aiden had tried to call for me. As I spoke of my father, her eyes got wide. “You saw him again?”

“Yes, and his girlfriend, and likely my half siblings for all I know.” I let out a dry laugh. I wanted to reach for the glass,

but as if Harper had read my mind, she took both of my hands in hers to keep from reaching for anything but her.

“I’m sorry, Jackson. That had to be hard.”

“It was, but the worst part is he only came because Aiden had bribed him with details about who leaked the photos. He didn’t come because he cares about me,” I said with a shrug. “Which I already knew, but it still hurt to see it. Especially when he has a new family. I warned Meredith that he would fuck up her little boys too, and I think she believed me. Maybe I got through to her, I don’t know, but seeing those little boys... I had to protect them from the bullshit my brothers and I went through, siblings of mine or not.”

“You did the right thing.”

“I hope so. It felt good to let loose, to be honest.”

“I bet it did,” she said softly. She stroked my cheek and I leaned into her touch. “I hope that it helps you heal.”

Harper being there was helping me more than anything else had, but I didn’t tell her that. I didn’t want her to feel obligated to stay in South Carolina for my sake. I hoped she would, and I hoped this was the start of a life together, but I wanted her to want it from the bottom of her heart, not feel obligated to be in my life to help keep me sober. I knew that was something I had to work on myself, it was my own battle, and I couldn’t put that all on her.

I leaned down to kiss her but she placed her fingertips on my lips.

“Before we move any further, I really need to talk to everyone.”

She was still frowning, and there was a look in her eyes that told me whatever she needed to tell us, it was serious.

Family meeting. Mom's house in an hour?

Jackson's message didn't say much more than that. It sounded urgent. He hadn't really been in a talking mood since the fallout with Dad a few days before, so I was relieved to hear him calling us together. I hoped that maybe it would be to tell us he was seeking help.

Before leaving, I opened a letter that had been delivered earlier in the day. It was a settlement agreement on the slander case I had filed against the former client who had tried to smear my name. It indicated that another copy had been delivered to Jackson.

I read through the letter which stated the defendant was willing to recant his statements about me and offered \$500,000 in damages.

I couldn't believe it. Jackson had come through after all. I stared at it in stunned silence. What had Jackson done to bring about such a swift turnaround?

I called him and he quickly answered. "Hey, I'm on my way to Mom's... are you still going to be there?"

"I am. I was on my way when I opened a letter from Bertram Johnson—"

"Ah, right, yes, I saw an e-mail from him before I left. I need to look it over more, but I think it sounds like a pretty good deal. I'd be eager to hear your thoughts, as well."

"But how?" I asked.

Jackson let out a laugh. “Good lawyering, that’s how.”

“I mean, I never doubted your skills as a lawyer, but this, this is amazing. I’d love to hear how you did it.”

“We can talk later; we have some other things to talk about first. But long story short, I asked for a lot of proof, documents and details that they couldn’t provide. I knew that they wouldn’t be able to provide those to the court because I know you, Aiden, and well, it looks like my plan worked. They knew that they wouldn’t be able to go up against us in court, they didn’t have a leg to stand on.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice nearly a whisper. Jackson had finally trusted that I was innocent. That meant more than almost anything else he had said.

“See you soon?” he asked.

“Of course. I’m heading over there now.”

We got off the phone and I left for my mom’s house. It was a short drive over to her place and when I arrived and walked into the formal living room, I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“Harper?”

She was there with Jackson, and when I entered, she got off the couch and came over to me. I wrapped my arms around her, and on instinct, went to kiss her, but she stopped me.

“Wait. I need to tell all of you something, and well, you may not feel like kissing me after I’m finished.”

“Nonsense,” I said, but she stared up at me with sadness in her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I—I need to wait until everyone is here, including Nate and Kat,” she said. “That way I can tell all of you at once.”

“Harper!” Kat squealed as she ran into the room. We had both been upstairs; Kat in her room and me in the office working when Jackson had asked us to all meet.

Kat ran to her best friend and hugged her tightly. I stood back, surprised and happy to see Harper, but unsure what was going on. Everyone in the room had a worried look on their face. After Kat and Harper hugged it out, I moved in for my turn. I wanted to kiss her, and it felt natural to lean in, but Harper kept a distance between us. I remembered her wishes that what we had was supposed to end once we left France.

“I have something I need to tell all of you,” she said. “Actually, I have a lot I need to tell you, and I don’t think it’s going to go over too well, so please, sit down.”

I took one of the chairs as everyone else sat down in various spots in the room. Only Harper remained standing, her hands in front of her. She was digging her nails into her palms and refused to look at any of us. She was quiet for a long time but none of us rushed her. Clearly whatever she had to tell us was not easy for her to say.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her cheeks were wet with fresh tears. I wanted to run to her, but she held up a hand as if to stop any of us from doing just that.

“First of all, it’s about time I came clean about something. You’ve been wondering who leaked the photos of your dad, tearing your family apart. Well... you’re looking at her.”

Her eyes peeled open, as if trying to gauge a response.

A cacophony of voices all asked the same thing.

“How?”

“What?”

“I don’t understand.”

I remembered what my dad had said about a redheaded teenager, and it all made sense now.

Kat stood up, but Harper once again held up a hand. “I was walking home from my summer job, and I saw your dad on the patio of a bar. He wasn’t alone. I got a bad feeling, so I watched him for a bit and took photos as he and the woman started getting close. But please know, I had no intention of making this public. I only wanted to show the photos to Kat and maybe your mom, because she deserved to know she was being cheated on, so I printed them out and showed Kat, but then I lost them and—”

Before she could finish, Kat cleared her throat loudly. “It wasn’t you that released the photos, Harper. It was me.”

“What?” Harper stared at her best friend with wide eyes. “I don’t understand... how?”

“You didn’t lose them; I took them from you.”

Jackson remarked. “Figures. You always did want to ruin Dad’s life.”

“It wasn’t to ruin Dad’s life, Jackson. He did that all on his own.” Kat’s voice was loud and confident.

Jackson was standing now close to Kat. Too close. I got up and placed myself between my sister and brother, in case things were about to get ugly.

A voice came from the entry to the room. “Your sister is lying.”

Mom was standing in the doorway, a solemn expression on her face.

“Mom, you don’t have to—”

“No, it’s about time the truth came out,” Mom said, coming into the room. She looked straight at Jackson, and there was sadness in her eyes as she spoke. “Kat came to me about the photos, she told me there was proof of his affair. I had long suspected it, but I never had any concrete evidence. I asked her to get the photos from Harper, but to keep everything private. I’m sorry, Harper, I didn’t want to involve you in any of this, but by trying to keep you out of it, you’ve blamed yourself all these years and for that, I am truly sorry.”

Harper just stood there, with her mouth open, but no sound came out. She seemed as shocked as the rest of us.

“I also knew how to find more personal files. I had access to his computer, and when I knew he was cheating, I retrieved everything I could and uncovered more than I expected. I released everything to a journalist I knew. Maybe it was petty, but I was also looking out for this family. I knew your father was likely to hang us out to dry, and I couldn’t let him do that to my kids.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and it pained me to see my mother this way. She had suffered under Dad’s verbal abuse and blatant neglect for years, likely to keep the family together at all costs. All these years, I knew that she deserved better, and I was grateful for everything coming to light. Seeing her come alive again these last few years had been worth it.

I was the first to go to her. I hugged her and told her, “I’m sorry for everything he did to you.”

Aiden was right there too. “You did the right thing, Mom.”

Kat came over sniffing. “Mom, you didn’t have to. I was willing to take the blame for everything.”

Mom stroked Kat’s hair and smiled at her daughter. “What kind of mom would I be if I let you do that, dear? I’m not like your father. I will take responsibility for my actions, and it’s about time the truth came out.”

Jackson was the last one to go to Mom. Aiden and I looked at each other, then at our brother. We feared what he might say

or do now that he knew the truth.

Mom looked at him and said, “I’m sorry, Jackson. I truly am. I thought it was best for you guys, but maybe I was wrong.”

He cut her off, slowly closing the distance between them. When he hovered above her, staring deep into her eyes, I almost stepped between them, but Jackson held out a hand to stop me.

“No, Mom. *I’m* sorry,” he said. “I never realized how awful he was to you, to everyone. At Christmas, and when we saw him last, I realized what type of man he was, and you didn’t deserve that. None of us did.”

“So you forgive me?” she asked.

“I do. As long as you forgive me for being a dick all these years and supporting the wrong parent.”

She smiled and the two hugged.

“Of course, son,” she said. “I will always love you, and nothing will ever change that.”

Harper was standing off to the side, still speechless. Alone. I went to her.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m just – I’m not sure what to think of all this. All these years I blamed myself. I thought I had lost the photos on the bus on my way home and they fell into the wrong hands but it wasn’t my fault after all. Not completely at least?”

“Not your fault at all,” Kat said from behind me. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you; my mom swore me to secrecy to avoid the fallout from my brothers for you and me. I had no idea you had held onto the guilt all this time though. Your photos were such a small part of it all, the release of the documents was the main part and there’s no way you would have been able to leak that.”

“I thought... I don’t know what I thought, to be honest. I thought the journalist just uncovered more about him once he saw what type of man he was.”

Kat hugged her best friend and I wrapped my arms around both of them.

“Dad ruined his own life,” I said. “Neither of you, nor Mom, did this to him.”

Jackson came over to us. “I’m sorry to both of you.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry that I couldn’t have been honest with you, Jackson.” Kat said.

“I didn’t exactly make it safe to talk to me before, but I promise that I hold no hard feelings against either of you.” His eyes moved past Kat onto Harper. She had looked so scared as he approached, but both of their faces softened as he hugged her tightly.

“There’s more,” she whispered against Jackson’s shoulder.

“More?”

“I have more I have to tell you, all of you,” she said.

Before I could find the words to tell them I was pregnant, Rose Bishop was at my side. “I’m so sorry, Harper. Like Kat said, I never imagined that you blamed yourself all these years,” she said. “There’s no way you would have had access to all his financials to release that information.”

“I guess I just believed it was all my fault. I just felt so bad, for what happened to your family.”

“Don’t feel bad. I always appreciated you so much for what you did, Harper. By seeing the proof, I was able to break free from that marriage and save my family. We might have struggled after the divorce, but as you can see, we are building our family back into something stronger than it ever was before. Do you think we’d be here hugging and talking about our feelings if he was still in our lives?”

“No, I guess not,” I replied.

“We are stronger without Dad,” Jackson said. “It took me a while to realize it, but it’s the truth. We still have some healing to do, but I have a feeling that we are going to be even stronger than before, and my brothers and I are going to be better men without his influence in our lives.”

I hugged Jackson again, the tears in my eyes no longer from sorrow or sadness, but from the joy of seeing everyone coming together.

“So what else did you want to tell us?” Jackson asked.

My heart dropped.

I feared that what I was about to say could cause more problems for this family, but they deserved to know. The guys deserved to know that I was pregnant and one of them was the father.

My eyes moved over everyone in the room. Kat and Rose were there too, did I really want them to know? But they stared at me with curious eyes.

“I, well, um, as everyone knows, I got a bit closer to the guys on our trip in France. Maybe a bit closer than I should have, I don’t know...”

I couldn’t look Rose Bishop in the eyes. I had not meant to include her in this initial conversation.

“We regret nothing,” Aiden said, giving me a wink and a playful smile.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and finally blurted out, “I’m pregnant.”

I watched the faces of those around me. Jackson’s jaw dropped. Aiden’s grin wavered a bit. Nate just stared at me as if he hadn’t heard me correctly. And Kat... her face twisted into a look of confusion and then shock.

Rose was the only one smiling at me. She looked so happy, so pleased with my announcement. “Wow, congratulations, Harper. Or should I say that I hope congratulations are in order? I know that you ended things with Tony, please tell me he is not the father?”

“No, he’s not, thankfully,” I said.

“Well then, may I ask, who is the lucky man?”

I looked at the brothers who all seemed to be slowly realizing that this wasn’t a joke. Somehow, one of us was going to have to explain to their mom that it could be any one of them.

Kat was the one who spoke up first. “Sooo... it could be any one of them?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling a weight on my chest. I couldn’t look my best friend in the eye.

“Jesus,” she said.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

Rose spoke next. “I don’t understand? Any one of who?”

Thankfully, it was Nathan who piped up.

“Mom, well, it could be any of *us*. Aiden, Jackson, or me.”

I opened my eyes long enough to see Rose Bishop’s face. Her eyes widened as she realized what they meant, and she was quiet for a long time. My heart raced, just wanting her to say *something*, even if it was to shame me.

“And you boys, you knew? You’re all okay with that?”

“We knew, and we are okay with it,” Jackson said.

“Oh, alright then,” Rose said, letting out a nervous laugh. She shook her head and continued laughing. “Relationships today aren’t what they used to be, that’s for sure. I don’t understand the youth of today, but I guess I don’t really have to. So does this mean I’m going to be a grandma?”

“It does,” Aiden said slowly.

“Well, that is something worth celebrating then,” she said.

It was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

“You’re – you’re okay with this?” I stammered.

“Being a grandma? Of course I am, dear,” she said with a sweet smile. “And I’ve always loved you and thought of you as family, Harper. Now this makes it official. I do hope that you can figure things out with the boys... whatever works for the four of you, it’s really none of my business.”

She took my hands in hers and gave them a squeeze.

“We promise that we will work things out,” Jackson said.

“Can we have a moment with Harper, please?” Nate asked.

“Sure, of course,” Rose answered. She seemed chipper and said again, “I’m going to be a grandma!” before leaving.

Kat was still there though, frozen in place. Her arms were crossed in front of her, and she stared at me with a look I couldn't make out, even after all the years of our friendship.

“Kat—”

“I think I ‘m going to leave you guys alone,” she said, hurrying from the room before I could chase after her.

“Give her some space,” Jackson said. “She just needs some time to get used to the news.”

It pained me to see my best friend upset at me if that's what it was. We'd fought before, but she was always loud and brash with her opinion. I wasn't sure what to make of her response, but I knew I also needed to talk to the guys. Jackson was right, I'd give her a moment.

“So one of us is going to be a father?” Aiden asked.

“Yes... and there's a problem, considering you're triplets...”

“We won't be able to tell who the father is,” Jackson realized.

“Really?” Aiden asked.

“Our DNA is identical. It could be any one of us.”

“So... what does this mean for us?” Nathan asked.

“It means, well, we have to work together,” Jackson said.

“I don't want to choose. I can't choose,” I said softly.

“Who said anything about choosing?” Aiden asked.

I looked at the three of them. “Because one of you will want to step up and be a father, I imagine...”

“Why just one of us?” Jackson asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“It worked while we were in France, we have shown you that we can share, and we all work well together so why do we have to be monogamous? Just because society tells us that families are two parents doesn't mean that it has to be that way.” Jackson said.

“We could be one large family,” Aiden said.

“I like the sound of that, actually,” Nathan agreed.

I looked at them. They were right, when we were together in France, it was perfect. Could it always be that perfect?

And what was the alternative, picking one of them and *only* one of them for the rest of my life when I wanted to be with *all* of them?

Jackson said it perfectly—why did it have to be two people in a relationship? Who made the rules?

“I like the sound of that too,” I said. “Do you think we can actually do this?”

The three of them hugged me, surrounding me with their warmth.

“I know we can,” Jackson said.

“We’re going to be dads,” Aiden chuckled, making the rest of us laugh.

“We are! I always wanted to be a dad,” Nathan said.

The boys talked excitedly about the baby.

“Maybe there will be triplets,” Jackson said with a boyish grin.

“Oh God, no, I don’t think I could handle that.” I laughed.

“And what about your career?” Nathan asked, reminding me that even though I was about to be a mother, I was more than just a mother and partner. The guys cared about what I wanted as well.

“I had decided even before the pregnancy that I was not happy in academia. I think Kat is right... I might look into getting my teacher certification. I wanted to study literature because of my love of reading as a child and I think fostering that in other kids could be my calling in life. I think I just got lost, so focused on what would sound impressive, you know?”

“You are impressive regardless of what you do, I hope you know that.” Jackson said.

My cheeks flushed. “Thank you, I appreciate that.”

“I only speak the truth,” Jackson said. “And I know I speak for all of us when I say it’s one of the many things we love about you.”

Love.

Did they love me?

I stared back at them and saw it in their eyes.

“I love you too, all of you,” I said.

* * *

AFTER CELEBRATING WITH THE BOYS, I told them I needed to find Kat. I slipped away and searched the house for her, but I didn’t have to search too long. She was in her favorite place, the place she always escaped to even as a child.

No surprise, it was the pool in the backyard. It was heated, but she wasn’t in it, just her feet dangling in the water with her back to the house as I stepped out into the garden. I took my shoes off and sat down beside her, dipping my feet into the warm water, as well.

Kat didn’t say anything, though she glanced in my direction with a small smile.

“I’m sorry, Kat. I didn’t intend for any of this to happen.”

“I know you didn’t,” she said. She took my hand in hers, giving it a squeeze. “Are they okay? The guys, I mean? They aren’t at each other’s throats?”

“No, they’re happy, actually. We have come to an agreement, one where I don’t have to choose.”

“As in... you’re going to be together, as a foursome, for good?”

I shot her a look. “How did you know?”

She shrugged. “Just a guess. I see the way you four are together, and honestly, I see the way they look at you and the

way you look at them. It's real, Harper. And as long as everyone is happy, I'm happy."

"Thank you, Kat."

"It's just weird, you're my best friend and now you're going to be with my brothers. But I can get over it."

"You've always told me you wished I was your sister, now I am, in a way."

"And you're giving me a niece or nephew, which I have to say, I am so stoked about," she said, her smile growing even wider. "Maybe you'll even have triplets like my mom did—"

I laughed. "Why does everyone go straight to that? I'm just hoping for one healthy baby. Maybe we can talk about more in the future, but for now, one is good. I have to figure my life out, you know?"

"They'll take care of you."

"But I don't want that. I need to forge my own path."

"I know you do. We're alike in that regard, one reason we're friends."

Her response piqued my interest. "What are you thinking about?"

"Well... I've been researching opening my own tattoo studio."

"You totally should. Not like you have to worry about money."

She looked back at the house and cringed a little. "Sure, but I don't want to fall back on my mom's money. Talking to Jean-Luc in France and seeing how he worked his way up from nothing... it's made me realize I've had it too easy. It's about time I learned to take care of myself and not rely on others. I want to do this on my own, without any help from anyone."

"Jean-Luc, huh? Do you still talk?" My cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

"Yeah, we do. I might even visit him next month."

A voice came from behind us. “Jean-Luc?”

It was Jackson.

“What are you doing out here?” Kat asked.

“I was looking for you, I wanted to talk to you, too,” he said. “But did I hear what I think I did”? Your lover boy was Jean-Luc?”

Jackson sat down on the other side of his sister. His voice had taken a very serious and harsh tone all of a sudden.

Kat rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sorry I didn’t tell you that I was hooking up with your friend, but like, considering the circumstances, I think you owe me this one, Jackson.”

“I don’t care that you hooked up with my friend, but that bastard—”

“I’m a grown woman, Jackson.”

“And he’s a married man, Kat. Did he tell you that?”

The look on Kat’s face told us both that she had no idea.

“He’s married?” she asked.

“Yes, he is. Her name is Elodie, and she’s a pastry chef. They have a daughter, too.”

“Excuse me for a moment,” Kat said, slowly standing up from the pool. Both Jackson and I stood up with her, following her into the house.

“Kat, are you okay?” I asked her.

“No, but I will be once I give that asshole a piece of my mind. I’m not going to be a fucking homewrecker.”

“That fucking dick,” Jackson muttered to himself. “I’m going back to France and kicking his ass.”

Kat stopped and turned to look at him. “Are you defending my honor, Jackson?” She laughed, which surprised both of us.

“I can’t believe he hurt my sister,” Jackson said.

“You never cared about me being hurt before,” Kat replied.

“I’ve always cared, Kat. Who do you think beat up that high school prick who got a little handsy when you told him to leave you alone?”

“That was you?”

“I’ve always watched out for you. You’re my little sister and I love you.”

“I love you too, Jackson. Even when you’ve been a dick to me.” She punched him playfully in the arm to keep things from getting too serious.

“Are you going to be okay, Kat?” I asked, just to be sure.

“I will be,” she said, giving me a small smile. “I’m tougher than this.”

“I know you are,” I agreed.

She looked between Jackson and me. “I think it’s about time to practice my French insults.”

She went into the house, and even though I wanted to follow her, Jackson held me back. “She’s going to be okay,” he said.

“And you? Are you going to be okay?”

My question seemed to take him by surprise. “Me? Why?”

“The drinking.”

“Oh,” he said. “If it’s any consolation, I have the name of a therapist and plan to call first thing in the morning. Something I never thought I would do. I looked up AA meetings online and there’s one near here tomorrow evening that I plan to go to.”

“I’m proud of you, Jackson.”

“I need to do this. I knew I needed to do it before, but this baby... it really puts things into perspective. I don’t want to make the same mistakes my dad did, I want to give our family a happy life.

I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his.

We were human. We might make mistakes at times. We had our flaws, and I knew all of us had some healing to do. But I believed in us, and at the end of the day, that's what mattered most.

I believed in us.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

Marriage might not be in the cards for me, but I was okay with that. I was a Bishop, and soon, with Jackson's legal help, my last name would reflect that.

My son was a Bishop from day one, and he looked just like his fathers. Kat had hoped for a girl, since the boys were outnumbering us, but she would have to wait a bit longer.

She loved her nephew more than life itself though, that much was clear from how we couldn't peel him out of her arms every time we were together. The boys were already asking when we could try for another, and I was happy to have more—one day.

Milo Bishop was our world though, and perhaps the most spoiled child I'd ever known. How many infants got to fly via a private jet to spend the holidays in France, after all? It was going to be his family tradition now too, just like it was for his fathers. But one thing that had changed, as our family grew, we decided to travel more comfortably. Jackson had the connections, and we were now the owners of a small jet, which still blew my mind. I was just a poor girl from South Carolina, how was this my life?

Arriving at the chateau, not much had changed with the house. The decorations were subtle, as before. The food, amazing as always. But a lot had changed with *us*.

The boys and I didn't have to hide our affection for each other. Not only did Rose and Kat accept our relationship for what it was, they were supportive and happy for us.

Milo had his own room set up in the chateau—they had converted a library to a nursery with baby blue walls and a mural of zoo animals but just like at home, Milo slept in a crib not far from where his dads and I slept in our big, oversized bed. I never had to worry about who would get up with the baby in the night, someone was always there. With four parents, it was a lot easier to raise a little one, and I had to admit that Milo wasn't the only one spoiled with the arrangement.

On Christmas Eve, when Rose brought out the familiar presents, every one of us – including little Milo – had matching pajamas.

“How can he be so perfect?” Kat cooed at him in his elf pajamas.

“I mean, look at us,” Jackson said with a cocky tone and his crooked grin. “With parents like his, there's no way he wouldn't be perfect.”

“Oh look at this,” Kat said. “Meredith sent me the boy's school pictures, and they look just like you guys.”

Jackson's smile wavered ever so slightly, but the boys and Kat were working on their issues in therapy and came to terms with the fact that there were two other Bishops out there—Andrew and Cole. Meredith had left their father, Jackson's words having got through to her, and while Meredith and Rose weren't likely to be BFFs anytime soon, Rose didn't blame the boys at all and encouraged her kids to have a relationship with their little brothers.

Jackson had seen them once; Nate and Aiden had visited twice. Kat was the one who had the biggest role in their lives, she clearly loved kids. I hoped one day that she might be able to have a family of her own.

“Hey, I know we usually exchange gifts tomorrow, but there's something we'd like to give Harper tonight, if that's

okay,” Nathan said, speaking to the family softly.

Kat willingly took Milo from me, and the grin on her face said she had an idea what this was about. Rose did, as well. They took a seat on the loveseat and watched in anticipation.

“What’s going on?” I laughed.

The boys each pulled out a small square box.

Then they dropped down on their knees in front of me and opened the boxes. Each one contained a diamond ring. My jaw dropped, but I was also laughing, because I knew there was no way we could have a traditional wedding.

“What’s going on?” I giggled.

Jackson cleared his throat and spoke first. “While the law won’t ever legally recognize us as your husbands...”

Nate continued... “And we may not be able to have a traditional wedding or marriage...”

“We have planned a commitment ceremony for the four of us, to promise to love and cherish each other forever,” Aiden wrapped it up.

I covered my mouth with a hand, afraid I might squeal from the excitement.

“So like a wedding but not?” I asked, nearly jumping up and down.

“Exactly,” Nathan said, his dark eyes shimmering as he grinned from ear-to-ear.

“Then... yes!” My entire body wiggled with excitement. “I can wear a white dress and everything?”

“Whatever you want, it’s your day, sweetheart,” Aiden said.

They placed the rings on my finger. They stacked and made one, perfect ring. Just like the four of us, when we were together, we just made sense. I hugged each of them and kissed them deeply, excitement coursing through my veins.

I thought the Christmas before was the best of my life, but I understood that as long as we were together, as long as I had my family, every year would be better than the last.

The End

Did you enjoy Harper's love story with the three sexy triplets? Get an exclusive glance years later into their happily ever after, [HERE](#).

Craving more? Check out all the sexy standalones in my catalog [HERE](#).

Meanwhile, check out my previously published romance with a fun free excerpt on the next page!

LAST BITE (PREVIEW)



He's the beast that bites. And I can't stay away.

Meet Xavier.

Tall. Dark. Mysterious.

Older. Much Older.

The man I grew up fantasizing about.

I'm all grown up now.

And my hot neighbor, turned demanding boss is beginning to finally notice.

I'm feverishly waiting for the Halloween Ball to profess my love.

I mean he's pretty fr*ckin perfect.

Except for the small part about living off human blood.

Or him potentially planting a seed inside me that could change everything.

KARA

“Love is the most beautiful of dreams and the worst of nightmares.” — Aman Jassal, Rainbow - the shades of love

The alarm startled me awake from another nightmare.

I sat up. My heart was pounding as I stared at the walls around me.

You can breathe now.

You're home. Safe.

My childhood home in New Orleans wasn't really home anymore - but on nights like these I welcomed the nostalgia.

Looking around my room it was hard to believe I'd been living in the city for four years. My childhood room looked like nothing had changed this entire time.

Pink walls, which perfectly matched the color of the twin size bed. I dreaded it. Pepto pink had been my mother's choice.

Reflexively, I reached for my neck, searching for any sign of penetration.

I felt foolish even checking, but my dream felt so real. So frightfully real.

I'd been having dreams like these since I'd returned home.

And they all involved Xavier.

Dark. Mysterious. Haunted man next-door.

He hardly knew me. But God, did I *know* him.

I'd been consumed by him ever since my adolescence. But these dreams were so much more raw, vivid, and erotic in comparison to my virginal fantasies.

I needed to stop watching so many damn horror movies on Netflix.

What the hell was going on with me?

I hit the alarm button on my phone, silencing it as I climbed from my bed.

“Dammit, the interview!”

Not just any interview.

My dream job.

Today was *the* day.

The day I'd been working toward for the last several years. I'd sacrificed so much, worked my ass off, and finally, I had the chance to interview at the most prestigious restaurant in town - *La Myrtille*.

Having the opportunity to work there would kick start the career of a lifetime - one that would give me the experience I needed to open my own restaurant.

Was it a coincidence that my wild sexual nightmare involved the very man that would be conducting my interview?

Good morning Xavier. You can count on me to do a job well done. I'll be your best asset. Teachable and eager. More than you know.

Shit. Shit. Shit!!! I needed to get my shit together or I would blow this interview.

I had to push the weird dream out of my head.

A shower.

A COLD shower.

After frantically drying my hair, I pulled my long, blonde hair back into a classy chignon, though a few soft tendrils fell free around my face.

I pinned them back, wanting to appear as sharp as possible. I'd bought a brand-new suit for this interview, wanting to dress to impress.

The navy-blue skirt fell just to my knees and hugged my figure, though I'd hoped not too suggestively. Adding a white button up blouse with a matching navy jacket, and I was almost ready to go.

I tied a smart scarf around my neck, hopefully upping the sophistication quotient a bit more.

I stared at myself in the mirror and knew my dad would have been proud.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I had to carefully wipe at them so I didn't smear my mascara.

No time for tears, Kara, I chided myself. You can't mess up your makeup right before the most important job interview of your life.

With a sigh, I grabbed my portfolio which contained a copy of my resume. I didn't have much job experience yet, but my education coupled with my internship in Paris should be more than enough to land this entry-level cooking job. I hoped.

I checked the time and found I was running late. I rushed down the stairs and into the kitchen. My mother was sitting at the table with her daily cup of coffee and her crossword puzzle. My father's seat was empty, as it has been for years.

Good morning, pumpkin, he would have said.

My mom looked up from her puzzle after a moment, her gaze lost.

“Good luck, dear. I know you'll do great.”

She returned to her puzzle, and I left without a word.

My heart felt empty, but it was a feeling I'd grown used to over the last year. I hadn't felt whole since my father's disappearance and presumed death.

And my mother hadn't made the nightmare any easier.

We had deep wounds, which I didn't know would ever repair.

Welcome to my life.

A wonderful train wreck.

I PULLED open the heavy wooden doors that were at least eight feet tall and stepped inside *La Myrtille*. It was like stepping back in time. Little had changed inside the restaurant; it was, as always, classically elegant. Perfect.

The dining area was also much darker than I remembered. Even though it was early in the day and wasn't open yet, it felt like evening with the thick, burgundy curtains blocking out the sunlight.

My eyes required several seconds to adjust to the lack of natural light. The room appeared to glow with candlelight, either from actual candles on the tables or lighting installed to give that feeling to the place.

"Kara!" Julia cried as she rushed for me, giving me a bit of a jolt in the silence.

I embraced my best friend, happy that I'd get to see her before going in for my interview. She was a hostess at the restaurant and had been for several years now. She was a big reason I got the interview so quickly after putting in a good word for me with her boss.

"I have to warn you, girlie, Xavier is in a mood this morning," Julia said with a frown. "He got here before any of us did, and he's been locked in his office all morning."

The fact that she even got to interact with the world-renowned restaurateur on a daily basis was enough to turn me green with envy. She insisted she hardly ever saw him, that he worked evenings most of the time and she usually worked days. It didn't matter to me. I'd always admired him from afar, thinking he was one of the most beautiful and sophisticated men I'd ever seen in my life. To speak with him had been a dream of mine since I was thirteen. We were practically neighbors, though I didn't see him much growing up. When I hit puberty, I certainly started noticing him.

My thirteen-year-old self would have absolutely died knowing I was about to sit down with him in his office and actually interview for a job in his establishment.

"You okay?" Julia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm fine. Just nervous. Why?"

"Because you're awfully quiet and don't seem to be listening to a word I'm saying."

"Sorry. I'm just going over everything I want to say in my head." My cheeks flushed. I couldn't bring myself to admit the real reason I was distracted - that I was more nervous about being in Xavier's presence than the actual interview itself. I was more than qualified for the job. I could sell myself to just about anyone regarding what experience I did have, especially since I'd rehearsed it countless times in mock interviews with my college advisor.

I was prepared for the interview, but was I prepared for Xavier?

An older woman with greying hair and a stern, cold face stepped out from the back and walked toward us. I straightened my posture, recognizing her instantly as the head chef - the woman I'd be training under if I got this job.

"You must be Kara Greene," she stated, looking me up and down. Before I could answer, she added, "I'm Suzy Petrovich. Come with me."

I looked at Julia, who shrugged, and followed Ms. Petrovich. The woman didn't say a word as she led me into the

back - which gave me a quick glimpse of the beautiful kitchen with all stainless-steel appliances - and through a door to the side. At the end of a dark hallway was a heavy wooden door. She walked me down the hallway and knocked.

“You may enter,” a male’s voice called from the other side.

Suzy opened the door and stepped inside. “Ms. Greene is here to see you, Mr. Bordeaux.”

Suzy stepped aside and motioned for me to enter. As soon as I walked past her, I saw Xavier behind the desk. He gracefully rose to greet me, towering over me by at least a foot. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe, much less talk, as it felt like all the oxygen had left the room. I just stared at him, transfixed on his piercing grey eyes.

He hadn’t changed a bit in the four years I’d been away. Not even one stray grey mixed with the raven black hair on his head. His hair was a little longer than I remembered, coming to almost his collar. It was styled nicely, silky with just a hint of natural wave to it. It took everything in my power not to reach out and try to touch it, just to make sure it was his real hair. It looked too perfect to be real.

Everything about Xavier seemed too good to be true. I never understood how a man could be so beautiful yet so manly at the same time. His skin was fair, which contrasted nicely with his dark hair, making his face appear to be carved from marble.

For a second, I felt like I was drowning in his presence. He reached out his hand, and I stopped staring into his eyes. As soon as we broke eye contact, I could breathe once more. The room felt calmer and more normal.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Bordeaux,” I said, sliding my hand into his and giving it a firm shake.

Xavier didn’t say anything for a time, his grey eyes moving over me, inspecting me. He held onto my hand for a moment too long, then dropped it as if he’d forgotten he was holding it.

“Please, call me Xavier,” he offered. He looked past me at the chef in the doorway, whom I’d all but forgotten. “You may go now, Suzy. Thank you.”

I heard the door close behind us, leaving just the two of us alone. I met Xavier’s gaze and felt the same as before - as if the air had been sucked out of the room. I noticed how dark it was in there too, even darker than the dining room. Black curtains blocked the windows entirely, and except for a small vintage lamp on his desk, there was no other light source.

Still, Xavier seemed to glow across the desk. With all the darkness in the room, I remembered the dream the night before. If it wasn’t a completely ludicrous idea, I’d think that maybe he was really a vampire.

Xavier shifted in his seat, relaxing as he steeped his fingers in front of his face. The room felt less stifled all of a sudden and much more comfortable, as if he could control the tension in the room, but I knew I had to be imagining that as well.

“So Ms. Greene, care to get started?” he asked.

XAVIER

“**Y**es, I’d love to.” Her voice was barely a whisper as she reached inside a portfolio she was holding.

I stole glances at her, and every time I looked, something shifted inside me. I recognized her name because she lived in the same neighborhood I did, just down the hill from my estate. Her family was fairly prominent in the community as well, but that wasn’t what made her familiar to me.

Strands of pale blonde hair fell loose from her updo as she looked down at the portfolio in her hand. She passed something to me, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her - feeling a tug in the center of my body.

Her blue eyes were the color of the sea. That particular shade of blue was one I recognized well and had only seen once before. Her facial structure was delicate. A perfectly oval face with large, mesmerizing eyes. It was more than just the blonde hair and blue eyes that struck me as similar to my Isabelle; her entire bone structure, everything about her, was reminiscent of the woman I’d lost a century before.

It took me a moment to realize I hadn’t been listening to a word she said. I glanced down at the resume she had slipped across my desk, and I’d seen it before since she’d submitted it online only a week prior. Her credentials were impressive, especially for an introductory position. I had no one else in mind for the job, no one with an education like hers along with actual working experience in France too.

But I knew before we began the interview that I couldn't hire her.

"Do you have any questions for me, Mr.—"

"Xavier," I corrected her before she could finish her sentence.

"Yes, sorry. Do you have any questions for me, Xavier?" She stared at me with such hope in her eyes. I'd seen that look before, and I was still living with the pain from letting Isabelle into my life for a similar look.

I hated to crush the girl's spirit. It wasn't fair to her that she looked like my lost love, but I knew myself. I knew my limits. I couldn't handle seeing her every day, seeing the resemblance and feeling the pain day in and day out. It was like the wound had never fully healed and being in her presence picked away at the scab, bringing all the pain back to the surface, raw and unwavering.

"I think that'll be all, Ms. Greene, thank you."

She blinked; her mouth open in surprise. "Really?" she asked me. "That's it? You don't want to ask me anything about my experiences in France or the dishes I've excelled at making, or what skills I can bring to your restaurant?"

"No, I think I've seen enough." I flinched at my choice of words. I'd clearly based my decision on her appearance alone.

Kara's perfectly pink lips pursed together, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest. I couldn't help but notice her suit, the way it hugged her petite, curvy body. The similarities to my Isabelle were unnerving.

I couldn't afford being attracted to her; it wasn't just about her resemblance to a past love of mine - I had a rule against getting close to humans. I saw the way she looked at me, I could feel her attraction to me, the heat emanating from her. I saw the way she licked her lips and batted her eyelashes when she looked at me. And my attraction to her, while less obvious, was causing tension already.

I couldn't risk it.

Kara took a deep breath, and when she started talking, it felt like the floodgates had been lifted.

“When I was thirteen years old, my parents brought me to *La Myrtille* because it’s all I wanted for my birthday. Your restaurant had just opened a year prior and was outside my parent’s usual budget, but they brought me here because I begged and begged. That birthday changed my life, Xavier,” she stated, her voice passionate. “It was at that dinner that I first realized how special food could be, how a meal can be so important to someone. I discovered my love for fine dining that day, and I spent months and months trying to recreate some of your dishes at home. I’d found my calling in life, hosting dinner parties for friends to try new recipes, and later getting into one of the best culinary schools in the country. I specifically went to Paris for my internship, knowing you’re from there, where you trained. I knew I would one day be sitting here, in front of you. It’s always been my dream to come back to where my love of fine dining started. I’d appreciate it if you gave me more than two minutes of your time.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back in her seat as if preparing to stay awhile. Her eyes were focused on me.

I glanced down at her resume again. Impressive as hell. She had a fire in her belly, clearly. She had passion and drive, combined with the skill.

“Fine,” I conceded. “You can start tomorrow, part-time. You can work days to begin.”

Putting her on days meant I’d be less likely to run into her. I rarely ever came into the restaurant during the day because I had to arrive before sunrise and spend all fucking day cooped up in this office or in the back, which never put me in the best of moods. Sometimes it was necessary, but I tried to keep it to a minimum. It made me grumpy and prone to rash decisions, like the one I’d just made.

Kara’s eyes lit up and she smiled brightly. “I promise you won’t regret this, Mr. Bordeaux.”

I didn't bother to correct her. She was practically jumping for joy, filled with raw energy I hadn't subjected myself to in a while. I had to admit, it was refreshing for a moment.

I stood and escorted the young lady out of my office, back down the hall and into the kitchen. Suzy was prepping for today's lunch menu.

"I won't be here in the morning when you arrive," I said, stopping near Suzy. "Suzy will show you the ropes."

Suzy nodded but didn't look up from measuring the ingredients we'd be using for today's special. "Welcome to *La Myrtille*, kid."

Kara lifted an eyebrow. "I'm twenty-two and a graduate of one of the top culinary schools in this country. I've worked alongside—"

I held up a hand to stop her.

Suzy stopped what she was doing and chuckled. "Sorry, but to the two of us, you're a kid. I mean no offense by it, but you're just starting out. Things are about to get real."

Suzy was a bit of a hardass, but she was also one of the best chefs I'd ever had the luxury of working for me. I knew Kara would give her a run for the money with the mouthiness though. I prayed the two of them could find a way to work together, because I couldn't have Kara working while I was there in the evenings. Suzy was her only option if she wanted to work for me.

Her feisty spirit only added to her resemblance of Isabelle, however, and I admired it in her. Her passion was the reason she got the job, and also the reason I regretted giving it to her.

Kara's blue eyes absorbed everything and everyone in the room, watching some of the other cooks as they sliced and diced. She walked over to our pastry chef and spoke softly to her, admiring her work. I couldn't take my eyes off her, even though it hurt everything inside me to look at her. I never knew my heart could ache so much until I lost Isabelle, and it had taken damn near a century for those wounds to heal. And now, I was living it all over again.

My gaze moved over Kara's figure, savoring the way her skirt hugged her hips and showed off the perfect hourglass figure. There was a tightness in my groin which caused me to shift uncomfortably.

"I have more work to do," I told Suzy, trying my hardest not to look at Kara. "Can you see her out?"

"Of course, boss," Suzy said with a nod, continuing her measuring.

I hurried out of the kitchen and back into the safety of my office before anyone had an opportunity to notice the bulge in my slacks. I fell into my leather chair with a sigh. My eyes landed on my desk, on the other piece of paper laying there. Another part of my past coming back to me.

It had my name written in my brother's familiar script. Inside was all the information for Sebastian's latest scheme. Or as he called it, a business plan. Knowing my brother, it would likely be some sort of scam. Nothing Sebastian ever did was within the confines of the law. He'd been a rogue when we were kids, and I doubted he would ever change.

"Why didn't you just stay away, Bash," I mumbled to myself, rubbing my temples. After more than a century apart, his appearance in my life was both surprising and unwelcome. Wherever my brother went, trouble wasn't far behind. We'd had to uproot our lives so many times because of him, and I'd finally built a life for myself in New Orleans. I didn't want him to ruin it.

KARA

“**T**o dreams coming true!” Julia toasted, clinking her glass against mine.

I still couldn't believe it. I got the job. This was the next step to one day owning my own restaurant like *La Myrtille*. Julia and I went out later that evening to celebrate in a small Bourbon Street bar filled with way too many tourists. It wasn't even close to Mardi Gras yet, but Halloween was approaching, which brought out all the people interested in the darker side of New Orleans.

I lifted my glass to my lips and took a sip of the mint julep. We were young and I was still fairly broke until I started bringing in an income, but Julia insisted that tonight was a night to live large and to spoil ourselves. I'd never had a mint julep before. I rarely drank since I'd turned twenty-one, focusing so much on school. Sure, there was wine or champagne tastings in some of my cooking classes and at my internship, but I'd never been much of a partier.

But Julia was right - tonight was a night to celebrate.

“You need to tell me all about Xavier and what I can expect working for him.”

Julia cocked an eyebrow, leaning back in her chair. The music was so loud coming from the dueling pianos nearby, and I feared I might not hear her. But I read her lips from across the table.

“There's not much to tell, really.”

“Come on, Julia. Don’t hold out on me like this,” I cackled, leaning closer to hear her better and to encourage her to keep talking.

She sighed. “Honestly, Kara, I rarely see Xavier. He works closely with Suzy and some of the chefs in the back, but mostly in the evenings when I’m not there. And when he is there, well, he’s just strange.”

“Strange how?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “He just keeps to himself. He’s not very social. And I’ve never seen him eat or drink anything, even at the events he holds for staff where we’re encouraged to eat and drink. He just stands off to the side and watches.”

I leaned forward to ask another question, but we were interrupted. Two fairly attractive men stumbled over to our table, one of them pulling a seat from another nearby table and setting it down next to me. He was blonde, fairly buff, and wearing a button-up shirt. He looked like a prep school kid with a trust fund. The other guy stood near Julia. She and I shared a look, and I rolled my eyes where only she could see.

“Hey there, beautiful,” the blonde next to me slurred.

“My name’s not beautiful,” I retorted, not bothering to glance at him.

“I meant that as a compliment.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m not interested.”

Julia grinned at me as the other guy - a brunette dressed pretty much identically to his friend - flirted with her. She seemed a little keener to talk to him. They weren’t bad looking men, but I wasn’t interested in either of them.

The blonde leaned closer, his breath reeking of whisky. He reached out his hand, which I didn’t take. He dropped it with a frown. “I’m Max.”

“Max, like I said, I’m not interested. I’m here to spend time with my friend, not be picked up by some frat boys in New Orleans to party.”

Julia chuckled and shook her head at me.

Max pushed the chair back and stood up. I thought we might have a problem as he stared down at me with a scowl on his face, but he motioned for his friend, "Come on, Nick. These girls are lame."

I rolled my eyes again, this time hard enough that they could have gotten stuck in the back of my head. Max and Nick stumbled away, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"You could have gone a little easier on them, Kara."

"Why should I? I didn't want to waste their time."

"They were kinda cute, you know."

"Kinda cute? Sure, but I've seen better."

"You mean you've seen Xavier, and no one else will do?"

My cheeks flushed pink. "I mean, yes, he's probably the most beautiful man in the world, but besides him - there are much better men out there than Max and Nick Douchebag."

Julia tried hard to suppress her laughter, but I could see the grin stretching across her face.

"What's that look for?" I asked her.

"Just, well, I remember when we were, what, fifteen? You told me you were saving yourself for Xavier. And I have to wonder if that's still true."

"I'm still a virgin, if that's what you're asking."

"I figured," Julia said, rolling her eyes. I glared at her and she giggled. "I don't mean it as an insult. I mean, you would have told me if you'd finally had sex."

I couldn't stay mad at her for that assumption, and I couldn't even be mad at her for remembering my teenage crush on Xavier. I'd talked about him a lot. While a lot of girls my age were crushing on Justin Bieber or one of the *Twilight* boys, I only had eyes for Xavier Bordeaux - and even though he was still a very unlikely catch, it felt more realistic than dreaming about a pop star or famous actor. At least Xavier lived in my neighborhood, even if he didn't know I was alive

back then - I was, after all, only a child and he was a grown man. It would have been creepy if he had noticed me. But now, I was twenty-two, and even though he should be somewhere in his forties or fifties, he didn't look a day over thirty.

“You still have a crush on him, don't you?” Julia asked. “That's why you keep bugging me for details.”

I shrugged. It was futile to deny it. Julia had known me since elementary school and could always tell when I was lying to her.

“You do realize he's at least twice your age, right?”

“He doesn't really look it.”

“Yeah, you're right about that. He's an ageless wonder.”

Julia's words brought me back to my dreams about Xavier, and I burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Well...I've been having some dreams lately.”

“Sexy dreams, I imagine?”

“Correct.”

She shook her head, laughing with me. “Girl, you're obsessed. You need to find yourself a more attainable man.”

“I know, I know, and now that I'm done with school, I can probably consider dating soon. After I get settled in at the job and all.”

“So you admit that chasing after Xavier is a bad idea?”

I shrugged and grinned. She threw a napkin at me. I batted it away and laughed. “Yes! Fine, you're right. I know it's a ridiculous fantasy. The guy is like twice my age, and if I want to be taken seriously in this industry, I can't risk fallout from chasing after one of the top restaurateurs in the world. But a girl can dream, right?”

“Sure, and it seems that you’re dreaming about him a lot these days.”

“Yeah, weird ones too.”

“Weird? How so?” she asked as she sipped her cocktail.

Feeling ridiculous, I mumbled, “Well, like, he’s a vampire in my dreams.”

She spat the drink all over the table, unable to contain the laughter. “A vampire? You’ve been watching too much damn *Twilight*.”

We were both laughing so much and so hard, it hurt. I wasn’t sure if it was the alcohol or just being with my best friend again. It had been so long.

“God, I missed this. I missed *you*,” I said.

She smiled at me. Even throughout the years apart, she remained my best friend in the entire world.

It felt so good to be home.

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