

Christmas
with

MY THREE

BEST FRIENDS

KAI LESY

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CHRISTMAS WITH MY THREE BEST FRIENDS

A CONTEMPORARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

KAI LESY

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DESCRIPTION

**What's more embarrassing than accidentally emailing
your crush?**

**When you've been crushing hard on your three best
friends...**

**And now they know all your wild, kinky fantasies about
them.**

We've weathered life's storms together,

Even the pain of betrayal.

They're my fierce protectors,

But clueless about my deepest desires.

And that's the safest way to shield my heart...

The Three Hot Best Friends:

We're pretty sure Shay sent us an email by mistake.

A list of her raunchiest desires...

Including the one that tightens our shorts.

We've been silently loving her for years,

But now... all bets are off.

**This holiday season, Shay's wildest dreams are our
command.**

All three of us, together with her.

And this time we're not holding back.

PROLOGUE

“‘Y’all are crazy.”

“You started it,” Richard replies with a soft chuckle. “Why don’t you try it?”

This is where I freeze, paralyzed by his words. “Wait, what?”

“Try it,” he says.

I am beyond flustered, yet not shocked nor outraged. To my own surprise, I’m intrigued. Curious. Even willing. My brain has definitely been rewiring itself over the past few days, because my reactions to invitations outside my comfort zone are once again appealing.

“Like, right now?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Marius leans forward, elbows resting on his thighs. His black tee stretches over his muscular shoulders, the warm brown of his eyes swirling with anticipation. Jax stirs in his seat, and I can tell he’s also extremely aroused. The mere sight of that generous bulge has me licking my lips as I look at the vibrator and decide it’s time to take things to the next level. They want me to. My best friend was right—what’s the harm if it is precisely what I’ve wanted for a long time?

Taking a deep breath, I set the toy aside and get up. “Perhaps I should lose the clothes first.”

“We wholeheartedly agree,” Richard smirks, arms crossed over his massive chest. His velvety gray vest struggles against

his torso, while the shirt wraps around his biceps, tightening with every flex. “Maybe start with the jacket.”

I nod slowly and do as I’m told, carefully removing the jacket. It lands on the sofa’s arm, followed by my silken shirt. Every movement is calculated and deliberate, though my heart is bouncing and my muscles feel taut, stretched and primed for something intense, something... otherworldly. The whole time, they watch me, lips pressed into thin lines and desire gleaming in their eyes.

I’m in nothing but a matching set of white lace lingerie. I feel strange. Not weird, not awkward, but... strange as they gaze upon me.

I welcome Marius, Jax, and Richard’s genuine admiration as I stand before them. Their eyes wander up and down, recording everything. Marius bites his lower lip when his gaze reaches my breasts. He has already tasted them, and he definitely wants more.

“You’re a stunning woman,” Jax mutters, one hand resting on his erection.

“Keep going,” Richard says, his voice lower than ever.

The emerald fires in his eyes demand my attention. I look at him as I unclip the bra and take it off. Then I look at Jax as I remove my panties with a slow, bending motion. A subtle groan escapes Marius’s throat, but he doesn’t move an inch as I take my seat on the sofa, making myself as comfortable as possible. I’ve played with smaller toys before, but not with such an enticing and attractive audience. And certainly not with this marvelous contraption.

“Who wants the remote?” I manage.

Richard moves like lightning as he snatches it from my hand. “I’ll go first.”

“Okay. Let’s see how this works,” I say. I gently insert the vibrator into my already dripping pussy. It goes in smoothly, and I position the smaller end against my clit. The large piece is delightfully thick, and I love the sensation. “Mhm... Yeah, it’s nice...”

“Let’s see what it can do,” Richard replies, watching me as he presses the On button on the remote.

Instantly, I arch my back in response as a flurry of steady vibrations ignite my core. “Oh, yes...”

It’s extraordinary... the speed with which I’m turned on. The ripples blow through me, making my hips sway as I tilt my head back. I catch a glimpse of Jax before I take a deep breath to try and hold on to the sensation for as long as I can. He’s got his cock out and is stroking that monstrous erection as he admires me.

Marius is barely self-controlled, the hunger blazing in his eyes as I’m compelled to touch my breasts with the hand that isn’t guiding the vibrator in and out of my drenched and eager pussy. I go slow, squeezing gently before I focus my index and middle fingers around the nipples. I pinch them just as the first orgasm rocks me into the bare wilderness. I cry out in sweet ecstasy as Richard intensifies the vibrations.

I feel my body moving, my knees bucking as I ride the wave.

“Do you like it?” Richard asks.

“Oh, God, yes... Don’t stop!”

He gets me to another level just as I come down from the pure bliss, colors exploding before my eyes. My breath is ragged, but I am nowhere near done. The constant vibration is downright addictive, and I feel raw and tender on the inside—every nerve ending responding to the deluge of unbridled pleasure.

“Marius... Come here,” I manage, panting as the tension tightens in my lower belly. “I would like to taste you...”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. Moments later, he’s out of his pants and kneeling on the sofa beside me. I stare at his cock, hunger gathering in my throat as I admire its sheer girth and generous length. I want him inside me. I want all of them inside me. But they’re right, we do have to start somewhere, and I want to repay them for every drop of pleasure they give me.

So, I wrap my fingers around the base of his throbbing erection and lick the tip. I taste the glistening, salty droplet of pre-cum awaiting. “Mhm... Better than I imagined,” I whisper.

“Take it all, then,” Marius replies, his eyes locked on mine as I open my mouth for him.

He slides in seamlessly, and I relax the back of my throat to welcome as much of him as I can. There’s a lot of him, but he is worth the effort. Back and forth, I slurp and suck him deep, while Richard ups the volume and sends me on another maddening ride. I moan and gasp for air, but Marius holds my head in place and fucks my mouth with slow, deliberate moves.

“I need more. Jax... You’re next,” I manage as Marius pulls back and plants a kiss on my lips.

He tastes himself on me and smiles softly. “Go easy on yourself, baby. You’ve got plenty of time to learn...”

“Go on, Jax,” Richard says. “I wanna see how much our queen can take tonight.”

Jax takes Marius’s place on the couch. His cock is different. Thicker and twitching with desire, the veins running along the meaty shaft as he puts it in my mouth. He tastes just as good, though.

“Fuck,” Jax curses under his breath. “Dammit, woman, you’re a natural...”

All I can do is moan as I revel in the continuous assault on my pussy and clit. Marius settles beside me, taking my left nipple in his mouth. He suckles hungrily while I service Jax to the point where I feel him swelling against my tongue. Slurping and licking his cock, I let the pleasure rumble through me as I feel a third climax coming on.

I’ve lost track of time.

“Pass me the remote,” Marius tells Richard. “Take my place.”

I don’t even register the switch, but Richard is now sitting next to me, his cologne invading my nostrils while Marius plays with the remote. The rhythm and intensity of the vibration

changes, making my core tighten as I deep-throat Jax. Richard guides my spare hand to his cock—another joy to feel, just as thick and veiny and pulsating with desire as I stroke him softly. He kisses my breasts, then playfully nibbles on my left nipple just as another orgasm takes me out of existence entirely.

I throw my head back, spasming and quivering with each wave, crying out and losing my breath as I hold on to Jax and Richard's cocks. Marius smiles, feeding on my mindless bliss as he watches me writhe and take everything they have to give me.

"You're such a good girl," Richard says, lovingly kissing the side of my neck.

Jax sits down and kisses me on the lips, our tongues clashing as I struggle to recover my breath. I don't ever want this to stop. It's too beautiful. It's sublime and primal. It's animalistic and delicious. Richard grabs a handful of my long, blonde hair and pulls, prompting me to gasp excitedly while he licks my neck and playfully bites my earlobe. Jax devours my mouth, and I welcome the possession, as Marius turns the volume even higher.

"Come on, baby, you can do it again, I know you can," I hear him say.

The intensity is too much to bear. My pussy is hyper-sensitive and under constant onslaught of orgasms, the vibrations making me unravel wildly. My hips rock back and forth. I need more. Harder. Deeper. *Oh, God, this is unbelievable.*

"Let go, sweetheart," Richard whispers.

"Oh, don't stop... Give me more!" I moan as he kisses me and Jax focuses on my breasts.

I'm loved on every level. I'm teased every which way. Each nerve ending in my body is ablaze, the tension reaching an all-time high as I feel myself rolling over the steepest edge I've ever been on. Jax and Richard hold me tightly, pinning me against the sofa as I lose all self-control. I see Marius stroking himself as he stands up and comes closer.

“Harder!” I plead, and he pushes the vibrations even higher.

It’s insane. It’s so much. Too much. But I’m a good girl. I take it. I take it gladly as Marius tightens the grip on himself and climaxes. His seed bursts and splashes across my bare chest as the next orgasm virtually destroys me. Jax keeps my mouth busy with his while Richard bites my shoulder. I’m falling apart, held in place by these incredible men, unraveling at the seams as every rocking motion squeezes my pussy dry.

I’m gushing like a fountain, completely unhinged, my juices flowing freely as I come undone.

I explode, over and over, like a supernova. I’m safe in their arms, the sweat dripping from my temples and down my breasts, where pearls of Marius’s seed glisten softly.

“You’re incredible,” Richard says when I’m finally able to hear them again.

My legs and arms are like boiled spaghetti, my heart filled with songbirds and my pussy beyond sensitive. Marius turns it off and kisses me lovingly on the lips.

“I’ve said it once, and I will say it again,” he says, peering deep into my eyes. “This is only the beginning, Shay.”

“That takes care of one item on your list. Plenty more to go, though,” Jax adds, a boyish grin cutting his face from ear to ear as he beholds me.

I take deep and measured breaths as I come down from the heavens, the colors and shapes around me returning. My vision is focused once more, and my heart may need a while before it can beat without trying to bounce out of my chest. But the pleasure I feel is colossal, like nothing I’ve ever experienced, and I know Marius is right. This really is merely the beginning.

And if the beginning of this is so mind-blowing, what will the top item on my naughty list feel like? I’ve already lost my mind here.

A Few Days Earlier

Life is a funny thing. Mostly optics.

Two years ago, I was the chubby best friend. The funny one. The pretty but not pretty enough to be with type of girl. The too-smart-for-her-own-good kind of woman. I was trying so hard to compensate for the hole in my soul, filling it with too much food while I languished away, perpetually annoyed, punishing myself for things that were always out of my control. It took a lot of self-work for me to get to where I am today, but even now... I catch glimpses of myself in any mirror I pass and hardly recognize the bombshell staring back at me.

Smiling confidently.

It's been a while, and it's only gotten better. The minute I learned to use my time as a single woman in order to love myself the way I wish to be loved... Everything changed. Everything. My perception of myself. The way in which I presented everything I am to the world. My confidence exuded, and heads started turning. Doors began to open.

And now, I walk into my own business with a soft smile and a kick in my step, coffee in one hand and purse over my shoulder. Jeans that hug my generous hips and muscular buttocks, a white shirt that's just enough see-through to give a hint of the white lace bra underneath, and gold bangle bracelets jingling around my wrists while my low heels click across the marble.

“Good morning, Ms. Taylor,” Alice, one of our receptionists, greets me from behind the massive black desk. She doesn’t look me in the eyes, though. That’s too much of an effort for a girl who barely makes it out of bed to get to work on time.

“Morning, hon,” I reply, genuinely pleased to see her. I’d expected her to be late for the umpteenth time. I’d have fired her months ago, but Richard insists we keep her, that she’ll come around. It’s hard not to roll my eyes at him when he says such things, yet I’ve chosen to let Alice prove him wrong, instead. It’s only a matter of time. “How’s it going this morning?”

“Pretty busy,” she says.

I cross the reception area to steal a glance at the gym. We’ve been open for about two years, and it’s been quite the journey since. We’re competing against large fitness chains in Seattle, though we hoped our more neighborly approach might entice people away from the big brands and into our halls. Lord knows Richard invested a ton of money in premium equipment for us to be able to offer a complete fitness experience.

To my delight, I notice Alice was right. It’s definitely busier than usual on a weekday morning. Granted, it’s late autumn, with winter just around the corner. People do come to the gym more often in the colder seasons of the year.

“I like the look of that,” I mutter and turn to see my business partners coming out of Richard’s office. “Hey, guys!” I cheer up, shining inwardly whenever we meet. “What a good day, huh? Plenty of customers, Alice on time, my coffee done right for once...”

There are four of us behind West Key Gym. Richard Adami, my mentor and our chief financial officer, the man with the cash. Jax Tucker, my kickboxing coach and our head martial arts trainer. And Marius Zlatan, my personal trainer and one of the best fitness practitioners I’ve ever had the fortune to work with. I’m the fourth, the ugly duckling turned swan who is now coaching other men and women to follow a journey similar to mine, focusing on smart nutrition and self-love. Frankly, the four of us becoming friends at the previous gym

we used to attend was pretty much the perfect storm for a partnership like ours to come to fruition.

We're best friends and allies, comrades in arms and, well... downright unbeatable.

We're not invincible, however, and our gym project is still young, still growing, still in need of improvement here and there. It's a difficult journey, but I love every second of it. I'm determined to see us get farther ahead, to prove to the world that fitness isn't just a way of life, it's a whole bloody ethos that stands at the very core of great health and longevity. Yet something doesn't sit right with me in this particular moment.

"Guys?" I ask, noticing Marius, Jax, and Richard simply staring at me. Mute. Speechless. Wide eyed. It's not like them. They're usually jolly and with an endless supply of quips.

It's a little weird. Alice isn't aware of the dynamic, she's too busy scrolling through her social media. Luckily, a couple of clients come in, prompting her to set the phone aside so she can scan their cards and give them the appropriate locker keys.

Marius's dark brown eyes are huge, sparkling and smoldering at the same time, and I'm pretty sure he's blushing. I can't always tell, given his olive complexion. The black curls hanging over his forehead cast shadows that further confuse me, but I know something happened. Something is different. Jax, too. His blue eyes twinkle, the corner of his mouth twitching, tempted to smile as he runs a hand through his short blonde hair. Richard, on the other hand, my red-haired, green-eyed Viking, is broadly grinning as he takes a first step in my direction.

"Good morning, Shay," he says. "How's your weekend looking? We should meet up."

"You never wanna go out on a weekend," I mutter. "There is definitely something wrong here. Guys, come on, what is it?"

The silence that settles between us is thick and heavy. It's making my heart beat faster, and not in a good way. Granted, these gorgeous partners of mine make my heart beat faster on

a daily basis, so I should've gotten used to it by now. But something is definitely happening, and I cannot for the life of me figure out what it is. The hairs on the back of my neck prick stiffly as I give Jax another look. He's like a tiger waiting to pounce on me. Marius looks away, but only for a second. His gaze is drawn to me, and it's making my skin tingle.

I've always had a thing for them. A dirty little fantasy in the back of my head involving each and all three of them. What's not to want, honestly? Built like soldiers, broad-shouldered and muscular, hyper-athletic and with plenty of charm and stamina... I'd be blind and a moron if I didn't get a little hot under the collar near them. We've always kept things strictly business, though. They've been by my side for a while, my fiercest supporters and closest friends aside from Cassandra. It's unlike them to act so... out of character.

"No, but seriously, I'm going to ask again, what's wrong?" I manage, getting genuinely worried. "Did I say something? Did I do something wrong?"

"I'm not sure if wrong is the right word," Jax mutters, crossing his arms.

"Okay, now I'm getting pissed," I shoot back. "What's up? Spill."

Richard chuckles softly while Marius lowers his gaze again. "I think you should start today at your own pace, then. Go into your office, enjoy your morning coffee... check your emails," Richard says, and it draws a dry laugh from Jax.

Crap, even Marius is smiling. They keep exchanging glances and holding back from me. It only amplifies my swelling anxiety—not to mention the hidden layer of arousal that's permanently bubbling underneath, but I'm clearly not going to get an answer from them.

"Fine," I sigh and pass the reception desk. "Alice, be a darling and forward any new customer calls to me," I tell her. "It's my turn today."

"Sure thing, Ms. Taylor."

I walk past Marius, Jax, and Richard, feeling their eyes on me in a manner that's got my senses twirling and my nerves stretching beyond their limits. This isn't how I imagined I'd be starting the week, yet it is precisely what I must contend with, for some reason.

"See you guys later, then," I say and dive right into my office. Once I'm in my sacred space, I give myself a minute to just breathe.

A couple of years ago, I was fresh out of college and still trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Crossing paths with Marius was the first of life's gifts. My heart was broken, and I was doubting my own reality in the wake of a failed relationship when he took me on as his client. He was working at another gym at the time. I still smile as I remember our first sessions. I was so slow and clumsy.

Then Richard came along with his business mind and oodles of ambition. I had so much to learn from the guy. Heck, I'm still learning. When Jax joined our pack, things at that gym were already starting to go sideways. By the time we decided to go into business together, they had seen me at my worst, they had supported me through my weight loss journey, and they had been my rocks, every step of the way. Working together simply made sense.

I glance out the window, admiring the Seattle skyline in broad daylight—glistening skyscrapers and busy roads under a blue sky with barely a tuft of white cloud. Autumns are usually gloomier and wetter in the Pacific Northwest, but I welcome the sunny mornings and never miss the rain. I work better when it's dry and warm outside. Throw in a bit of sunshine, and I'm the frickin' Energizer Bunny.

Once I feel ready, I take a seat behind my desk and open my laptop. The guys said I should check my email, so I do just that, my pulse racing as I find... nothing.

"What the..."

I see emails from other coaches and fitness supplement distributors, gym equipment service specialists, and our marketing manager. Nothing to draw my eye, however, nor to

explain my partners' behavior from earlier. This doesn't make sense, so I text Richard to ask what I should be looking for, specifically, in my email inbox. His reply is swift, and I can't help but read it aloud.

Check your outbox, he replies.

I do so and notice my email from last night. I sent it to Marius, Jax, and Richard, and it's about some new nutritional plans for their clients. Curious, I go over it again, checking the email body carefully. I mention the adjusted caloric values, the focus on their macro-nutrients—specifically protein, my usual ramblings about paying more attention to fiber and not skipping carbs. I've done this so many times, including on myself, that I fail to see anything noteworthy or out of the ordinary.

But then I see the email attachment. It's a word document, but not the one I meant to send from my home computer. Heat explodes in my chest as I recognize the file. It was on my desktop screen, next to the latest nutritional plans that were supposed to go with this message.

“Oh, shit,” I manage, beads of sweat covering my face. “Shit, shit, shit.”

In anticipation of Christmas later next month and after a hilarious conversation with my best friend and pseudo-therapist Cassandra, I put together a sort of “naughty list” to blow off some steam. It's been six months since I've been with anyone. A broken heart can really mess a girl up, especially one like me—a virgin, still, much to my surprise... So, Cassandra thought it would be a good idea to write down my craziest, dirtiest fantasies, if only to cool my head off and clear my mind. I guess my body has been trying to tell me some things. The problem is that at the very top of this list, this wretched “naughty list”, is my deepest, darkest desire, written in all caps.

A STEAMY FOURSOME WITH MARIUS, JAX, AND RICHARD. I WANT THEM TO SHARE ME AND TAKE ME EVERY WHICH WAY UNTIL I SCREAM.

Thus, I wrote it, thus it was saved in the document. I wasn't supposed to send the damned thing last night, though. It was supposed to be private. What the hell was wrong with my eyes that I ended up shooting myself in the foot?

The guys have no idea about how I feel about them, how I sometimes fantasize about them. There are days when it's hard to even be around them—hot men who take care of themselves and who keep my heart sacred and protected against a world that sometimes seeks to hurt me. They picked me up when I was down. They nursed my soul back to health when Vincent broke it. They've been by my side since day one, and now... Now, they know what I've been dreaming about.

My face burns crimson. I am not sure how I'm even breathing at this point. I might pass out.

I can't unsend this message. They've already seen it. Read it.

"Well, that explains the looks," I whisper to myself.

How do I fix this? Hell, what do I tell them? That it was a prank? Nah, there's too much inflammatory stuff on the list, and they know me well enough to ascertain the list's authenticity on their own. Not that I ever talked about these things with them, but I'm pretty sure some of this might've slipped through a conversation here and there, in one form or another. It wasn't supposed to be anything serious, just our regular banter, yet here I sit, shaking like a leaf and trying to go over everything I've ever said, trying to retrace my steps from last night... wondering where my head was when I added the wrong attachment to an otherwise super-professional email.

"How am I ever going to live this down?"

I don't have an answer, just a mountain of anxiety as I think of the moment when I'm going to have to face them again. Oh, God, I need a disaster, some kind of distraction. Maybe a catastrophe. Anything big and cataclysmic enough to spare me the utter humiliation of having to walk out of my office and face my business partners, fully aware of my titanic blunder.

The door opens, and it's as if the universe has heard my prayer and has decided to screw me over even more. Marius comes in, his big brown eyes wide and strangely warm. He's not alone, though. Lyle, one of our personal trainers, is with him. I breathe a sigh of relief, understanding this is a professional encounter.

"Hey, Shay," Marius says. "Lyle and I were talking about implementing a new fitness and cardio routine in the evening, Monday to Friday, and we wanted to know if you'd like to provide any new customers with personalized meal plans."

"Sure, what were you thinking about, specifically?" I ask, my voice high-pitched and creaky with embarrassment.

Lyle smiles broadly—the man is the size of a refrigerator and just as smart, covered in tattoos and piercings. A good guy all around, despite his threatening exterior. I'm sure his wife first fell for his eyes, though. Giant blue-green saucers and a boyish smile to perfectly compliment them. It wasn't his dazzling, non-existent personality. "We got a lot of ladies, mostly, coming in every evening and messing with the weights without understanding what they should be doing to get the best results."

"Or how they should be doing it," Marius adds. "They're not sure they want full personal trainer programs, either, and it's not like we can force them to sign up. Besides, I'm already packed, and Lyle barely has a couple of open hours left. So we thought we'd book an hour between seven and eight PM every Monday through Friday and have as many folks come in as possible. We could use the second gym room for this. We've got mirrors all over the walls and enough weights and dumbbells for them to work with."

"We wanna mix weight training with light cardio. Marius and I will combine the sets and movements into something that's easy for them to follow, and we're thinking we could get up to twenty or thirty of them to sign up," Lyle says.

Marius nods. "And we would also like to give them a sign-up option that includes a personalized meal plan for an entire month. You'd have to meet with each of them individually,

like you usually do, and assess their wants and needs... So, if you could think of a price per plan, Lyle and I could go ahead and devise the messaging for our reception and marketing staff.”

“That sounds good,” I reply. “Sure, I can put something together. When do you need an answer from me?”

“Anytime this week would be great. The sooner we roll it out, the better for us. We need more evening traffic, and we couldn’t think of a better way to get it. Jax is doing everything he can on the martial arts side of things, but the competition is getting stiffer by the day, particularly in this neighborhood.”

His gaze is persistent. I know we’re talking business, but there’s something underneath, a layer of emotions I can’t quite read. Romanticizing something that might not exist is one of my biggest fears, so I’ve made a habit of immediately dismissing anything that may seem like attraction coming from Marius or Jax or Richard. The last thing I need is emotional complications in this business and platonic harem of ours. Yet I can’t stop myself from holding his gaze, wondering... have I been wrong the whole time?

“That makes sense,” I manage. “I know there’s a new uppity gym opening on Fifth and Lexington. That’s gonna up the stakes some more.”

Lyle scoffs. “Like they weren’t high enough, right?”

“We’ll pull through,” Marius declares stubbornly. “Oh, there’s that book,” he adds, glancing somewhere behind me. I keep a bookshelf with nutrition and fitness-themed books, psychology papers and sports magazines for various references. “The one on the mathematics of nutrition. I’m gonna borrow it for a while, if you don’t mind.”

“By all means, have at it,” I reply.

He comes over, and only now do I realize how stupid I was. I should’ve just taken the book and handed it to him. Too late. Marius closes the distance between us and reaches over my shoulder. The shelves are just behind me, but with me in my swivel chair in the way, he can’t exactly get to it as easily. This

leads to a brush of his forearm against mine, causing my blood to rush up to my head as I exhale sharply.

“You smell nice,” Marius whispers, and I can feel his eyes on me.

We’re only a few inches apart. I don’t have a full view of him, but if turn my head, there’s a chance our lips might meet. It’s making my heart drum faster as I struggle to sit upright and appear normal, professional, and not the shamelessly aroused mess I’ve suddenly become as Marius withdraws from my personal space with his borrowed book.

“Thank you,” I mumble.

Lyle’s phone rings. “So, yeah, think about pricing, and we’ll talk some more. Excuse me, one of my clients is calling,” he says and leaves the office.

It puts me in a different kind of bind. The room feels small in his absence. Marius stands by the corner of my desk, watching me intently, while I try to think of something decent and neutral to say. It’s as if my own brain has decided to conspire against me, however, because nothing decent nor neutral wishes to come out.

“Did you check your outbox?” he asks, his voice low and sending chills down my spine.

“Um... Yeah...”

Marius comes closer again, and I hold my breath as I look up at him. Good grief, there’s quite the storm brewing below those long, black eyelashes of his. His cologne is soft but intoxicating as he leans forward. Barely an inch of air is left between us, the tension thickening as I close my eyes and feel his lips landing gently on the side of my neck.

It’s enough to unleash fireworks in the pit of my stomach, every atom in my body igniting against his mouth, against his sweet and sinful kiss. It feels like forever unraveling around us, forever hugging me in the absolute darkness as I sit here, motionless and aroused beyond repair, until I sense him pulling back.

My eyes open, but I can’t quite breathe just yet.

All I can do is stare at him. Wait.

“We’ve got a lot to talk about, it seems,” Marius says. “Later, after work.”

A smile flutters across his lips. The same lips I felt earlier, accompanied by the tickling of his neatly trimmed beard. My fingers tingle. I’d love to run them through that thing, to feel his skin on mine, to lose myself within him, entirely.

But I just nod slowly, watching him turn around and leave.

As the door closes behind him, I sit in my swivel chair, liquid heat pooling between my legs, I can only wonder... What the hell have I just unleashed with that “naughty list”, and how do I fix it?

As expected, my morning kickboxing session with Jax is pretty weird. I don't think it's weird in a bad way, though. He's a lot more open, a lot more responsive to my presence—Jax is usually the super professional, the brooding one who rarely opens up. Today, however, he's telling me about his weekend, about his night out with the guys and the bender he narrowly survived while I practice my leg kicks on a red, suspended punching bag. Jax holds on to it tightly, making sure each of my kicks is met with solid stability.

"I'm telling you, I never should've gone for that second round of tequila shots," he says, laughing lightly.

"Well, we're hedonists by nature. You couldn't stay away from it precisely because it was a forbidden pleasure," I reply between leg switches.

He eyes me carefully, and I catch glimpses of his attention sliding up and down my body. I'm wearing my usual orange gym shorts and light gray tank top, the black sports bra keeping my generous bosom in place while I train hard in his company. "Left leg," he reminds me. "And focus all your strength in the very last moment prior to impact. Just swing it out first, then put your force into it."

"Right," I mumble and follow his instructions to the letter. To my delight, it results in the kind of leg kick that makes him plant his heels deeper into the tatami rug. It takes considerable force to make this man wobble. "What time did you guys leave the club on Saturday night, then?" I ask, trying to keep the conversation away from my naughty list.

“I think it was about three in the morning,” he says. “How about you? How was your weekend?”

That’s enough to make me lose my balance mid-swing. I almost fall over but manage to keep myself upright as I take a deep breath and switch to my right leg, instead, praying to all the martial arts gods that Jax didn’t notice. But he did. There’s a wicked smile creeping across his handsome, stubbly face.

“Nothing special,” I reply. “Just rest and relaxation. Sunday was a bit of a mess. I was getting a lot of phone calls, so I think I got confused at some point...”

“Is this your way of trying to tell me you didn’t mean to send that list over?” he chuckles.

I freeze, both feet on the tatami as I stare at him. Heat rises to my face yet again. Where’s a natural disaster when you desperately need one, I keep asking myself? “Yeah, about that...” I try to speak, but he laughs and slaps the punching bag.

“Keep kicking, Shay.”

I keep kicking, hoping that’ll be the last we ever mention my naughty list. A minute goes by in the most awkward silence while I intensify my kicks from one leg to the other. Jax watches every movement, correcting me here and there with verbal instructions.

“You’ve come a long way in the past six months, you know,” he finally says. “Who knew getting your heart broken would bring out the athlete in you, huh?”

“I guess Vincent was the last necessary boot up my ass.”

“Have you heard from him lately?”

I shake my head. “Not since he ghosted me mid-engagement six months ago,” I reply. “Screw him, Jax, he’s not even worth thinking about it.”

“Yeah, absolutely. I’m just stunned that anybody would do something like that,” he says. “Like, the man chased you for months on end. He even proposed with a ring and everything.

Granted, it was the cheapest ring I saw on Amazon, mind you, but still... How does a guy just disappear the way he did?"

"Cassandra says that's what toxic, malevolent narcissists do," I tell him. "They love bomb you, they make you doubt your own reality and self-worth, they make you work for every ounce of affection they give you, and they feed on your energy, on your love and your kindness until they wear you out or until they find someone else they deem more useful or interesting than you. And then, they drop off the face of the earth because they lack the basic decency and emotional maturity to end things like proper men." I paused my tirade. "Apparently, they're a whole breed..."

"I'm guessing the absence of closure is meant to make you question yourself, to hurt you on a deep level," Jax says. "It's evil, Shay. It's downright evil, and I'm glad he's out of your life. He did you a favor."

"He did me a favor, yeah. It just took a while for me to realize that," I say, remembering all the hours of therapy, of crying myself to sleep, of forgiving myself for having fallen for Vincent's lies and gaslighting, of working my ass off at the gym to take care of my body and my injured heart, to pump my self-worth back to its regular levels. "I still can't believe I let him manipulate me the way he did. I actually thought he was the one. Idiot me."

"You weren't an idiot," Jax replies. "He was the idiot for not realizing what he had and treating you the right way. You're a strong woman, and I like that the most about you."

I find myself standing still yet again, staring at him as I process his entire statement. "Do you really mean it?"

"Of course. You're as tough as they come, Shay. That sucker isn't even worthy to breathe the same air as you."

"Thanks Jax. That's really kind of you to say."

Jax chuckles dryly and comes over. "Kill 'em with kindness is my motto," he quips, quickly approaching me. All of a sudden, I'm breathless and tense, my muscles tightening with each step he takes in my direction. "I was just being nice because we're

about to practice some tackles, babe, and I plan on winning every time.”

“Bring it on, big boy,” I jokingly tease him, hoping it’ll keep the play fighting neutral.

One more thing I was dead wrong about, because as soon as Jax gets close enough, I’m briefly mesmerized by his bare, tattooed chest and rock-hard abs, his muscular shoulders and strong arms, beads of sweat glistening down his torso—as soon as I look up, I fail to see his left leg swinging low. I’m knocked over, but I don’t go down easy.

I shriek like a rabid monkey, completely graceless in my attempt to wrap my arms around his waist and take him with me. It becomes a tangled, sweaty mess as I manage to keep myself up for another second or two before his leg swings out again.

“Son of a—” I end up falling, but Jax lands on top of me.

A second becomes a minute as I’m pressed under his full body weight. He’s smiling, his muscles crushing me against the tatami floor. I’d move, I’d squirm, I’d do something to save whatever is left of my tattered honor, but my brain has abandoned me once again. All I can do is look into his baby-blue eyes and wonder if I see desire twinkling furiously in his dilated pupils—dark pools threatening to swallow me whole. His scent invades my nostrils. His heart thuds against mine. And his cock feels hard as it’s nestled against my stomach, twitching as we hold each other’s gaze. A minute becomes an eternity...

“I never knew you had those ideas in your head,” Jax finally says, his voice low and gruff, making my ears tingle nervously while his hands move up and down my sides.

His touch is electric, sending jolts through my whole body as he explores it with his palms and fingers, memorizing every inch of fabric and bare skin he comes across. His thigh slides between mine, and I feel my core tightening with excitement as he lowers his head, ever so slightly, his lips so close to mine I’m about to beg for his kiss.

I lay still, though, panting and struggling to keep my scattered mind together. “Those weren’t for you to read,” I tell him.

“We figured that much,” Jax replies, his gaze lowering to focus on my slightly parted lips. “Even so, I’m genuinely surprised. I never knew your mind worked in such dirty ways, Shailene.”

Jax usually calls me by my full name when I’m in trouble, when I’m skipping a move or a whole practice session. He’s a strict man and a dedicated coach, yet this time... the tone of his voice feels different. The way my full name rolls off his tongue has my pussy wet and clenched as he presses his muscular thigh against it.

“I didn’t think...” There should be a second part to this sentence, but I can’t find it.

I’m breathless, melting under him and desperately yearning for more. So much more. Dammit, I should’ve double-checked the email attachment prior to sending it. I’ll consider this a lesson learned and hope they’ll forgive my transgression.

Jax lowers his head deeper, and I feel his nose brushing against my ear as he breathes me in. “You’ve been a good girl this year, Shay. Who knows, maybe Santa will consider granting some of those deliciously depraved wishes of yours,” he whispers, then nibbles on my earlobe for a brief moment.

It’s enough to rip a moan from the back of my throat. My breasts ache slightly, nipples hardening against his bare chest with only a hint of fabric between us. I shudder under him, close to unraveling entirely. *Gah*, the effect these men have on me is dangerous and undeniable. How the hell am I going to move ahead with my life, now that they know my deepest, darkest desire?

Jax is already gleefully using it against me.

“Let’s get you back up,” he says.

I don’t even register the shift, but I’m back on my feet, my knees turned to jelly as I try to keep a straight face and my chin up. “Good session, sensei,” I manage.

“I agree. Particularly good. I look forward to the next one,” he replies, his gaze unyielding as it searches my reddened face. “I’m sure we can get the best out of you yet.”

Staring at him, I understand this hot mess is just getting started. I’ve unleashed something by accident, and there is no putting this specific genie back in the bottle. I’ll either roll with the punches or drown in the lava current coursing through my body, igniting my flesh and soul and turning my very consciousness to ashes. This is way more than I had expected. I have no idea how to handle it, going forward.

I’m gonna kill Cassandra.

The afternoons are usually reserved for my strength training sessions with Marius. We do them every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in between client meetings. Today is a subtle but clear continuation of this morning’s encounter in my office. He watches me closely, counting my reps but his eyes never leave mine. I love the feeling, I’m just not used to having so much of his attention.

Worse even, or better yet, it’s leg day, so he’s got me doing plenty of weighted squats and deadlifts. It gives Marius glorious views of my muscular behind, a peach-shaped beauty that has been the talk of the gym since I first started training. It has done wonders for my vanity; I’ll give myself credit where due.

“Well done,” Marius says after a whole set of Romanian deadlifts. “You’re getting stronger, Shay.”

“Thanks. Sticking to my protein target,” I reply, smiling. My glutes burn, my thighs ache, but I adore the feeling in between sets, when my body is primed and working overtime to sustain the immense amount of effort I’m working through.

“I’m honestly proud of you,” he says, arms crossed over his rippling chest. He’s always a pleasure to be around, but there’s a certain degree of intimacy developing between us, and while I don’t know how to handle myself in these circumstances, I must admit... maybe sending that email wasn’t the biggest mistake. “You’ve come a long way in a short amount of time.

You're consistent and ambitious, dedicated and constantly motivated."

"Vincent almost knocked me out of orbit, but I'm pleased to say I'm absolutely better than when I first started."

"It shows," Marius says. "He didn't deserve you."

"Aww, thanks Marius."

"I'm not sure anybody deserves a woman like you, Shay."

I've always been confident and caring with myself, despite my weight issues and emotional fluctuations. Coming from a broken home like mine, being raised by terrible people and understanding I had no choice in the matter to begin with—it all served to build me up, to teach me to focus on myself in order to persevere and remove myself from a toxic environment. When Vincent first came along, I thought I'd healed enough to welcome him, to actually build a healthy relationship. I should've known better. Well, I definitely know better now, after I glued my heart back together.

Marius's kindness, the intensity of his voice, the fire burning in his eyes. He's got me enthralled and speechless, blushing like a schoolgirl and wondering what it would be like if there was more brewing between us. I'm terrified of doing something wrong here, though. I'm terrified of somehow scaring him or pushing him away—that naughty list would have most guys running for the hills. He's still standing before me, watching me, telling me things that make my heart sing and my soul swell.

"You've been instrumental to my progress," I say, preparing myself for another set of deadlifts.

"All I do is tell you how to lift and how much to lift," he replies. "Most of this work is yours and yours alone. I'm but a humble tool."

I giggle at his choice of words. "Did you just call yourself a tool?"

"I've called myself worse," he laughs, then comes closer—as if he wasn't close enough—to add another weight to my bar

before I lift it. “Let’s get you to the next level while we’re here. I think you can do this now.”

He doesn’t move, though, and it’s making it harder for me to focus. I manage to lift the bar, feeling the weight tugging my shoulders downward before I pull back and assume the deadlift position. My glutes are instantly activated, and while it’s a difficult set, I surprise myself with twelve full reps. At the thirteenth, however, Marius inches even closer and places a hand on the small of my back.

Lightning shoots up my spine, but I keep pulling. “Don’t round your back. Only go as low as your hips will let you.”

“Okay,” I groan slightly as I go down for a fourteenth rep.

“You can do it. One more, babe.”

The word slips past my ear as I manage a fifteenth rep, then set the bar back on its metal rack, exhaling sharply as my muscles begin to relax. “Wow...” I adore the immediate sensation after a deadlift. “Had anyone told me six months ago that I’d love doing this stuff as much as I do, I would’ve laughed in their faces.”

“You’re a natural,” Marius says, still beside me, still focused on me, still consuming me with his very presence while his hands patiently rest behind his back. I can’t help but admire his athletic frame—he was one hell of a tennis player in his early twenties until a shoulder injury forced him to shift lanes and get into fitness training. “And I say this to barely any of my clients.”

“I’m more than a client, though,” I joke.

But he takes me seriously. “You’re right. You’re more than a business partner, too. More than a friend. More than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Oh, now, you’re spoiling me,” I joke some more, though my ears are incandescent.

“I’m not spoiling you nowhere near as what I read on that naughty list of yours.”

And there it is. The blow to the knees. The kick in the gut. The moment of truth. Panic sets in. I could barely handle myself with Jax, but Marius is even harder to deal with—it's probably because I've harbored my crush on him for the longest. He was my first point of contact with the world of fitness, my first pillar of support in my journey of self-growth, and my closest ally when Vincent disappeared six months ago. I found comfort in this man. Kindness. The kind of tranquility I'd never experienced with my ex-fiancé.

"Marius, I... It was a terrible mistake," I say, trying to mend something I fear I may have broken beyond repair.

"Maybe. But I needed to read it. Jax and Richard, too. We all needed to read it and we certainly needed to become aware of where your head is at. Lord knows I've been wracking my brain for months, trying to figure out a way to get closer to you."

"Wait, what?" I blurt out, suddenly self-aware. "What do you mean?"

Marius's lips twitch into a shy smile. I've never met a man like him, with eyes as dark as sin and a gaze that pins you to the spot. He's a walking contradiction, a shadow filled with light, a strong man with a soft core... no wonder his female clients swoon over him the way they do.

"I thought you might have noticed by now," he says. "It's not like I've been indifferent to your presence. Your beauty. Your brains." He smiles at me. "Shay, there's plenty about you to like and then some. Getting that naughty list of yours felt like a gift from the heavens."

"I don't know what to say."

"So say nothing right now," he playfully replies. "You need to do a third set of deadlifts, anyway. We'll keep this weight for now."

I nod slowly and get to work, thankful to have my body briefly take over while my brain recovers from the avalanche of advances I've been getting since I walked into my place of

business this morning. I'm embarrassed as hell—and I'm not usually easily embarrassed.

I'm cautious, perhaps too cautious. I don't want to ruin anything.

"I don't want to ruin anything," I say it aloud as I finish my third set.

"You're lifting enough, there's nothing to ruin," he replies.

"That's not what I meant. I don't want to ruin anything between us." I look up at him, my heart struggling against my ribcage. "I'd rather have you as my coach and business partner if I can't have you in any other capacity in my life," I add. "The same goes for Jax and Richard. We're close, we're friends, and my... gosh, my sexual fantasies weren't supposed to be the hot topic of the day. I'm sorry, Marius. It was a terrible mistake."

He frowns and comes even closer. I can almost breathe him in. The world around us disappears. I forget about other coaches and clients currently buzzing through the gym. I no longer hear the weight disks clanking, the treadmills humming, the grunts and gasps of strength aficionados pushing themselves past their limits. All I hear is the thudding of my own heart, the muscle twitching furiously with every beat as I dissolve under Marius's discerning gaze.

"I may be so focused on my professional ethics that I don't notice when a woman likes me, Shay... And you know that about me. You know how creeped out I am about the very concept of trainers hitting on their clients. I can't even fathom a woman being attracted to me in this place. But I know how you feel now. And there's no undoing that. There's no undoing that because you're not the only one who feels it."

"Marius..."

"We'll talk about it later, don't worry. Let's keep what's left of this session professional in the meantime, what do you say?"

I nod slowly, mustering a soft smile. "Okay."

"Bulgarian splits squats, next."

“My God, Marius, are you trying to cripple me?!” I croak, feigning despair.

He laughs wholeheartedly, fully aware it’s one of my favorite exercises, especially when he throws a ten-pound weight into the mix. I like our sessions the most, truth be told. There’s always this muted tension between us, this want and need for more, but I’ve never had the courage to voice any of it.

Once I finish work, and Marius wraps up his last training, we meet by the reception area, where Laura, another receptionist, is currently engaged in a phone call with what I’m guessing is a new customer. I feel hopeful about this place, even though we’re not doing as well financially as I’d hoped just yet. The company is still young. The brand needs more time to grow.

And Marius is making my heart skip beats with every glance he steals at me.

“Jax wants to use my car until tomorrow,” I mutter, checking through my phone messages while I wait for Laura to get some files for me from her desk drawer. “His is in the shop, apparently.”

“Leave the keys for him here,” Marius replies. “I’ll drive you home.”

“And pick me up tomorrow morning?” I shoot back with a grin.

“It would be my pleasure,” he replies, meaning every word. His gallantry only serves to further demolish my defenses at this point. “Come on, let’s get you out of this place. We’ve had enough gym stuff for today.”

“Gym stuff,” I chuckle as I leave the keys for Jax and grab the files from Laura’s extended hand. Unlike Alice, Laura is infinitely more professional and efficient in her reception work. They do manage to balance each other out, though, at least for the time being. “Thank you, Laura.”

We’re almost through the doors when Richard rushes out of his office and catches up with us. “You two! Stop right there!” he barks, prompting Marius and me to sheepishly turn around

like kids caught ditching school. “Where are you off to in such a rush?”

I admire Richard’s affinity for tailored suits—it takes an expert to fit any kind of fabric in a flattering manner on a body like his. A former bodybuilder, Richard is stacked like an ox and exceptionally imposing, his Viking frame, red hair, and piercing green eyes softening his presence. The whole of him makes my knees quiver. I’ve spent countless nights imagining him bending me over and taking me six ways from Sunday.

“Marius is taking me home,” I tell Richard. “Jax needs my car.”

“I wanted to talk to you about the holiday hours,” Richard adds. “How are we handling Christmas? I’ve had a couple of people asking.”

“Oh, we’re definitely taking the twenty-fifth through the twenty-seventh off. Then the thirty-first of December and first of January, as well,” I tell him. “But we could cut the twenty-fourth short, too, if needed? I don’t know, what do you think?”

“I was hoping we wouldn’t close at all,” Richard sighs, sounding somewhat disappointed.

Marius shakes his head. “It won’t make much of a difference, Rick. Day passes don’t even cover our operating costs for the day, especially around the holidays.”

“See, that bothers me. We really need to get more people through the door,” he says.

The words fall heavily on my shoulders because I understand his frustration. Richard put a lot of his money behind this place, and the absence of a return on his investment has put him slightly on edge. If there is one thing I know for certain where he’s concerned, it’s that he never lingers in an investment he doesn’t consider fruitful. I’ve never met anyone as emotionally unattached as Richard in terms of building a company from the ground up.

It scares me, sometimes, but it’s also a good reason for me to stay on my toes and always work toward growing the brand altogether.

“It’ll get better in the new year,” I try to assure him. “Winter is always tough on new businesses, and Christmas and New Year’s celebrations don’t make it any easier. But we survived last year. We’ll survive this year, too.”

“We survived last year because of a hefty cash infusion, not on account of higher sales,” he replies. “We should definitely meet up later this month and put together a strategy for the new year. I honestly can’t afford another quarter like this.”

Marius’s brows furrow deeply with concern. “We’ll sit down and discuss our options, sure. I am already working on something that should boost our revenues.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.” Richard claps his hands once, then switches back to his usual, friendlier self as he looks at me. “Shay, we need to talk about that naughty list of yours, too. I’m honestly intrigued.”

“Oh, God,” I mumble, once again flustered and ashamed.

“Oh, no, I definitely plan to speak to Santa about it and see how many of those spicy desires we can tick off the list when Christmas comes around,” he says.

Marius slips a hand around my waist, subtly pulling me closer, while Richard takes a step forward. I feel small and vulnerable yet protected and conquered at the same time as I look up and lose my senses. Richard’s wild green eyes burn brightly, his lips parted slowly as he smiles.

“I’ve already warned her there’s no turning back,” Marius says.

“Absolutely not,” Richard replies, tucking a lock of my blonde hair behind my ear. His touch alone is enough to have me quivering on the inside with anticipation. “I’m particularly determined to make item number one happen. I assume it’s what you desire the most since it’s at the top of your list.”

“I don’t even know what to say to any of this,” I mumble.

“That’s okay. All you need to do is say yes when Santa comes to town,” Richard says. “I’ll make sure he’s got a sack filled with goodies to your heart’s desire.”

Richard has a way of riling me up in every possible way. I've never met someone as fluid and as multifaceted, as fiery and as playful as this man. His outward appearance is a reflection of his character and personality. Big, generous, kind, and funny. Dirty-minded and light-hearted. Witty and sharp as a Japanese katana. A charmer and a warrior. Few women are able to resist his advances, but I was never on the receiving end of such attention until now—I am feeble and helpless, fully understanding how easy it is for him to get what he wants. Richard always gets what he wants.

I stand between them like a deer caught in the headlights, unsure what to do or say next. My mind is wandering all over the place, my body betraying me. Every inch of flesh on my bones trembles and aches for their touch, for their kisses and caresses. These wild imaginations of mine may be my undoing, but I cannot bring myself to turn back, to pretend it was just a tasteless joke, a prank of sorts.

It's not like I didn't consider chickening out of the whole thing. But who am I kidding? That wish is at the top of my naughty list for a reason. It makes zero sense to back away when the three of them are so clearly responsive and willing.

"Richard, we'll see you tomorrow," Marius cuts in, as if picking up on my awkwardness. "Ease a girl in, why don't you?"

"I'll see you both tomorrow," Richard says and plants a quick kiss on my cheek.

It only lasts a split-second, yet it manages to kickstart a wildfire. The blaze ravages through my entire being as I smile and wave goodbye, slowly leaning into Marius as we leave the building behind us. His jeep awaits on the other side of the parking lot, lusciously black under a graying evening sky.

We get in, and for a moment's worth, silence settles between us. I like it. There's a sense of calm accompanying it, of peace and balance in the middle of an otherwise stormy day. I never expected my week to start out like this, but here we are, sitting awkwardly and shyly glancing at each other as we both try to figure out what we're supposed to do next.

Marius starts the car, the engine roaring to life, and puts it in reverse. "I've never even considered something like this before," he says. "And somehow, it's all I've been able to think about since I read your naughty list."

"I'm not very good at expressing precisely how I'm feeling," I reply, hands resting in my lap. "Except that I'm genuinely embarrassed."

"I know, and I get it. But it was an honest mistake. No one could ever fault you for it," Marius says. "Besides, it also gave me a pretty intimate glimpse into your soul, Shay. It's not like there wasn't enough for me to like and want in the first place. That list only made the fire burn brighter."

"Aren't you the poet..."

"I pick up on things," he chuckles softly. "Quick learner, remember?"

"Indeed you are."

He drives me home with music playing on the radio, a mixture of indie and rock tunes from a previous decade. I find the guitar riffs quite soothing at this hour, and I briefly travel away with the lyrics until Marius's voice returns me into the real world.

"Here we are," he says as we pull up outside my townhouse.

"Home, sweet home," I reply.

Once I get out of Marius's car, I hold my breath as I notice him getting out as well. The keys jingle in my hand, that's how badly I'm shaking because of the intense look in his eyes as he walks over to my side.

"I'll walk you in," he says.

"You don't have to," I manage meekly.

"Nonsense, it's my pleasure."

He's on a mission, and I'll be damned if I'm gonna stop him. Marius has come to my place before, but never after moments of unexpected intimacy such as those from earlier. I have a

hard time breathing as I unlock the door and go in. He follows quietly and closes the door behind him.

“Do you want coffee? Tea? I’ve got some non-alcoholic beer in the fridge, but nobody ever wants that,” I say, half-smiling as I stand in the lobby.

“I didn’t come for drinks,” Marius says.

“What did you come for, then?” I ask, my heart thumping.

I know what he came for. And he knows I know. It’s written all over his face, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever had the fortune of seeing. Determined and incredibly hot, Marius comes closer and takes me in his arms. Within seconds, I’m damn near crushed against his muscular chest, his embrace tightening as his mouth captures mine.

The kiss obliterates every last sense left flailing within me. I’m helpless and breathless as we devour one another, lips pressing and tongues clashing as we taste the sweetness that has been brewing between us for so long. I realize it’s been as intense for him as it has been for me, because his chest echoes with a frantic heartbeat and his breath is ragged, the moans slipping from his throat, causing a fire to light in my core.

I’m wet already, panting softly between rushed inhaled before I kiss him again, deeper and deeper until I lose myself in him. It happens so fast, his movements so swift I barely register the moment I slip out of my shoes. The moment he peels the clothes off me and takes a second to admire me from head to toe.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long, Shay, you have no idea,” Marius says, his voice raspy and dripping with desire. “You’re so fucking beautiful and you’re all mine tonight.”

My breasts fill the lace cups, nipples perking under his gaze. My panties are slick, and there’s an ache between my legs in desperate need of release. I’ve pleased myself rather efficiently over the years, and I almost went all the way with Vincent more than once, but there was always a sliver of doubt where he was concerned, the kind of hesitation that made me pull back each time. It’s nothing like that with Marius,

however. Whatever we're about to do, I want it. Wholly and fully. I need him to dismantle me and claim me as his. And I know as soon as we cross that threshold, I will want more and more. Of him. Of Jax. Of Richard, too.

I might just get my wish after all...

"Come here," Marius commands me. I'm turned on by the fact that he's still fully dressed, though the bulge in his pants is telling me he is as turned on as I am.

I obey and come closer. He touches my breast, gently at first. A finger, then two brushing over the nipple, feeling the lace before hooking under the hem. He pulls it down, revealing my naked flesh. A second later, his mouth is locked around the nipple, his tongue and teeth teasing. I whimper softly, my back arching as his hands lock on my hips, pulling me closer.

He suckles delightedly, tongue flicking and causing electrical storms to unravel in my loins before he pulls the fabric off my left breast and repeats the same delicious operation. I'm putty in his hands, surrendering to this man as he tastes me, as he explores my body and marvels at every curve.

I run my fingers through his black, curly hair. I've been wanting to do this for ages... my fingertips tingle with excitement as he comes back up and kisses me again. He's hungry. Ravenous, even. And I am his to do with as he pleases. I don't even have to say it. He knows. He sees it in my eyes.

"I know you're inexperienced," Marius whispers. "So, we're gonna ease you into that foursome fantasy of yours."

"How?" I mumble, half-drunk on his arousal.

He pulls my panties down. They end up on the floor, drenched with my desire. "Spread your legs for me," he says, and it's impossible to resist.

As soon as my knees are apart, he kneels before me. I feel weak, light-headed as I look down at him. Subconsciously, my balance wavers, and I lean back against the base of the staircase railway, holding my breath as I drown in his dark eyes.

His hands creep up my creamy thighs, the muscles sore from strength training. His fingers dig into the flesh, squeezing, feeling, touching, and exploring every inch until I'm shaking with the desperate need for more. As if he can read my mind, Marius slides his tongue between my wet folds, and I lose my mind completely.

I've never been touched like this before. "Oh, wow..."

He moans harshly as he tastes me, lapping at my slick pussy until my clit stiffens and swells, a ball of lightning unfurling in my core. He kisses and licks, then suckles on my sensitive nub until I run my fingers through his black curls. His eyes are locked on mine, and I see myself within him. I don't want this moment to end. It's so intimate, so devastating, so all-consuming. I never imagined I would feel this way, I never thought we'd get to this point. But it's happening.

His left hand moves slowly, slipping between my legs. His fingers work their way up my inner thigh, his gaze never leaving mine as he licks me harder and faster. I gasp when I feel his index and middle finger probing my entrance. I am so wet, so primed and ready for this. He goes in while suckling my clit, and I hear myself gasping and moaning. My hips sway, rocking back and forth against a rhythmic movement of his fingers.

The tension rises. The temperature spikes.

His mouth makes love to my pussy, destroying any sense of reality I've got left in me. I'm closer to the edge, closer...

"Don't stop, baby," I whisper, feeling myself slipping away.

Moments later, I feel it coming. The unstoppable earthquake, the shattering of my defenses as the orgasm explodes through me with the strength and the intensity of a tidal wave. I cry out in sweet agony as he finger-fucks me into sheer madness, suckling my clit and feeling my core as it ripples against his mouth. His moans are like music to my ear as I unravel and squirt my juices, and he licks and drinks me whole.

I'm not sure how long it takes for me to come down from this deflagration of raw pleasure, but I feel the stars burning in my

eyes, and I see them in his as he stands up and takes me in his arms. We kiss, and I melt in his embrace, my legs too weak to hold me. I taste myself on his lips, on his tongue, which only serves to further stoke this devastating fire he lit within me.

“Dammit, Shay, you’re gonna be the death of me,” Marius says, trailing kisses along my jawline.

“I was about to say the same thing.”

“This is only the beginning,” he replies. “You started it, and we’re gonna see it through. All the way to the end, whatever the end may be.” He pulls back and plants one last kiss on my lips.

I’m a shapeless puddle at this point, a smile stretching across my face as I notice traces of me glistening on his lower lip. His beard tickled, but I loved every second of it. I’m getting even more aroused by the memories of mere moments ago.

“I’ll come pick you up tomorrow,” Marius says. “We’ll grab coffee on the way.”

“Okay.”

It’s all I can say as he smiles and walks out, careful to quickly close the door behind him. I’m left naked and feverishly satisfied in the hallway of my house, wondering what the hell I’m going to do with the rest of my evening. I’ve never been treated this way. Vincent and I got past the kissing stage more than once during our relationship, but he was never as tender nor as intimate with me. Not like Marius. No, Marius knew precisely how to handle me, which buttons to push to give me the utmost pleasure.

I’ve been missing out on too much for too damn long.

Three days later, I'm dealing with yet another gym-related crisis. The same as always, actually. Things were looking too good after my moment with Marius. Even the coffee we had on the way to work the next morning was the best I ever tasted. It made sense for the universe to remind me that life is anything but easy.

Alice is late. For the umpteenth time. I've lost count of how many mornings I've spent rushing out of the house and through the whole frickin' city to open the gym because Little Miss Can't Be Bothered to Use An Alarm Clock couldn't wake up.

It's a good thing some of our customers have my number. The regulars have gotten used to this mess, but the newer folks don't like it. People have busy schedules, so when they come to the gym, they're allocating certain segments of time for it. When they can't get in because the receptionist is late, it messes with their schedules. I completely understand their frustration.

I reach the gym running from my car to the front doors, where a throng of customers is already waiting. Checking my watch, I realize Alice is over thirty minutes late. This is getting worse, and I can barely look these people in the eyes as I unlock the doors and go in to turn the lights and everything else on.

"Shay, don't worry too much about it," one of the regulars says to me as I manage to get behind the reception desk and start signing them in, one gym pass at a time.

“This is unacceptable,” I mutter, my blood boiling as I force myself to smile and nod and apologize to everyone else while simultaneously handing them locker keys. “Utterly unacceptable...”

Some of these people give me the stink eye. I feel responsible. This is my business. My brand and my company. I put a lot of work into this place, and I certainly can't sit idly by and watch an airhead with too-long nails and big doe eyes ruin it for my partners and me.

It's bad advertising from the get-go, and I'm pretty sure at least two of the customers I've seen this morning won't be coming back next month. I give myself a minute's worth of deep breaths while I go into the gym room and turn the machines on before I get back behind the reception and get everything else into full function. The computer, the tills, the card scanners. The lights on the refreshment fridges. The music and sound system.

One by one, the illuminated signs and art on the reception walls light up. Our logo shines brightly behind me, and I feel as though a worse disaster has been averted.

I'm thirsty and in desperate need of coffee. I spent most of my night dreaming about Marius. Jax and Richard pitched in. I was devoured by three men, and when my phone rang earlier than I'd expected, I damn near cried because I'd been pulled out of the sweetest and most decadent dream. They've been particularly attentive to me since the email conundrum. They smile more. They find reasons to be around me more often—new clients, new strategies and ideas for next year, anything that can get them into my office outside our regularly scheduled meetings and practice hours.

I thought it would be disastrous for our professional relationship. To my astonishment, it's only brought us closer. It's pretty difficult to untangle, truth be told. I'm still embarrassed out of my mind about it, but I'm rolling with the punches. Marius is infinitely closer to me. Sweeter. He follows me with his gaze whenever I'm around. I can feel him staring even when I've got my back turned. We shared an incredible moment the other day. When I remember those precious

minutes, I feel the heat rising. That fire burns voraciously, the flames consuming me on the inside. I need more. So much more.

Shaking the thoughts away, I remind myself that there's a crisis here to focus on. I didn't even get a minute to myself for coffee, so it's the next thing on my to-do list. The customers continue to arrive, so I sign them in while the coffee machine brews my magic potion. The early birds are already migrating from the lockers into the gym. Hip hop music blares through the speakers, a compilation of fast-paced trap-style pieces designed to awaken and motivate the crap out of our gym rats.

As soon as I take my first sip of hot coffee, I see Alice coming in. She looks pretty in her uniform—a black and red polo shirt with our logo and a pair of black jeans, her black hair pulled back into a tight bun, but she's clearly just fallen out of bed.

“For Christ's sake, Alice!” I snap.

“What? I didn't hear the alarm clock!” she replies, frowning as she walks behind the reception desk. “I think I need a new phone or something, but you don't pay me enough for that.”

The audacity is enough to send the blood boiling right up to my temples. “Are you serious? You're half an hour late repeatedly, and you're blaming us?” I reply harshly. “Alice, this can't keep happening. I understand you've got a life outside of work, and I wholly encourage that because I have a life, too, but so do our customers. You're late at their expense. Some of them called me, and I drove up here in a panic to open the gym because they were outside waiting! Do you not realize how embarrassing that is for us? For you?”

“They could come in later,” she mutters, unable to look me in the eyes. This wretched pride is going to be the death of her, I know it. “Who the hell comes to the gym at six in the morning, huh?”

“People who pay your salary,” I shoot back. “You could always find another job. No one's keeping you here against your will.”

Alice looks up and raises a contemptuous eyebrow. I know she hooked up with Richard long before we started the gym, but I'm pretty sure she still relies on him to bail her out when she does something stupid. Her tardiness is likely to cost us customers, though. And I doubt Richard takes kindly to anyone who makes his bank account bleed, no matter how pretty she is or how good she may have been in bed.

"I'm not leaving. I'll try to get a new phone on a new plan, maybe," Alice says.

"You're making it sound like you're doing us a favor," I scoff.

If there is one thing I absolutely despise, it's people who don't give a rat's ass about anyone else, especially when it's their behavior hurting or inconveniencing them. I didn't get this far to let Alice's lack of professionalism destroy what I've worked so hard for. I'm putting my foot down with Richard if he doesn't do something about it. Unfortunately, he makes all the hiring and firing decisions.

"It's fine," Alice says with a nonchalant shrug. "I mean, you opened the gym, so it's fine."

But Richard comes in, smiling and ready to start his workday, completely unaware of what just happened. Usually, I'd be just as pleased and as bright as he is, but this morning just ain't it.

"Hey, ladies! How's everything going?" he says, coffee in hand.

"Good morning, Rickie, baby! you're looking fine as usual!" Alice exclaims, giddy and fluttering her fake eyelashes. She's getting on my nerves.

"Good morning, Richard. Alice was late. Almost forty minutes. Again," I say bluntly, then take another sip from my coffee while she gives me the hardest glare I've ever had to contend with. "Clients called me from outside the gym. I had to drive over and open for them. I'm pretty sure a few won't be back." I look him squarely in the eye. "We need to address this. Now."

For a long, quiet moment, Richard's enthusiasm sours, his gaze bouncing between Alice and me. The air thickens in the

reception area, and even my coffee tastes bad in the aftermath of the drama.

“Alice, can you tell me why you were late?” Richard decides to calmly ask.

Granted, he didn’t have to rush over here to open the gym. I reckon he would’ve chewed her head off if it had been him instead of me. Yet Alice either doesn’t realize the kind of trouble she’s in, or she doesn’t really care as she stands up and straightens her back, making sure her boobs perk up through the polo shirt. I’m guessing this strategy works with most men, but to my surprise, Richard seems immune, his eyes never leaving hers.

She puts on a sheepish smile. “I had trouble with the alarm on my phone, Rickie. I’d buy a new one, but I can’t afford it.”

“You could buy an alarm clock instead,” he replies gently. “A ten-dollar one to simply plug in. I need you to put in more effort into this job.”

“Okay, I’ll do that, Rickie.”

“Richard, please. If you’re late again, I’ll have to cut your pay,” Richard states, his lips thin in irritation. “And if I have to cut your pay more than once, I’m sure you won’t like it. You’ve got student loans, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I’ll just get one of those plug-in alarm clocks,” Alice replies, her voice a little less flirtatious.

“I think that’s a good idea,” he tells her.

It’s a dismissal of sorts, though Alice doesn’t see it that way. She lights up like a firefly when he’s around, and while I understand the brief and intimate history between them, I can tell he’s not into her the way she’d want him to be. Oddly enough, the thought brings me a sense of relief. Ever since that email went out, and Richard’s attitude toward me has consistently changed, I’ve become a lot more observant of the women constantly hovering around him.

Richard moves closer to me, takes my arm, and we move away from the reception desk and Alice. His leather-and-musk cologne breaches my olfactory senses and drowns me in my

dreams of last night. I almost felt his hands on me, his lips on mine. I almost felt him stretching me, screwing me out of my head.

“Sorry you had to come in earlier than usual,” he says, his tone lower, sweeter he looks deep into my eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. Just a tad grouchy,” I chuckle. I can feel Alice glowering at us, but I deliberately ignore her, secretly enjoying the shift in Richard’s attention. “How’s your morning so far? I hope I didn’t ruin it.”

“You could never ruin anything for me, not even a minute in the day,” he replies, smiling. “We’ll figure this out. The four of us, Shay, we’re one hell of a team.”

“We most certainly are.”

“And speaking of. I’d like to schedule a meeting with you, Jax, and Marius before the weekend. My office on Friday? Evening, ideally, before we each head out to our own devices.”

Normally, I’d just nod and say yes. We have meetings on a weekly basis, anyway. But the sound of his voice feels... different. I’m not sure what the meeting is supposed to be about, and it’s making me nervous. “Sure, not a problem on my end. Is everything okay, Richard?”

“It will be. One way or another, I’m sure of it.”

“That sounds a tad cryptic,” I laugh nervously.

He inches closer and whispers in my ear, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “I like keeping you on your toes, at least occasionally.”

I’ve got nothing to say to this. I’m too busy quivering and getting all kinds of hot and bothered on the inside as Richard smiles and goes into his office. I watch the door close behind him with a familiar click, and fully aware that Alice is still eyeing me, I choose to take another sip of my coffee before I retreat into my office as well.

This week started with a bang, and I’ve got a feeling it’ll end with an even bigger one.

When Shay first walked through the door of my previous gym, I was surprised by her determination. Unlike most of my clients, she knew what she wanted. She'd already done most of the work with therapy and with herself—the relationship with her inner child, the childhood traumas, the issues with food. Chaos begets chaos, she said, so when she started putting order back into her life and implemented new habits in lieu of the old ones, everything else just fell into place.

If I'm honest, I liked her plenty since day one. I liked her full curves and the confidence with which she carried herself. But when she started telling me about her journey, I was hooked. I was stunned and thrilled because I knew she would be a pleasure to work with.

Things got in the way. Life, work. Vincent. When that fucker came along, everything stopped. For the longest time, I felt like I was on the outside looking in, watching her fall in love with a man who did not have honorable intentions. I tried to warn her, but I couldn't get through—how could I? We were just friends and later business partners. That man had her attention and her affection, while I watched the trainwreck slowly unravel.

By the time he ghosted her, I knew she would need every ounce of support so she wouldn't fall back into her old habits. I was already catching feelings for Shay, though I kept telling myself she had no reason to like me back, to want me the way I wanted her. What could I offer her? Vincent had poetry and

plenty of talk in him. He seemed smarter, savvier. Better dressed. Charming. I was and still am what most people would consider the jock archetype. All I know is sports. Movement. Fitness. The body and the mind in perfect sync. And Shay is such a sharp girl, wicked smart and insanely ambitious. I used to feel small beside her. Not anymore.

Not since that email. It's been a pleasure coaching her. I love watching her blossom and become an even better version of herself. But I want the very core of this woman more than anything. I want a future with her. And after what happened the other night... damn, I want to have her, all of her, until my very last breath. Hell, I'm so into her I'm even willing to share her with Jax and Richard. Our friendship is tight and strong enough to work through it.

"We're crazy, aren't we?" Jax asks.

We've been lounging about at Mabel's for the past twenty minutes, a favorite coffee shop of ours that's close to West Key. Richard called us, but he has yet to tell us what it's about though we're both pretty sure it's about the email.

"What with, specifically?" Richard replies, slightly amused. "We've done plenty of questionable things in this life, already."

"Us and Shay," Jax says, leaning back into his plush armchair. "I mean, I like her. I knew you two were into her, as well. But none of us thought to make a single move until that naughty list popped up. And now, look at us."

"It doesn't make us any crazier than Shay herself is for having such a fantasy," Richard says. "It's not something I'd thought about until I got the email, to be fair. But here we are. Here I am. Willing. You're not?"

"Oh, absolutely. How about you, Marius?"

I nod slowly. "I'll have her however she wants to have us," I tell them. "I don't even care, as long as I'm with her. As long as she's safer with us than with that Vincent prick."

Jax frowns, his eyebrows drawing deep shadows over his otherwise sunny blue eyes. "He hasn't been around, has he?"

“One of the receptionists mentioned a Vincent at one point. We were discussing potential new clients,” I reply.

Richard dismisses the idea entirely. “That loser should know better than to come around West Key. He’s met us. Surely, he wouldn’t be an idiot on top of everything else.”

“He doesn’t matter, anyway,” I say, shaking my head. “My point stands. I’m down with making her naughty list come true, one item at a time.”

Richard smiles broadly, sympathy and affection glimmering in his eyes as he looks at me. “You’ve been head over heels for her for a quite a while, huh?”

“There’s plenty to be head over heels with,” I reply.

Jax chuckles and adds a smidge of sugar to his black coffee. “She’s been through so much. We need to be careful with how we approach Shay. She’s pretty embarrassed about the naughty list.”

“We’ve seen her through the worst and the best of times,” I say to Jax. “She knows she can trust us, and I intend to keep her trust going forward. This may be a messed up world, and ours may be a... let’s call it a complex friendship currently evolving into something unorthodox, but Shay needs to feel safe and loved with us. If we can’t provide for her in that sense, we might as well just pretend the naughty list never happened.”

Richard nods in agreement. “We either do this right, or we don’t do it at all.”

“How did she seem when you dropped her off at her place the other night?” Jax asks me.

Almost instantly, a grin slits across my face. A sense of pride swells within me, and my pants feel tighter as I remember the sound of her voice when she came, when I ate her out and made her quiver until she could barely stand. The mere look on my face is a clear enough answer and prompts Richard to laugh lightly.

“Pleased,” I manage, then clear my throat and try to stay in the present. I’ve been wandering back to that moment at the

bottom of the staircase, I've been reliving it, over and over. She's dangerously addictive, and I could easily overdose on this woman without a single shred of remorse. "We'll have to ease her into it."

"I'm still shocked Vincent didn't get the first time with her," Richard says, scratching his rust-colored beard. "There must've been a glaring red flag on top of the ones we saw, big enough to scream 'Don't do it' in the back of Shay's head. I know they almost did a couple of times."

"She stopped it twice," Jax remembers. "She said it didn't feel like the right moment. Like she wasn't really into it."

"Shay also said Vincent was rushing her," I say. "So that's one thing we need to be careful with. We have to let her come to us. To voice her desire and give her full consent."

Richard takes a long sip of his latte and whips out his phone, going over the list again. "Alright, let's see what we've got here. We don't have to start with the very first item, do we? You know, since you said we should ease her in."

"Christmas is just around the corner," I reply. "We could get Santa to drop some presents early. Shay made an impressive list there..."

I'm constantly turned on these days. It's hard to even focus. I was already nuts about her but getting a glimpse into her deepest and raunchiest desires... now I can't stop thinking about her, about being with her. About taking it all the way, night after night and day after day.

It's a dangerous mindset for me to be living in. I've gotten my heart broken before. Roxanne left deep wounds that I'm still healing from. And having her as a client at the gym hasn't helped, either. I've found comfort in Shay's presence when Roxanne hovers in my vicinity. At least I passed my ex onto another coach since I didn't want us to stay friends like she had originally suggested. I couldn't be friends with a woman whose toxic jealousy damn near broke me. In stark contrast, Shay's self-confidence is remarkably seductive on its own. I can't help but feel drawn to her. Maybe there's hope for me still. Maybe it's Shay.

“Look at this,” Richard says, showing us the list on his phone screen. “Item number three...”

“Oh, I recognize that,” Jax says, the corner of his mouth twitching.

We all recognize it. It’s a wearable vibrator with a Bluetooth remote control. The woman inserts it, stimulating her in more than one way, while the man plays with the remote.

“We could start there,” I reply, my gaze wandering around.

“I’ll order it tonight,” Richard says. “Next-day delivery is an option.”

“Have it gift-wrapped. She deserves a proper present,” Jax smiles. I’m aware he’s had a soft spot for eons, too. Not that I can blame him. Or Richard. If anything, I think our affection for Shay has only served to bring us closer together as friends and partners. “We’re meeting with her on Friday, right?”

“Yeah, evening, after practice,” I tell him. “What time do you wrap up?”

“Nine. Got my eight o’clock group,” Jax says.

“That’s fine. If I remember correctly, Shay will be putting together price offers around that time for yours and Lyle’s fitness and weight training combo plans,” Richard says.

I notice my cup is empty. I could order another one, but I’d rather get two to go and take Shay a latte, instead.

“Alright, then, Rick, you place the order, and we’ll meet up on Friday night. The four of us,” I say, pulling myself out of a startlingly comfortable armchair. “I need to get a couple of coffees and head back to the gym.”

If Shay wants us to take her every which way, we’ll do it. If she wants to be claimed and shared, we’ll claim and share her. If she wants her brains fucked out of her head, she’ll get that, too. Body and soul alike, we’ll take her and make her into our woman.

I have no idea how it will work out in the long-term, but I do know I’m willing to try whatever I can to make it happen.

It's been a while since I've sat down with Cassandra in her office. Her private practice is a lovely, generously illuminated space on the east side of Seattle, nestled between residential buildings with restaurants and cafés lining the ground floor. Giant spruce trees poke out of the park nearby, their dark green spears shooting for the gray winter skies as I melt into the sofa, admiring them from the other side of the glass. It smells of vanilla and jasmine in here—one of Cassandra's favorite incense combinations.

"I've missed you," Cassandra says.

"I know, I've missed you too. It's been so busy at the gym lately. I'm sorry I haven't been able to get together as much."

She shakes her head. "Don't apologize. I know what it's like to get a business up and running." She smiles wickedly at me, wiggling her eyebrows. "So how have things been since you accidentally emailed the list to the guys?"

"Richard called a meeting tomorrow evening."

"And you think it's to talk about that?" She's trying so hard not to laugh.

"Hey, you're the one who encouraged me to write it in the first place," I chuckle dryly.

She nods once, holding back a hefty chortle. "I figured you'd use pen and paper, not a whole ass Word document."

"I got lazy. My laptop was on at the time..."

“Shay, it’s okay,” she says. “You already know their reactions. They weren’t spooked, they weren’t weirded out nor put off, were they?”

I shake my head. “No. On the contrary. That’s why I’m on edge, actually. They seemed super into it, and Marius, Jax, even Richard have all changed their attitude toward me. Dramatically, might I add. I didn’t expect any of it.”

“You mentioned your little episode with Marius already. And the tatami moment with Jax,” Cassandra says. “And you also mentioned Richard’s words after Alice was late again. You’re noticing the whole pattern, right?”

“Yeah. I’ve unleashed something, and I don’t know how to handle it. I mean, it’s one thing to fantasize about being with three hot men at once, but it’s a whole other thing for said fantasy to accidentally become a reality.”

“Have you thought about the naughty list from a different perspective?” Cassandra asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the items listed on it came from your head, right?”

I nod again. “Yeah.”

“And where did your head, your mind, come up with a foursome with Marius, Jax, and Richard? Think about it. You’re close friends and business partners. You see each other every day. And they were there for you through thick and thin. When Vincent disappeared, they were there to pick up the pieces, to keep you upright and on your path, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Don’t you think your dynamic has subtly shifted in the past six months without you even realizing it? Have you considered that maybe you thought of a foursome because of the slight signals they might’ve been unwittingly giving you?” She sits back, arms crossed as she makes her point. “Marius is an expressive man. His eyes alone speak volumes. I’ve seen him and spoken to him enough times to read him like an open book. And frankly, I’ve known he’s got the biggest crush on you since I first walked into that gym.”

I gasp. “Oh, wow...”

“Seriously. He’s head over heels, honey, but cautious. I can’t blame him. We all remember Roxanne, right?” Cassandra shakes her head.

“He was loyal to her.”

“Loyal doesn’t mean he loved her,” she points out. “I think Marius found something in her, something he couldn’t have with you because you were too busy being gaslighted by Vincent.”

“Ouch...”

“The truth hurts. But let’s circle back to the foursome fantasy. Shay, think about it,” Cassandra replies.

I do think about it for a moment. I can’t exclude the possibility that the concept might’ve seeded somewhere deeper in our friendship, especially in the past six months. My journey of self-growth and healing has brought parts of me to the surface I’d never been aware of. The guys noticed, and they often complimented me about it. I specifically remember Richard telling me one morning that he thought I’d grown more in the past six months than in the last two years.

“So, I wouldn’t have thought about a foursome with Marius, Jax, and Richard if I didn’t already know, somewhere deep down, that they’d actually be into it,” I conclude.

“Doesn’t that sound reasonable?”

“It does.”

“Therefore, having this concept at the forefront of your consciousness in this moment, how do you feel about them accidentally reading the list?” Cassandra asks.

“Listen lady, you’re sounding too much like a therapist right now. I’m not your client,” I tease lightly.

“No, but the hat is hard to take off, especially here in my office. My question still stands, though.”

And it’s a good question to ask again, now that the mindset has shifted. “I’m... glad. Holy crap, I’m actually glad they got the

list.”

“Why is that?”

“Because now they know how I feel, sort of. I mean, it runs a much profounder course for me,” I tell my friend. “But the desire is there. I want them, all three of them. And I’m glad they got a glimpse of my sexual side, I guess.”

“A side you’ve never really explored.”

“It’s the kind of stuff I’ve wanted to try since before I met Vincent. But because I’ve always been so guarded and afraid to open myself up... So, the fact that Marius, Jax, and Richard know about it... I think I like it.”

“You like it?”

“Yeah. I like that they know where my mind’s at, sexually speaking. They know I’m willing to take the next step and explore my sexuality.”

“It’s about time, too. You’re willing, Shay, but do you feel ready?”

I feel my lips stretching into a confident smile. “Oh, yeah.”

“Then what’s the point in feeling embarrassed about the naughty list? The three of them are willing to help you fulfill every bullet point on that thing,” Cassandra says. “Why not embrace this knowledge and let the universe guide you?”

It sounds somewhat hokey, but it also rings true. Every inch of me desires those men—and not just their bodies, though I’d rather start there and see where it could lead. Our bond is tight enough as it is. Why did I fool myself into thinking they might not respond to my naughty list the way they actually did? I braced myself for failure as soon as I realized what I’d done.

“How do you feel about tomorrow’s meeting, then?” she asks.

“Not as anxious as half an hour ago,” I laugh.

“Good. Listen, Shay, you’ve already got what it takes to grab life by the balls, but you have to let go of your shield and sword for a hot second and simply enjoy yourself.”

I shrug. “What’s the worst that could happen, huh?”

“You’ll be on the receiving end of what I hope are three phenomenal cocks.”

We stare at each other before bursting into raucous laughter, throwing our heads back, wheezing and gasping for air as we revel in our own dirty jokes. I needed my best friend’s advice more than I knew. I do feel better.

Granted, I’m still pretty terrified of the potential outcome and how it might affect my professional relationship with Marius, Jax, and Richard. I’m still worried about damaging our friendship, as well. But there really is no harm in giving this naughty list a go, especially if the three of them have already expressed their interest.

Like Marius said, there’s no putting this genie back in the bottle.

When Friday evening comes along, my heart is tightly stuck in my throat as I brace myself for the meeting. I check my watch for the umpteenth time. It's nine o'clock, and I have one last look in my office mirror before I head over to Richard's. I opted for a cream-colored pantsuit with dark red heels, a black silk shirt, and a crimson leather bag for this moment—though I'm not entirely sure why. The power suit is supposed to dominate the room, yet the conversation will likely be about me getting dominated by three men. Oh, well, I'm better off following my instincts through and through on this one.

My pulse races frenetically as I walk out of my office and hurry past the reception desk. I spot Alice in her seat. She's got the evening shift today and looks downright miserable. I'm guessing it's because we close at midnight and it's a Friday. Everybody hates the weekend shifts, but I take a small degree of pleasure in knowing she's unhappy and languishing behind that desk.

The gym rooms are packed at this hour. If only every day were like this. If we could get more folks through the door on weekends, we would see a significant increase in our revenue, and Richard wouldn't be so angsty about the whole thing. Once I'm done scoping out the place, I go into Richard's office. My breath falters as I find the three of them already here.

“Hey, guys,” I manage.

Jax and Marius have the guest seats turned to face the sofa. Richard gets up from his desk and comes around, leaning on the corner as he motions for me to come in. “Hey there. Make yourself comfortable,” he points to the sofa. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“That sounds rather ominous,” I chuckle lightly.

Marius’s gaze darkens as it travels up and down my figure. Jax holds back a smile, his eyes never leaving my face and drilling holes into my very soul. Richard, on the other hand, is ever the playful devil, his focus resting on my lips. Despite my power suit, I feel downright naked and vulnerable before these men. I’m also compelled to obey, so I take a seat on the sofa, hands resting on my knees as I look at each of them.

“How was your day?” Jax asks me.

I give him a warm smile. “A lot less stressful than I expected,” I tell him, then look at Marius. “I’ve emailed the prices to you and Lyle, by the way. You two can discuss the details on Monday. I’ll be here for any questions you might have.”

“Thank you,” Marius says.

“Okay, enough about work. We’re all off the clock here,” Richard cuts in. “Shay, it’s time we address it.”

“Address what?” I mumble.

He laughs and takes out a printed copy of my naughty list. It’s enough to make my temperature spike as I take a deep breath and prepare myself for what will either be a colossal letdown or the beginning of something absolutely extraordinary. The pressure is way higher when the odds are fifty-fifty, and the stakes are as high as this.

“Your naughty list, of course,” Richard says. “The guys and I have gone over it. Needless to say, we’re intrigued and interested.”

“Intrigued and interested?” I can barely hear myself speak, melting under their probing, burning eyes. My skin feels hot. My throat is tight. Worse even, liquid heat pools between my legs, making me ripe for anything but a constructive conversation about my... fetishes.

“Yes, intrigued and interested. And we figured we’d start small since it’s clearly a sensitive topic for you,” Richard says. “This gift is the first of many,” he adds and places a shoe-sized box on the coffee table between us.

It’s gift-wrapped in red paper and elegantly tied with a gold-threaded bow. All I can do is stare at it, curious and apprehensive at the same time as I try to understand what’s going on. “I thought we... Hold on, what’s in here?”

“Your first Christmas present,” Marius replies, a subtle smile testing his lips. “An early gift, let’s call it.”

He gets up and walks over to the door. He locks it, then turns around and takes his seat next to Jax. I catch a glimpse of his bulging erection and damn near faint as I realize the three of them are as aroused as I am in this moment. My attention keeps bouncing back to the box, though. It’s related to the naughty list, so my mind is automatically going over it as I remember every single thing I wrote. Lava roses blossom in my cheeks.

“Can I open it?” I ask meekly.

“You absolutely should,” Jax replies. “It’s for you.”

With trembling hands, I mumble a, “Thank you,” and unwrap my gift with care, removing the ribbon first, then the paper. Beneath, I find the original box of the vibrator I’ve wanted for a long time. “Oh,” I gasp, recognizing the model.

“We figured we’d start small, like I said,” Richard replies with a cool grin. “Go on, take it out of the box. I wanna see it.”

I give him a startled look. “You do?”

“We all do,” Jax replies.

I look at Marius, and he nods slowly, so I have no choice but to take the vibrator out of the box. It’s bright pink with two sections—one for vaginal stimulation, and a smaller bit for my clit. The remote is the size of a key fob, and as soon as I press the On button, I realize it’s got batteries in it and everything. I turn the vibrator off and laugh slightly.

“Y’all are crazy,” I say.

“You started it,” Richard replies. “Why don’t you try it?”

This is where I freeze, paralyzed by his words. “Wait, what?”

“Try it,” he says.

I am beyond flustered, yet not shocked nor outraged. To my own surprise, I’m intrigued. Curious. Even willing. My brain has definitely been rewiring itself over the past few days, because my reactions to invitations outside my comfort zone are once again appealing.

“Like, right now?” I ask.

“Yes.”

Marius leans forward, elbows resting on his thighs. His black tee stretches over his muscular shoulders, the warm brown of his eyes swirling with anticipation. Jax stirs in his seat, and I can tell he’s also extremely aroused. The mere sight of that generous bulge has me licking my lips as I look at the vibrator and decide it’s time to take things to the next level. They want me to. My best friend was right—what’s the harm if it is precisely what I’ve wanted for a long time?

Taking a deep breath, I set the toy aside and get up. “Perhaps I should lose the clothes first.”

“We wholeheartedly agree,” Richard smirks, arms crossed over his massive chest. His velvety gray vest struggles against his torso, while the shirt wraps around his biceps, tightening with every flex. “Maybe start with the jacket.”

I nod slowly and do as I’m told, carefully removing the jacket. It lands on the sofa’s arm, followed by my silken shirt. Every movement is calculated and deliberate, though my heart is bouncing and my muscles feel taut, stretched and primed for something intense, something... otherworldly. The whole time, they watch me, lips pressed into thin lines and desire gleaming in their eyes.

I’m in nothing but a matching set of white lace lingerie. I feel strange. Not weird, not awkward, but... strange as they gaze upon me.

I welcome Marius, Jax, and Richard's genuine admiration as I stand before them. Their eyes wander up and down, recording everything. Marius bites his lower lip when his gaze reaches my breasts. He has already tasted them, and he definitely wants more.

"You're a stunning woman," Jax mutters, one hand resting on his erection.

"Keep going," Richard says, his voice lower than ever.

The emerald fires in his eyes demand my attention. I look at him as I unclip the bra and take it off. Then I look at Jax as I remove my panties with a slow, bending motion. A subtle groan escapes Marius's throat, but he doesn't move an inch as I take my seat on the sofa, making myself as comfortable as possible. I've played with smaller toys before, but not with such an enticing and attractive audience. And certainly not with this marvelous contraption.

"Who wants the remote?" I manage.

Richard moves like lightning as he snatches it from my hand. "I'll go first."

"Okay. Let's see how this works," I say. I gently insert the vibrator into my already dripping pussy. It goes in smoothly, and I position the smaller end against my clit. The large piece is delightfully thick, and I love the sensation. "Mhm... Yeah, it's nice..."

"Let's see what it can do," Richard replies, watching me as he presses the On button on the remote.

Instantly, I arch my back in response as a flurry of steady vibrations ignite my core. "Oh, yes..."

It's extraordinary... the speed with which I'm turned on. The ripples blow through me, making my hips sway as I tilt my head back. I catch a glimpse of Jax before I take a deep breath to try and hold on to the sensation for as long as I can. He's got his cock out and is stroking that monstrous erection as he admires me.

Marius is barely self-controlled, the hunger blazing in his eyes as I'm compelled to touch my breasts with the hand that isn't

guiding the vibrator in and out of my drenched and eager pussy. I go slow, squeezing gently before I focus my index and middle fingers around the nipples. I pinch them just as the first orgasm rocks me into the bare wilderness. I cry out in sweet ecstasy as Richard intensifies the vibrations.

I feel my body moving, my knees bucking as I ride the wave.

“Do you like it?” Richard asks.

“Oh, God, yes... Don’t stop!”

He gets me to another level just as I come down from the pure bliss, colors exploding before my eyes. My breath is ragged, but I am nowhere near done. The constant vibration is downright addictive, and I feel raw and tender on the inside—every nerve ending responding to the deluge of unbridled pleasure.

“Marius... Come here,” I manage, panting as the tension tightens in my lower belly. “I would like to taste you...”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. Moments later, he’s out of his pants and kneeling on the sofa beside me. I stare at his cock, hunger gathering in my throat as I admire its sheer girth and generous length. I want him inside me. I want all of them inside me. But they’re right, we do have to start somewhere, and I want to repay them for every drop of pleasure they give me.

So, I wrap my fingers around the base of his throbbing erection and lick the tip. I taste the glistening, salty droplet of pre-cum awaiting. “Mhm... Better than I imagined,” I whisper.

“Take it all, then,” Marius replies, his eyes locked on mine as I open my mouth for him.

He slides in seamlessly, and I relax the back of my throat to welcome as much of him as I can. There’s a lot of him, but he is worth the effort. Back and forth, I slurp and suck him deep, while Richard ups the volume and sends me on another maddening ride. I moan and gasp for air, but Marius holds my head in place and fucks my mouth with slow, deliberate moves.

“I need more. Jax... You’re next,” I manage as Marius pulls back and plants a kiss on my lips.

He tastes himself on me and smiles softly. “Go easy on yourself, baby. You’ve got plenty of time to learn...”

“Go on, Jax,” Richard says. “I wanna see how much our queen can take tonight.”

Jax takes Marius’s place on the couch. His cock is different. Thicker and twitching with desire, the veins running along the meaty shaft as he puts it in my mouth. He tastes just as good, though.

“Fuck,” Jax curses under his breath. “Dammit, woman, you’re a natural...”

All I can do is moan as I revel in the continuous assault on my pussy and clit. Marius settles beside me, taking my left nipple in his mouth. He suckles hungrily while I service Jax to the point where I feel him swelling against my tongue. Slurping and licking his cock, I let the pleasure rumble through me as I feel a third climax coming on.

I’ve lost track of time.

“Pass me the remote,” Marius tells Richard. “Take my place.”

I don’t even register the switch, but Richard is now sitting next to me, his cologne invading my nostrils while Marius plays with the remote. The rhythm and intensity of the vibration changes, making my core tighten as I deep-throat Jax. Richard guides my spare hand to his cock—another joy to feel, just as thick and veiny and pulsating with desire as I stroke him softly. He kisses my breasts, then playfully nibbles on my left nipple just as another orgasm takes me out of existence entirely.

I throw my head back, spasming and quivering with each wave, crying out and losing my breath as I hold on to Jax and Richard’s cocks. Marius smiles, feeding on my mindless bliss as he watches me writhe and take everything they have to give me.

“You’re such a good girl,” Richard says, lovingly kissing the side of my neck.

Jax sits down and kisses me on the lips, our tongues clashing as I struggle to recover my breath. I don't ever want this to stop. It's too beautiful. It's sublime and primal. It's animalistic and delicious. Richard grabs a handful of my long, blonde hair and pulls, prompting me to gasp excitedly while he licks my neck and playfully bites my earlobe. Jax devours my mouth, and I welcome the possession, as Marius turns the volume even higher.

"Come on, baby, you can do it again, I know you can," I hear him say.

The intensity is too much to bear. My pussy is hyper-sensitive and under constant onslaught of orgasms, the vibrations making me unravel wildly. My hips rock back and forth. I need more. Harder. Deeper. *Oh, God, this is unbelievable.*

"Let go, sweetheart," Richard whispers.

"Oh, don't stop... Give me more!" I moan as he kisses me and Jax focuses on my breasts.

I'm loved on every level. I'm teased every which way. Each nerve ending in my body is ablaze, the tension reaching an all-time high as I feel myself rolling over the steepest edge I've ever been on. Jax and Richard hold me tightly, pinning me against the sofa as I lose all self-control. I see Marius stroking himself as he stands up and comes closer.

"Harder!" I plead, and he pushes the vibrations even higher.

It's insane. It's so much. Too much. But I'm a good girl. I take it. I take it gladly as Marius tightens the grip on himself and climaxes. His seed bursts and splashes across my bare chest as the next orgasm virtually destroys me. Jax keeps my mouth busy with his while Richard bites my shoulder. I'm falling apart, held in place by these incredible men, unraveling at the seams as every rocking motion squeezes my pussy dry.

I'm gushing like a fountain, completely unhinged, my juices flowing freely as I come undone.

I explode, over and over, like a supernova. I'm safe in their arms, the sweat dripping from my temples and down my breasts, where pearls of Marius's seed glisten softly.

“You’re incredible,” Richard says when I’m finally able to hear them again.

My legs and arms are like boiled spaghetti, my heart filled with songbirds and my pussy beyond sensitive. Marius turns it off and kisses me lovingly on the lips.

“I’ve said it once, and I will say it again,” he says, peering deep into my eyes. “This is only the beginning, Shay.”

“That takes care of one item on your list. Plenty more to go, though,” Jax adds, a boyish grin cutting his face from ear to ear as he beholds me.

I take deep and measured breaths as I come down from the heavens, the colors and shapes around me returning. My vision is focused once more, and my heart may need a while before it can beat without trying to bounce out of my chest. But the pleasure I feel is colossal, like nothing I’ve ever experienced, and I know Marius is right. This really is merely the beginning.

And if the beginning of this is so mind-blowing, what will the top item on my naughty list feel like? I’ve already lost my mind here. What else will I lose? And why can I no longer imagine a future where said first item on my naughty list won’t happen?

Christmas week finds the four of us at a private spa and resort in upstate New York called Hedonerie, which I believe to be a play on the word hedonism. I guess there would no other fitting term for what we're doing, anyway. Richard booked us private suites on the first floor of this sprawling complex overlooking the snowy Chappaqua woods.

The resort is splendid—a cluster of interconnected minimalist buildings with humongous windows and sloped glass roofs. The lobby is clean and well-appointed as we reach the reception desk.

“Good morning, and welcome to Hedonerie,” the concierge says. “I presume you have a reservation, sir?”

Richard nods and slides his ID across the counter. “Yes, I do. Richard Adami.”

“Ah, right, Mr. Adami,” the girl replies, while the other receptionist tends to an incoming couple. Glancing around, I notice a lot of couples hanging out in groups, laughing and touching one another in a rather intimate and loving manner. Why do I find it odd? “We've been expecting you. Your suites are ready, and my colleagues will guide you to your rooms.”

“Thank you,” Richard says. “I believe we're also booked for dinner tonight.”

“That is correct. We have you at a table for four at seven o'clock. Would you like to confirm while you're here?” the girl replies.

He nods once. “And one of the playrooms afterward.”

“Yes. Which would you prefer?”

“Playroom?” I mumble and give Marius a wondering look. He smiles vaguely, and it does all sorts of things to me.

“Playroom?” I ask again.

“You’ll see,” he replies.

A concierge comes over to load our bags onto a brass-plated cart while I keep my ears open and aimed at the reception desk, where Richard is going over playroom options. I thought this was a spa and resort. I’d understand massage and hydrotherapy rooms. I’d understand thermal pools and cosmetic salons. But playrooms?

“I think we’ll settle for the Nubile Classic,” Richard says.

I mouth the words to myself. “Nubile Classic...”

“Shall we say nine o’clock?” the receptionist asks.

“Sounds decent. Two hours should be enough for dinner, right?” he turns to us.

I nod my agreement along with Jax and Marius, though I’m still not sure what we’ll be doing after dinner. Part of me suspects something decadent and particularly spicy, but I’ve decided to let the element of surprise make everything more interesting while we’re here. I’ve never spent Christmas outside of Seattle. I think I’ve earned myself a break, and I couldn’t imagine a better way to spend Christmas than with three of the hottest men I’ve ever known. I’m excited and eager, obviously, but definitely nervous. It’s one thing to fantasize about a foursome with Marius, Jax, and Richard, and a whole other thing to actually go ahead with it.

We’re escorted to our rooms on the first floor by another concierge. The first one has already carried our bags in while we were given a brief tour of the ground floor. The whole place is a sensory experience, I soon realize, as I listen to the soft jazz music pouring from seemingly invisible speakers. Every single choice of design is meant to soothe and relax the resort’s guests, and I have to admit, it’s working.

My room is huge with floor to ceiling windows that offer a full view of the hot springs and the surrounding gardens. Snow has fallen everywhere, though the staff make sure to keep all the pathways and seating areas clean and dry. But it looks beautiful, a pristine white blanket covering the gardens and loading the leafless trees with shimmering snow crowns.

The living room area is wide open with creamy seating and a glass coffee table, where an assortment of fresh fruits and healthy snacks await in a silvery bowl with filigree edges. The bed is ginormous, covered in ivory-colored silk, sprigs of lavender left on the pillows along with a welcome note. My bathroom is like something out of a dream, with treated wood paneling that resembles a Swedish sauna, while the clawfoot tub looks deep and wide enough to hold a foursome.

“Holy smokes, I’m in heaven,” I mumble as I tour my room, taking in every detail and running my fingers along every surface.

A phone rings somewhere in the room. I look around and spot a vintage rotary telephone with a brass dial and mother-of-pearl inlays.

“Hello?” I answer, and Marius’s voice flows through.

“How’s it looking?”

“Oh, gosh, it’s wonderful, Marius. I’m spoiled and then some.”

“Yeah, you should see my room. I reckon we’ll be coming back here. I’m already hooked,” he laughs.

“What kind of resort is this?” I ask him.

“What do you mean?” he replies.

I can almost see him lounging in a seat like mine, listening to the sound of my voice. The scantily clad couple outside my window captures my attention as they start making out, tongue-wrestling without a lick of shame as other spa residents simply walk past them, smiling and talking, without a care in the world, unbothered by what’s happening.

“Well, I’m looking at this couple,” I tell Marius. “Out in the hot springs... Do you have a view of them, too? Or is your room on the other side?”

“No, I can see them.”

“So, you can see what they’re doing,” I say, my voice lower and raspier than usual. Crap, I’m turned on. And judging by Marius’s voice, he’s not far behind.

“He’s licking her breasts, yeah. She seems to like it,” he replies somewhat nonchalantly.

“They remind me of us,” I hear myself and cannot believe my own ears.

What’s even more troubling is the fact that my hand is traveling downward, fingers unbuttoning my jeans as I keep watching the couple. He’s handsome, maybe in his mid-forties and blonde, while she’s super fit and tanned, her ginger hair pulled up in a loose bun on the top of her head. I see her muscles twitching as she wraps her arms around his neck.

The woman’s upper back is against the pool’s edge, her breasts just above the water. I lick my lips slowly.

“See how he takes his sweet time with each nipple?” Marius asks.

“Yeah.”

My fingers slide between wet folds, a swollen nub awaiting in desperate need of release. Whatever this place is, it’s doing one hell of a number on me—and I’m not the only one, either. Another couple stops not far from the pair Marius and I are watching. They seem just as interested, the husband parting his wife’s robe to touch her. She spreads her legs for him and smiles as they both admire the pool frolickers.

“She must be gushing underwater,” Marius says.

“She’s not the only one.”

“You’re wet, huh?”

“Soaking.”

“Look at her lips. She’s whispering something to him,” he says.

Whatever the ginger woman says to her man, he’s red-faced as he shifts underneath. “Oh, damn, he’s fucking her, isn’t he?”

“She’s loving every second of it. Aren’t you?”

I’m flicking my clit incessantly, feeling the tension gather in the pit of my stomach before a sudden descent between my legs. I’m panting over the phone, and I can hear Marius’s ragged breathing so close, as though he’s standing right beside me.

“God, yes,” I moan softly.

“Are you touching yourself?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“And we’re watching them,” I tell him. “While thinking of each other...”

He exhales sharply. “Check out their voyeurs, though.”

“Oh, wow...”

The other couple are getting busy, as well. The man has the woman bent over as she holds on to a bench for dear life. He pounds into her, each thrust making her thick thighs jiggle. The ginger woman in the hot stream bounces happily with her legs wrapped around her man’s waist, her breasts splashing over the water.

I slide my middle and ring finger inside myself while pressing the bottom of my palm against my clit. “Talk to me, Marius... I’m almost there...”

“I can’t wait to have you like that,” he says, and I can feel him closer to the edge. “To lose myself inside you. Shamelessly, over and over until you’re crying out my name and Jax’s and Richard’s at once. Look at the redhead now...”

I do, and I make myself come as I watch her cry out in ecstasy, her head thrown back as her man gives her everything he’s got while biting her shoulder. The other couple have switched

places. It doesn't even matter that it's a cold winter outside; the steam and heat from the hot spring keeps the whole garden at a lovely temperature. The woman is naked and on her knees, sucking her partner's cock until he explodes in her mouth.

Marius's guttural moan sends me into the sweetest bliss as I finger-fuck myself, snippets of that Friday night at the office making me quiver twice over.

"This is so fucking hot..." I manage, coming down from a different kind of paradise.

"Wait until you see what we've got planned for after dinner," Marius replies, catching his breath as well.

I leave the couples outside and lean back into my chair. "Will it be like what we just witnessed?"

"Even better and thrice over."

Oh, I like the sound of that. I never imagined I'd lose my virginity in such a decadent setting. This clearly isn't a regular spa and resort. Whatever this place is, however, I plan to enjoy it to the fullest. I've suppressed this part of myself for too long.

It's time to grab life by the horns and go for a spectacular ride. I've got three gorgeous hunks who are more than eager to claim and dominate me in every which way. Tonight can't come soon enough.

* * *

DINNER IS A DELIGHT.

I'm wearing a little black dress with chrome-colored heels and a few matching bangles on my wrist. I spritzed my favorite evening perfume—a seductive layer of roses and bergamot mingled with pepper and lemon blossoms. Jax loves sniffing me like a hound in heat, frequently leaning into me for this endeavor.

Our table is loaded with various meat and side dish platters, as we ordered a selection to try from. There were so many

appealing options the waiter offered us mixed plates to enjoy as much of the menu as possible without stuffing ourselves full like Thanksgiving turkeys. Glancing around, I see the couples from earlier enjoying their dinner together. Other couples do the same—though I also spot hands under the table. Legs spreading. Devilish smiles and dirty whispered words.

“Damn, everybody is perpetually horny in this place, huh?” I mumble.

Richard follows my gaze and laughs lightly. “Hedonism at its finest, don’t you think?”

“I don’t mind it in the least,” I say. “But you still haven’t told me about the playroom. What’s that about, exactly?”

“She’s curious,” Jax chuckles, looking at Richard and Marius.

“Of course. And judging by everything I’ve seen so far, I’m pretty sure I’ve landed in some kind of kinky, sex jungle of sorts,” I reply with a smirk.

“It’s a spa. A special kind of spa,” Marius says, finishing his main course with a deep sigh and a generous gulp of sparkling wine.

Before long, our table is cleared and dessert is served—a plethora of strawberries, sliced peaches, and raspberries accompanying various rare cheeses, nuts, and dollops of whipped cream in crystal cups. A sweet dessert wine is included, as well.

“Gewurztraminer,” I mumble, reading the label with a furrowed brow. “My tongue’s getting tied just trying to pronounce this...”

“It’s the best on the market,” Richard says. “They have it delivered from Austria. But you want to be careful with it. One glass too much, and you’ll be wilding out like our neighbors over there,” he adds, holding back a laugh as he looks to his left.

I follow his gaze and gasp upon noticing a woman on her knees under the table. She’s blowing her man out of his mind, while the other couple accompanying them feed each other strawberries and whipped cream, watching. Naturally, my

body reacts, liquid arousal trickling between my legs as I clench my knees tighter together.

“Damn, this is insane,” I mumble.

“But also pretty stimulating,” Jax replies. He takes my hand and guides it under the table so I can feel precisely how hard he is. “It’s what this place is all about, really. Letting go of every inhibition and indulging in every sin available. The minute we walked through the door, we left the rest of the world behind us.”

I nod slowly, unable to take my hand off him. If anything, I’m tempted to squeeze ever so slightly, wishing he’d at least unzip his jeans so I can hold him properly. As if reading my mind, he pulls his cock out, and I happily wrap my fingers around the thick shaft, stroking him slowly.

“I like it,” I say. “I’ve been such a prude for so long... it’s actually quite liberating to let go.”

Richard leans forward, his green eyes dark burning with desire as he reaches out and offers me a strawberry dipped in honey. “Then take this, Shay. Consider it an appetizer of what’s to come.”

“You’re going to keep me in the dark until we get to the playroom, huh?” I reply, then grin and take a lazy bite out of the strawberry while simultaneously tightening my grip on Jax.

He hisses, his cock twitching in my hand. “You’re gonna make me come a little too early, baby. Slow down...”

“But I want it all and more,” I shoot back.

Marius inches closer and places a soft kiss on my bare shoulder. “Tonight, you’ll get it all and more.”

We try to be civilized, but couples at other tables keep doing the dirty either underneath the shimmering white tablecloths that only partially obstruct our view or in plain sight. The waiters don’t seem to mind, either, as they hover around and glide across the dinner hall, their arms loaded with plates. Whatever the rules, the people here have gladly accepted them.

The outer world no longer exists.

Once we're done with the last of our strawberries and sweet wine, we're escorted by one of the hostesses into the playhouse, where we have a room booked until the early morning. I have no idea what awaits, but I'm enthralled by the overall aesthetic.

I let Richard hold me close as we walk behind the hostess through a narrow, dark red hallway with Victorian era wall sconces dimly illuminating our path. I feel Jax's hand on my ass. A gentle squeeze, no more. A promise of what's to come. Marius keeps stealing glances at me, smiling to himself when we lock eyes.

Ahead, I find myself briefly fascinated by the hostess herself, a tall, lanky woman with legs for days and heels that further elevate her above us. Her slim body is wrapped in black chiffon, and I can see the lacy hem of her stockings. I can see the garter-belt strap as well and wonder if Jax can see mine from behind.

We pass by several doors, each adorned with an identification plaque. The Cigarette Room. The Swing Set. The Gourmand's Dream. The Velvet Cave. Each name suggests the playroom's overall theme, and it's making my mind fuzzy as all sorts of naughty scenarios blow through, as I imagine myself with my three men in each of these spaces, trying the toys and the contraptions that likely await.

We reach the playroom labeled The Nubile Classic, guarded by a solid mahogany door with a lion's head knocker. The hostess smiles and runs an access card through a device mounted on the door frame. We all hear the lock click open as the hostess hands Richard the access card and politely backs away.

"Refreshments await inside," she says, her voice as soft as honey. "Should you require anything during your stay in the playroom, you just have to pull the bell rope. Enjoy your evening."

"Thank you," Richard replies with a pleasant smile.

Once we're inside, I realize how incredible this place really is—and how much thought went into this booking. Richard, Marius, and Jax actually sat down and went over who knows how many different options before they stopped here. For them to do so much in order to spend time with me, in order to make the top of my naughty list a reality... I'm speechless and overwhelmed as I admire the playroom.

It's spacious and round, with walls dressed in pale pink silk with white embroidery resembling reeds bending in the wind. Frilly chandeliers hang overhead, pearls and faux crystals glistening in the delicate, warm light. It smells like roses and lily of the valley, while soft 50s ballads croon in the background. The bed in the middle of the room is a massive splendor with a white-wood frame and a veiled canopy, velvety butterflies and flower appliques adorning the hems.

Marius pulls each veil back, tying them around the bed posts with candy-pink ribbons, while Jax walks to the mini bar and pours us champagne in Bohemian crystal flute glasses. Richard locks the door and stands beside me as I try to take everything in.

There is a section of the wall on which various sex-play accoutrements are mounted—not the red-and-black leather and latex stuff you see in every street corner sex-shop, but high-end objects designed to appear as though they were made for the late- eighteenth century. The dildos are pale pink and huge, with pearly and pink sapphire inlays around the bottom. The whips are dusted with glitters and gold, their tips made of white feathers. The feather duster toys are definitely instant favorites for me, with wood handles sculpted in the shape of graceful damsels. There are plenty of pink-fur cuffs and candy-flavored edible lingerie.

“This is a fairy's porn paradise,” I say, breathless and in sheer awe.

“Nothing less for our lady,” Richard replies. He turns to stand in front of me, a soft smile dancing on his lips as he looks into my eyes. “You're deserving of this and more, Shay. And while your naughty list may have been accidentally sent to our

inbox, I honestly believe the universe wanted to lead the four of us here.”

I stare at each of these men, wondering how long this has been going on. How did we get so far, so deep into our dynamic? I’ve been feeling these emotions for a while now, and it appears I’ve not been alone in this muted turmoil. Marius has already made that clear.

“I have to admit, I’m a bit nervous,” I tell them.

“It’s going to be alright,” Richard replies. He pulls one of the pins from my hair, loosening the bun at the top of my head. “One step at a time,” he adds, then pulls the second pin. “There’s no rush, Shay. We have the entire night and plenty more after that,” he says and frees my hair with the third pin. Honey-colored waves pour down my back as I take a deep breath.

Marius comes closer, standing behind me. I feel his presence before I see him. I feel his lips on my shoulder, and I tilt my head back in response. Jax brings a glass of champagne and gives me a sip, watching me with burning eyes as I drink and smile.

Richard unbuttons his linen shirt, his lips twisted and handsomely framed by his red beard. I’m dazzled by their scents. Marius prefers the citrus notes, while Jax wears sandalwood. Richard’s musky cologne dominates my senses as he leans forward and kisses my lips. I welcome him wholly, our tongues swirling and playing, tasting and pressing against one another. My pulse goes on the adventure of a lifetime as Marius’s fingers hook under the straps of my dress, tugging both down my shoulders.

“Keep your shoes on,” Richard insists.

My first time, and it’s not with one man. It’s with three, each as hot and as fascinating as a romantic fool like me might conjure in her dreams. How did I get so lucky? And what are the odds that it will eventually blow up in my face? Previous life experiences have taught me that nothing truly good lasts. But I’d rather enjoy what I can than deny myself this moment.

The dress falls to the floor. My breasts fill the black lace cups of my bra, while my pussy tingles inside the matching Brazilian cut panties. Richard fetches one of the feather toys and runs it down my arms with slow and deliberate movements. I try to control my breathing while Jax works on unclasping my bra.

Marius gets down on his knees behind me, and my panties follow.

“Hold still,” he says, and I can feel the desire burning in his voice. His fingers dig into my thighs as he spreads my legs. Instinctively, I push my ass back, giving him the perfect view. “Fucking hell, this is paradise...”

His tongue flicks between my slick folds, and I gasp with delight, my eyes rolling.

Jax kisses my ear, then proceeds to taste the side of my neck. Lips, tongue, teeth. Pecking, licking, nibbling. Each gesture causes a fire to ignite within me as I struggle to stay upright. Sensing my loss of balance, Richard smiles and takes my breast in his hand, while the other keeps the feathers going and tickling every inch of bare skin. I didn't even register the bra coming off, but I am certainly enjoying the feel of Richard's intimate touch.

“How does it feel?” he asks with hooded eyes.

“I love it. I need more...”

“Ask and you shall receive,” Jax replies and captures my mouth in a ravenous kiss while Marius's tongue penetrates me, savoring every drop of my arousal.

I moan against Jax's lips as Richard's feathers travel downward. He finds my clit swollen and in need of attention, so he puts the feathered toy aside and cups my pussy with his hand. Marius doesn't relinquish his position, though, so they quietly agree to share. Marius keeps his tongue sliding in and out of me, while Richard's fingers flick my tender nub until I feel my core tightening.

“What do you want?” Jax whispers in my ear.

“Everything, baby,” I whisper back, panting as I reach the edge of reality. I hold on to Richard’s massive shoulders, gripping the muscles and tightening my hold as he adds more pressure to my clit. “Give me everything...”

Marius playfully slaps my ass before his tongue spears me again. It’s enough to throw me out into the endless pool of insanity. I fall apart and come hard, moaning and gasping as both he and Richard work my pussy, squeezing every drop of liquid pleasure from me.

I don’t get a moment’s respite, though. Naked and trembling, desperate for more, I’m gingerly escorted to the edge of the bed, where Jax turns me around and has me lay down. Unbuckling his belt, he gets out of his jeans, cock hard and ready for me. I lick my lips as Richard and Marius flank him, both of them naked and equally aroused. I still can’t believe it’s all for me...

“We’ll go slow,” Jax says. “I’ll be gentle.”

“Take me,” I manage, cupping my breasts as I lift my knees and spread my legs for them. It’s enough to unleash a tidal wave of passion as Jax mutters a curse and positions himself against my glistening pussy. I feel him go in, slowly, so slowly.

First, the bulging head. I’m gradually stretched and filled, more and more, until he meets a thin layer of resistance. Marius crawls onto the bed and lays beside me, holding me close and showering me with kisses as Jax moves deeper. The pain is sharp but short-lived as I feel Richard’s fingers probing my clit again. The subtle movement makes my core relax, allowing Jax to go all in.

“Oh, wow,” I gasp, feeling his entire cock inside me.

“Relax, baby,” Marius mumbles in my ear. “Just relax until it doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Don’t stop,” I beckon them. “Please... I need more...”

Jax smiles softly. “I told you. You were made for this. For us.”

He grips my hips and moves. In and out. Each thrust going deep and smooth. I lift my hips to welcome him, the pain long

gone and replaced by infinite pleasure as I feel myself tightening around him. His fingers probe my flesh, his grip harsh and firm just as he intensifies his campaign of conquering my body.

“Oh, God, yes... Yes, just like that!” I croak as Richard keeps working my clit.

Jax starts fucking me fast and hard. Marius keeps me close, kissing and licking my breasts, his cock pressed against my side and pulsating with each of my moans.

They take turns, and Richard slides inside me next. Jax climbs onto the bed and gives me his cock. I take all of him in my mouth while Richard claims my pussy. Marius never lets go, his hands roaming up and down, kneading and caressing, owning and massaging, pinching and scratching gently. The amalgam of tactile sensations sends me reeling as I explode all over Richard’s magnificent cock.

“Marius... I need you too, baby,” I say, downright insatiable.

This is what I’ve been missing out on, and I could kick myself. The engines are turned on, and my heart is tumbling maniacally through my chest. Marius turns me over and takes me from behind. He’s the biggest and thickest, and I feel him deep enough to make my stomach clench.

“Fucking hell!” I hiss, and he stills inside me for long enough for me to feel his erection throbbing as the ripples of my orgasm begin to fade. Rivers of creamy arousal envelop him as he moves, faster and deeper and harder.

He grabs a handful of my hair and pulls my head back, bending over to reach my lips. I kiss him as he fucks me into oblivion. Richard and Jax are both kneeling in front of me, and I am compelled to give them as much of this moment as I can, so I take their cocks, one in each hand, devilishly squeezing the base of the shafts before I lick their swollen, purplish heads. I lick the pre-cum first, then take each of them in my mouth.

Sucking hard, I service both with equal enthusiasm, stopping only for a breath of air as Marius pounds into me. I don’t want

this to end. It's too good, too pure and dirty at the same time. They've unlocked something within me, something I may never be able to quell.

"Take it all, baby," Richard grunts as he shoves himself deep down my throat. "Your mouth is perfect, Shay."

"Made for us," Jax repeats as I move back to suckle him like my favorite lollipop.

Marius's hand slips around my hip, his fingers finding my clit tender and hyper-sensitive. His touch alone is enough to demolish me, though, and he works me into yet another mind-crushing orgasm as he thrusts himself deeper. Harder. So hard I'm crying out in the midst of an instant rapture.

"Yes, baby, yes! Just like that!" I scream as my whole body shudders.

I feel him come at the same time, our orgasms intertwined as he spills his seed inside me. The warmth spreads through my lower belly as I look up, my lips parted just in time to receive both Richard's and Jax's climaxes. I suck each of them off until they're ready, taking matters into their hands and stroking themselves into a double, thunderous release.

Marius's cock twitches, my core rippling and stretching around me with each final thrust.

"Take it all," Richard says it again.

I stick my tongue out and welcome the splash of their salty essence, the corners of my mouth pulled back into a satisfied grin as I taste both Jax and Richard at the same time. It's the most intimate and honest kind of connection, and it's got me unraveled in a wholly different way.

Marius collapses on top of me, his breath ragged and his heart beating out of his chest as he wraps his arms around me, refusing to let go. Richard runs his fingers through my hair, a tender smile settled on his sweaty face, while Jax brushes his thumb over my lower lip, collecting the last droplets of his cum.

I quickly come to terms with my situation. I've just lost my virginity in a foursome. I've got three men to fuck my brains

out and not just for tonight. Hell, tonight has only just begun, and my appetite seems to only grow bigger as the minutes pass us by.

This can't be reality.
Yet I am living it.

Marius, Jax, and I have always had a tight bond of friendship. We've known each other for long enough to be comfortable enough to share a woman. I just never imagined the woman we would so happily share would be Shay. She is perfect. Even now, in the late afternoon, after a whole night of mindless lovemaking and a few more rounds between breakfast and lunch, even now as we're relaxing in the hot spring pool and breathing in the mineral steam, she is fucking perfect.

Naked under the water, her blond hair soaked and flowing down her back, her eyes closed and head resting on Marius's shoulder. Perfect.

"We'll wait for the holidays to pass before we discuss the new year," I tell Marius after he asks me about our plans for January and February. We've all read Lyle's emails earlier this morning where he was expressing concern after having lost a couple of customers on account of Alice's tardiness in reception. "We should enjoy our stay here and keep any business conversation for when we get back."

"I fully agree," Jax chimes in, smiling as he admires Shay in her state of utter relaxation.

"We'll be okay," she says. "I've got a couple of ideas, particularly for spring. Mother's Day, International Women's Day... There are plenty of great opportunities ahead,

especially for our female clients. We only need to get through the winter. But that's all the business talk you're gonna get from me."

Marius nods and plants a soft kiss on her cheek. "How are you still talking, babe? You are literally spent..."

"You boys wore me out," she giggles.

I wish it could be like this forever. The truth is, as delighted and as unwound as we are, a harsh reality awaits us back in Seattle. I haven't told them yet, but our revenues have dropped even further, and I don't see us getting past winter without an additional cash infusion. My principles remain firm, however. I cannot help a business that refuses to grow, regardless of the reasons. Part of me knew it would be a troublesome endeavor, given the gym's location and neighboring competition, but I hoped our alliance would withstand that and more.

Alas, the world of business isn't for dreams nor for hopes. I've lost my share of brands by not letting go sooner, so I know I won't be making the same mistake again. I am ready to drop West Key if it doesn't improve by the end of January, and it's the main reason I'm doing everything in my power to keep things strictly physical between us and Shay. Out of the four of us, she has the most to lose when the gym ultimately fails.

I'll make sure she lands on her feet because I care about her. Deeply. But I know she will resent me for jumping ship. The last thing I want to do is get us involved on an emotional level on top of everything else. It will threaten our partnership and it will definitely ruin our friendship, so the best I can do is keep my brakes on and make the most of this Hedonerie holiday as I possibly can.

"Oh, so you're spent, then?" I ask, watching her eyes slowly peel open so she can look at me.

To think she was a genuine virgin when we first walked into the playroom. By midnight, she had two cocks in her mouth and one deep inside her, moaning and writhing in unadulterated pleasure as she gave herself to us. Her mind is a cornucopia of colors and shameless desires, while her heart has the strength of a thousand lions. Her body, on the other

hand, is a wonder in and of itself. I've never felt this way with a woman before, so naturally... I'm dangerously addicted to her. That puts a cramp in my plan to keep things strictly physical. I'll cross that bridge when I get there.

"Not spent. Just a little tired," Shay says.

"There are ways to fix that," I reply, gliding closer.

The hot spring pool is fitted with underwater jets, making the four of us weightless and utterly relaxed as we huddle together. There are others enjoying the pool and its surrounding gardens. It snowed last night, but the staff have already cleared the whole place. They even mounted outdoor heaters to assist the hot spring in keeping the entire area warm beneath the gray, wintry sky. I'd love it if it would snow, though. I'd love to watch the snowflakes melt into the pool around us.

"Oh? And what exactly did you have in that dirty mind of yours, good sir?" Shay laughs lightly.

"My mind is dirty?" I feign outrage. "Shall I remind you what we did with almost all the toys we had available in the playroom?"

Her face turns pink, then red as her lips press into a thin, bashful line. "You got me into it..."

"And you took the lead," Jax chuckles softly.

He and Marius flank her, holding her with her back against the pool's edge. "What are you three planning?" Shay asks with playfully narrow eyes. I could lose myself in those smokey blues of hers. "I'm sensing a plot here..."

"You call it a plot, I call it a consequence of your actions," I reply and close the underwater distance between us. "Either way, I'm not done with you yet."

On a bench nearby, two couples chat and exchange impressions about the place. As the afternoon slowly descends into a quiet evening, they get closer and more intimate, hands sneaking around and underneath the fluffy white bathrobes, lips meeting and tongues playing. I love this place. There is absolutely no regard for decency, and people can be as

depraved as they wish. Yet somehow, they're just the right amount of depraved.

"What do you intend to do about it, then?" Shay challenges, desire flickering under her eyelashes.

A woman with as much self-confidence as Shay will likely rule the world someday. I've admired her from the moment we met, but now... Dammit, my heart is working overtime to screw me over, but I can't help myself as I bring my hand forward in search of her pussy. I find her slick with want, the steamy water obscuring most of what we're doing.

"You should be punished for being this addictive," I murmur, moving closer.

I kiss her on the lips, taking my sweet time to explore her soft mouth as I remember how it felt with my cock deep down her throat. It's an experience I seek to have again. Soon.

I feel her moving against my hand as she moans roughly.

"How are you able to turn me on so fast?" she gasps, and I penetrate her with two fingers.

I use my spare hand to flick and rub her clit in deliberate, circular motions. "You're only responding to what you desire the most."

"This is too soon," Shay whimpers as I feel her tightening around my fingers.

She must be sore. But she doesn't ask me to stop. Instead, she rides my hand as I carefully lift her just high enough above the water for Marius and Jax to take her nipples in their mouths to suckle and lick freely. She's so close to a climax.

I finger-fuck her steadily, enjoying her every moan and fractured breath. I flick her clit, then rub it firmly to finally push her over the edge. "Please, fuck me," Shay cries out, completely oblivious to the other couples.

Some of them chuckle discretely. Others turn their attention to us, and I am compelled to oblige, so I get closer and wrap her legs around my waist.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask with a low voice. “There are people watching us.”

“Let them watch,” Shay says, still writhing in a surprisingly long orgasm. “I want them to see the luckiest woman in the world, right here, right now...”

How could I ever deny this goddess anything when she tells me such things? I count on Marius and Jax to keep her against the pool’s edge as I go deep inside our woman. Ours and only ours. Damn, she’s so tight, so fucking hot. It’ll be impossible to pull myself away from her when things inevitably go sideways.

An arrangement like ours can’t last. We all know it.

“Fuck me, Richard,” Shay hisses.

I lose control. I forget about everybody else. As Marius and Jax kiss her bouncing, full breasts, her soft shoulders, her beautiful, long neck, I ram into her. Hard, fast, ruthlessly throbbing with every thrust while my fingers dig into her hips. She’s got her arms around Marius and Jax’s shoulders, licking her lips as I fuck her brains out, as I claim her over and over until she’s creaming and quivering, until I shoot my shot and fill her to the brim.

She shudders in yet another orgasm while her pussy clenches tightly around my cock, squeezing the last drop from me. It barely took a minute, that’s how hot and arousing this woman is. But she’s not letting go of me, yet I’m compelled to cock my head to the side with a curious look on my face.

“What are you up to?” I ask, catching my breath.

“I’m not done with you yet, mister,” she replies, wiggling her eyebrows. “This was barely an appetizer, wouldn’t you agree?”

Marius nods in amused agreement. “I’d certainly like to see more.”

“Fine, then we’ll just have to wait until I’m hard again,” I chuckle dryly, but one quick squeeze of her drenched pussy has me reacting way before I thought I’d be ready. It’s enough

to kick the smile off my teeth. “How are you doing this?” I exclaim, prompting Shay to laugh.

“I guess I have a magical pussy,” she replies cheekily.

All I can do is kiss her deeply, thinking to myself that is absolutely right. This is a magical pussy I’m dipping into. She sets me on fire, yet she cools my very soul. She leaves me hungry and always wanting more, yet when I’m inside her, I feel sated and blessed.

Shay squeezes me again, and I can’t stop myself.

I don’t want to stop myself.

I was never one for long-term relationships.

My upbringing, the absence of a feminine figure in my childhood, and my penchant for trouble as a kid steered me away from anything resembling stability. Once I got into martial arts, I discovered the true value of discipline and perseverance, of healthy routines and of putting my mind, my soul, and my body in sync. But with my career came the attention of many women.

After all, who doesn't love a fighter?

I didn't consider being with anyone for the rest of my life until I met Shay. She doesn't know that, and I can't bring myself to tell her, either. What is happening now is strange and unprecedented to me, but it's giving me the kind of access to her I doubt I would've gotten on my own. We're close friends and business partners, and while we're all in agreement that this thing of ours mustn't bleed into the rest of our lives, I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who's aware that it's already way deeper than it should be.

We agreed to go on one-on-one dates, too, to keep the level of intimacy comfortable for all parties involved. I certainly don't mind, because Shay is such a warm and funny and smart creature. Every moment I spend in her company makes me a better man. I'm just constantly disheartened by the fact that it's going to end, and I cannot allow myself to fall in love with her.

"I've never been out here," Shay says as we continue our stroll through Central Park.

She wanted to see New York, and since both Marius and Richard wanted to try the mud spa today, I decided I'd give Shay an opportunity to visit the so-called Big Apple. It's as crowded and as noisy as I remember it. I'm no stranger to this place, given the number of championships this city has hosted. But I do like the idea of seeing it with Shay. I love how she marvels at things that seem almost banal to me. The sense of wonder in her smoky blue eyes fills me with warmth.

"Central Park is definitely one of the strong points," I tell her. "We'll see Broadway next, if you want. I wanted to go shopping, anyway."

"Shopping?"

"Yeah, new sweats and kicks, mainly. There are a couple of stores on Broadway that I really like. Boutique stuff, not the regular merchandise you find at every big brand store," I explain.

Winter has the sprawling park covered in a thick layer of snow. The air is cold enough to make my breath steamy with each spoken word, but Shay's pink lips have my undivided attention, particularly when they stretch into a smile. I wonder how she'll feel later when it's just the two of us in my bed. There's a side of me I haven't shown her yet. Maybe I should. Maybe it'll help her keep her guard up. I don't want her falling for me, just as much as I don't want myself falling for her. Maybe I should give her a full view of who I really am. That'll keep the brakes on.

"I have to admit, I never thought something like this would work. The four of us, I mean," Shay says. "It's crazy. Isn't it?"

"Not unprecedented. I've heard stories, though none had much of a happy ending."

"How so?"

I give her a curious look. "Don't you think one of us will want more at some point? How would we go about it? What's the logistic behind this dynamic? At least if we keep things strictly physical, nobody gets hurt."

“Right. Yeah. We agreed on that,” Shay replies, gazing somewhere ahead.

It’s almost midday, and there are some people out in the park with us—mostly joggers who brave the winter snow to get their cardio in. I see a few couples, too, walking arm in arm and taking occasional photos of one another. They’re laughing and chattering happily, and I can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy in the pit of my stomach. That’s what it must be like... being a healthy couple. You enjoy one another, you don’t need to say much, you simply feel comfortable in their presence.

Shay leans into me, her arm hooked around mine as we turn left down a narrow alleyway. Around us, majestic oaks with naked crowns rise above, their branches arching over our heads as if to hug each other, to connect beyond the confines of nature and man-made structures. We sit on one of the benches, our thick coats insulated and comfortable enough to allow us a few minutes of rest before we head over to Broadway.

“But even so,” Shay says after a while, “I’m still in shock. I know it’s real, it’s happening, and it’s working—”

“For now.”

“Yeah, for now,” she says quietly “Aren’t you shocked, or am I the only one?”

I give her a long look and feel myself softening on the inside. “You’re not the only one, Shay. I think we should just make the most of it, enjoy every moment we have together and make sure we keep our friendship and our business partnership completely separate.”

“Oh, I absolutely agree. We’ve each worked so hard for the gym, for our clients, for our careers. It makes all the sense in the world for us to protect it. Speaking of,” she says, lowering her gaze for a moment. “I have this nagging feeling that Richard isn’t sure about our gym anymore.”

“You, too?” I let a heavy sigh roll off my chest. “It’s been on my mind as well. Marius and I have tried talking to him about

it, but he keeps reassuring us that we're in it together, in it for the long term and whatnot. Yet at the same time, he has said he won't be investing anymore if the gym doesn't pick up its revenue soon. I don't know where that leaves us, or how we're supposed to push through. We're still in the early days."

"We've been open for almost two years, though..."

I shrug, having seen my share of business enterprises come and go. "Most service industry projects need at least two years to start seeing a return on investment. If we manage to skate along the baseline, we're golden. Richard wanted this place to boom right off the bat, and he should know better."

"Except we're not really along the baseline, either," Shay replies. I can see the concern etched in the shadows dancing over her eyes. "We're bleeding money, and we're not bringing in enough new customers to stem the flow."

"We knew that from the beginning, from the moment we found the space. We knew the neighborhood would be a competitive one, and that we would have to build a different and smarter identity," I tell her. "We're almost there, though. I can see our brand coming together, Shay, and I have a lot of faith in us. Like you said just a few days ago, we only need to get through the winter and things will start to pick up."

"Yeah. They should've picked up with the cold season, though. Think about it this way. Summer is when most people are away on vacation. Autumn, winter, and spring should be full all the time. In the two years we've been open, Richard has had to cover the gym's rent five months out of twelve. It's a lot, especially for a man who lives and breathes by certain codes."

"Richard knew what he was getting himself into," I say. "I wouldn't worry too much about him, Shay. He's a good man, and he keeps his word."

"I don't doubt that for a second. But I do worry about the gym. We need to come up with something more, something to strengthen his trust in us and in the business."

I nod slowly, stretching my arm around her shoulders. “We’ll figure it out. Hey, we’ve been riding this boat for two years, now, and we’ve only gotten better at it.”

“I guess...”

“Your evolution alone has been a favorite show of mine.”

Shay gives me a curious look, the corner of her mouth tempted by a smile. “Professional evolution, you mean?”

“All of it. I’ll be honest, I liked you since before you started your glow-up journey, as you prefer to call it. Your character, your personality... They made you beautiful and perfect just the way you were. I’ve always wanted to get closer to you like this.”

Shay takes a deep breath and gives herself a moment to think. I hadn’t planned on saying these things, but she has a way of making me open up to her even when I’m trying to be cautious and guarded.

“Jax... I had no idea. You never said anything.”

“How could I? We were in business together. And I didn’t know if you felt anything for me, either. It was too high a risk for me to take.”

“I was always attracted to you,” she sighs deeply. “Marius, too, and Richard. You each have something that makes me want you as a woman. You’re different and yet so much alike, it’s mind-boggling and wonderful and scary at the same time. I wasn’t sure I’d ever deserve something like this.”

I hold her close and kiss her ruddy cheek, breathing her in and closing my eyes for a moment. “You will always be deserving, Shay.”

“I know that now.”

“Good.”

We stay like this for a while, though there’s a fire burning in the center of my heart, spreading outward and out of control. The blaze will soon consume me, flesh and bone and soul. I won’t be able to stop it. It will eventually destroy me, despite my feeble attempts to keep my own emotions under control.

Who the hell am I trying to lie to here? Shay has burrowed her way deep inside me. She's been there for a while. It didn't happen overnight.

She was always a distant dream. A sweet kind of what if.

After we're done sightseeing in the city, we drive back to the Hedonerie resort in one of their rental Jeeps. The backseat is loaded with shopping bags. I made sure Shay got her fill at every single store that caught her eye. Lingerie, jewelry, shoes, dresses. Whatever she wanted, I got it. She objected repeatedly. At one point she refused to let me buy her anything—I kissed her hard and grabbed her ass and told her to do as she's told. The dark undertone of my voice made her gasp and whimper with instant desire. When she's all hot and bothered, Shay is exceptionally pliable and submissive.

"I still can't believe you bought me so... much... stuff!" she exclaims as we pull up outside the resort. It's snowing here in Chappaqua, and I'm loving the view. Thick snow clusters fall gently over the layers from yesterday, and it gives me a sense of peace and quiet I haven't experienced in a while. "You really went overboard, Jax."

"Consider it a Christmas present and be done with it," I chuckle dryly.

"This is a motherload of Christmas presents!"

"You deserve it. Now, shut up and kiss me."

She laughs lightly and leans over. Our lips meet, and it's a sweet, tender encounter before I let my tongue go on a conquering rampage. A moan escapes her throat as I run my fingers through her hair, clutching tightly at the back of her head. "Oh, Jax," she breathlessly says.

"I'm not done with you yet."

I pay a concierge to carry the bags to her room while Shay and I grab a quick drink at the cocktail lounge bar on the ground floor. We skip dinner and retreat to my room for the evening—we've already had our fill with New York staples of the street food variety. Besides, we're both hungry for something else entirely.

As soon as I close the door behind me, Shay slips out of her boots and jeans, turning around to face me with a playful smile.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Making myself at home.”

“Oh, really? That’s audacious.” I smile as I watch her take her white wool sweater off. My gaze wanders along the delicious curves of her body, fingers itching to get the matching pink lingerie set off. Her panties are wet with desire. Shay is an incredibly sexual fiend despite her lack of experience. It was an honor to be one of her first, and I’m certainly eager to explore this side with her. “Stop, don’t move,” I say when she reaches for the bra clasp between her full breasts. “Wait a second.”

“Okay...”

“Ah, so, you do know how to obey,” I reply, hunger sizzling within me. My voice is low and thick, as thick as my cock at this point, every inch of me aching to be inside her. “Come here...”

“You could ask me nicely,” she chides playfully.

I shake my head. It’s time to show her who I really am and see if she still likes me when I’m done. “Come here, I said.” To my surprise, she obeys with wide, glistening eyes. “Undress me. Slowly.”

Her lips press into a playful thin line as she pulls my sweater over my head, first. I watch her gaze wander over my muscles and tattoos. She sees the scars and recognizes them from our previous nights of intimacy. I haven’t told her the story behind these cuts, though. Maybe I should.

“Don’t you want to know where I got them?” I ask as she stares at one of the pale lines running up my arm. She gives me a subtle nod. “I broke up a gang fight about five years ago. These kids in my old neighborhood were going at it with knives. I was training half of them at the community center in my spare time.”

She runs her fingers over the scar. Her touch alone is enough to send liquid heat coursing through my body. “They cut you,” Shay mumbles.

“They didn’t mean to. But at least it stopped them from fighting each other. I was bleeding and close to passing out, so they threw the blades away and called me an ambulance. By the time the cops got there, the kids were gone. When I saw them again at the community center, they were like little lambs. Of course, as soon as I was allowed to fight again, I took each of them to the mat and beat the shit out of them,” I reply, almost laughing as I remember the sheepish looks on their faces. “It’s how you talk sense into hard heads. Some people like it rough.” I pause when I see her eyes moving downward. It’s making my cock twitch. “Take the boots off next.”

Shay drops to her knees, ever so slowly, and unties the laces first. One by one, she removes my boots, occasionally glancing up at me. I give her a reassuring smile when our eyes meet, and she seems to enjoy this particular moment. I can tell from the way she keeps licking her lips. Her nipples perk up when she realizes she needs to get rid of my jeans, as well.

“You know what you have to do,” I say, my gaze never leaving her.

With trembling fingers, Shay unbuttons my jeans and pulls them down along with my boxers. I help her out at the bottom, my erection glistening, aching for her. She looks up and smiles. It’s all I can do to stop myself from claiming her right here, right now. But I want this to last. I want this night to be the best night she will remember with me.

“What, now?” Shay asks, her voice as sweet as syrup.

“Taste me,” I say.

She takes a deep breath and a firm hold of the base of my cock. Squeezing slightly, she licks the drizzle of pre-cum off the tip, swallowing it with a satisfied grin. “Oh, I’d like more of this, please...”

“You don’t call the shots here, baby,” I shoot back. “Take it all, like a good girl.”

Shay knows where this is leading, and she is beyond excited as she opens her mouth and practically slurps me down like her favorite popsicle. I curse under my breath, my muscles tightening as I feel the wet warmth of her mouth around me, her tongue gliding along the shaft.

She moans softly as she suckles the tip, taking her sweet time and using her hand to stroke the base, while the other focuses on my hardened, full balls. I take her by the head, handfuls of hair pouring between my fingers, and hold her in place as I move gingerly back and forth. Shay relaxes the back of her throat to let all of me in, like a fucking expert.

“You were made for this,” I manage as I thrust deeper and faster.

Tears trickle down her cheeks, but she doesn’t stop me. She loves it. She wants more. She likes having her mouth fucked like this, and the universe is my witness that I couldn’t stop even if I wanted. I revel in the sensation, feeling every sweet inch of her tongue, the sloppy slurping as I pull out for just a moment, for just long enough for her to catch her breath.

Her mascara is smudged, but her eyes are on me, smiling as she is close to unhinging her jaw for this. It’s too good. And she is anything but overwhelmed. I’m possessing her in ways I thought would scare most women, yet Shay is very much on her knees and welcoming everything I’ve got to give.

I can go a little further, so I stop and take a step back. She tries to get up, but I raise a hand to stop her. “I didn’t say you could get up, Shay.”

“Okay.”

“You stay there, on your knees, and take your bra off.”

She unclasps the bra and unleashes her breasts. I love the sight before me, the creamy flesh, the fullness beckoning for my touch. I bite my tongue as I admire her, as I thank the universe for having brought her to us.

“Are you pleased?” she asks, quick to catch on as a submissive. This is getting dangerously good. Shay likes it too much. And I can’t stop.

“Touch yourself.”

“Okay.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply. “That’s how a good girl responds.”

She giggles. “Yes, sir.” She cups her breasts while I stroke myself, watching as she squeezes her soft bosom, index fingers and thumbs pinching the nipples.

“Pinch harder.”

“Oh...” Shay gasps and closes her eyes as she tightens the grip.

“How does it feel?”

“So good.”

“Keep going.”

I’m about to fucking explode, but I can’t. Not until she has wholly submitted. So I put both hands behind my back and continue admiring this spicy show as Shay massages her breasts with slow, circular movements, once in a while stopping to pinch her nipples as hard as I told her. Each time, she hisses delightedly and throws her head back.

“Get up,” I order.

She smiles once more and stands up, her knees visibly shaking. I nod at her panties, and she knows what to do next. As soon as they’re off, I feel a grin slitting my face. I take hold of my cock yet again, my grip tight so I can edge myself easily when it’s time. The arousal is too much to handle, but I keep it together. I need to see where this leads.

“Get on the bed and spread your legs for me,” I tell her. Shay lays on her back, and I move closer so I can see her in her entire gorgeousness as her knees pull apart. I admire the glistening desire glazing her pink, tender pussy, each fold begging for my attention. “Touch it. Go slow.”

She brings a hand down, fingers sliding between layers of yearning flesh. Her clit is swollen, primed and ready as she rubs it with two fingers. I can't take it anymore, but I need her to tell me.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Shay?”

“Yes, sir,” she moans as she brings herself closer to an inevitable conclusion.

“How badly do you want me to fuck you?”

Her fingers slide farther down as she stretches her pussy open for me, her eyes fixed on mine. “I'm going to die unless I feel you inside me right now, sir.”

“You're going to make yourself come while I fuck you. How hard do you want it?” I can barely breathe at this point. The way she's playing along is feeding into my darkest dreams and fantasies. This can't be happening.

“As hard you can give it to me, sir.”

“Fucking hell.”

I ram right into her. She cries out in shock, initially tight as I fill her to the brim. Slowly, she relaxes, and I feel her pussy embrace my cock with formidable ease. The feeling is extraordinary, and I know I won't last long. But I'll give her what she wants. One thrust in, and she's flicking her clit again, panting as she intensifies the finger movement.

“Like this?” I ask, my second thrust harder.

“Harder, sir.”

By the third thrust I've got her by the back of the head, a handful of her hair tightly wound around my fingers. Shay smiles like the devil as I pound her into oblivion. Harder, harder, hardest. Faster. Deeper. She takes it all, moaning and breathing raggedly as she works her clit into a frenzy. I'm a fucking animal, taking her body and soul like this. But Shay wants it.

Shamelessly, mindlessly, desperately.

She holds on to the bed with one hand. She rubs her clit harder, applying more pressure as I feel her core tightening around me. She's so damn tight, I lose control and fuck her with animal intensity. Hard and fast, relentless and aggressive, feeding on her desire as I feel myself close enough to melt into the sun.

“Don't stop, sir!” Shay screams as she finally comes, rippling around me, gushing like a geyser as I go deeper, harder, faster.

The rhythm is impossible to sustain. I'm growling and thrusting, eager to feel every single atom of her marvelous pussy as she unravels, as she explodes in a billion colors, and I ultimately surrender. I fill her with my seed and feel the sweet release of ecstasy as she says my name.

“Oh, Jax, yes! Just like that!”

She's going to be the death of me. I plunge myself inside her. I dissolve and disappear in the grayish pools of her eyes. I kiss her hard on the lips as my cock pulsates happily, enveloped in her throbbing core. Every ripple squeezes me dry. Every spasm shooting from her body reverberates through mine. She is perfection. She welcomes my darkness. It scares and exhilarates me at the same time.

This woman might very well be my end.

Marius is infinitely more energetic in the morning. I actually like that about him, especially because he's the first to wake up and in the kind of mood that has his hands running up and down my body under the covers. My eyes peel open as I part from the sweetest dream, his fingers kneading the toned flesh of my ass and hips. I'm usually the little spoon so I get a perfect sense of how eager and rock-hard he already is.

"Morning," I mumble, feeling his breath on the back of my neck.

His heart thuds against my back, his cock twitching between my bottom cheeks as his hand moves around my hip and works its way up. "Morning, baby," he whispers in my ear, then kisses and playfully nibbles on the lobe. Sparks shoot through my belly as his hand finds my bare breast and squeezes gently.

I hiss and arch my back in response. He loves it, groaning harshly as he trails wet kisses down the side of my neck. He slips his left hand around my waist to keep me glued to him, while the right hand works back downward and between my legs. I part my knees to welcome him.

"Oh, I see we're in the mood," I giggle and turn my head just in time to receive a long, tender kiss. He licks my upper lip, embers burning in his dark eyes as he looks at me.

"I'm always in the mood with you," he says.

His fingers work my clit, sliding between the wet folds as my temperature spikes. I'm aching for him, deep down, my core throbbing as I shift so his cock can find its way to where it's supposed to be. I feel the head at my entrance, warm and slick against my creamy pussy.

"Dammit, Shay, you're more than ready for me," Marius grunts harshly as he goes in.

I suck in a deep breath as he moves slowly at first, stretching and filling me. I don't want this to ever end. I'm home with him, I'm safe with them, I'm happier than I've ever been, happier than I ever thought possible. Marius holds me for what feels like forever, then starts to move again. This time, he goes deeper and faster, our bodies melting into one another, undulating like reeds in the water.

The motions are perfectly synced, our breathing and our hearts beating in unison. He rubs my clit harder, feeling me tighten around him as he intensifies his thrusts. Sweat drips along my temples as I sense the deluge coming. The climax shakes me to the core as I crumble in his embrace. I ripple outward like a scorching sun, feeling his every motion deep within me. He possesses me, body and soul, biting my shoulder as he takes me harder.

"Come over here," he says, then rolls us both over.

I climb on top of him, still gushing and pulsating as he spears me with his magnificent cock. I don't move for about a minute, content to simply enjoy the sheer size and thickness stretching me. He cups my breasts and fondles them, smiling devilishly when I begin to move again.

The rhythm intensifies as he plants his heels into the bed and starts meeting my every move. My hips rock back and forth.

This position is optimal for my own pleasure, I quickly remember, as my clit presses against his groin. He thrusts upward, faster and harder, pounding into me while I grind to match his motions. It causes a devastating orgasm to build up before it explodes.

"Harder," I cry out.

Marius moans loudly as he tightens his hold on my breasts and fucks me harder and deeper. I'm bouncing and sweating and climaxing all over him, my mind in shambles as I feel his cock twitch, as I feel him come inside me. I love the look on his face, the way he breathes and the way he closes his eyes to revel in the sensation.

I'm so tender, quivering like a leaf blown by the morning winds. My nipples red from pinching, my clit overly sensitive with each grind throwing me over the edge repeatedly. I want every drop of this man inside me, I want to be his with everything I've got. He's already mine. I can tell. And as I collapse on top of him, panting and glistening in the afterglow, as I kiss him lovingly on the lips, I know we've got each other no matter what.

The two of us are amazing together. The four of us are unstoppable. Yet Marius has a link to my heart, a certain sensitivity that connects us on a wholly different level.

"You're my favorite kind of breakfast," Marius says.

I chuckle softly, my arms wrapped around his neck. "We should eat something, though. I doubt we're getting out of this room before noon."

"Oh, is that so? I take it you've got plans for me, Shay?"

"Well, you can't just tease a girl with a morning snack and not expect her to want more," I reply, planting sweet kisses on his rugged cheek while I run my fingers through his beard. "I want a full breakfast, sir."

"A full breakfast you shall have, then."

A half an hour later, we're having an actual breakfast in bed, courtesy of the spa's illustrious room service. We're comfortably seated with a bamboo tray between us, loaded with mini-sandwiches and fresh fruit salad, coffee with steamed milk and an assortment of sweet and savory pastries.

"I don't know what it will be like when we go back to Seattle." I let the thought slip out as I grab another sandwich.

Marius gives me a curious look, while I briefly enjoy the idea of the two of us, naked and sharing breakfast. He's been out of

my reach for so long, I still can't get used to us being like this.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"This foursome thing works beautifully up here. But how will we manage it further? I like where it's going, I love how we are together..."

"Yeah, me, too. It's different. Insanely fun. Intimate. Not like anything I've ever experienced, to be honest," Marius admits.

"Right?" I can't help but smile. "It's crazy and wonderful at the same time. And so far, we seem to have succeeded in compartmentalizing our relationship... but we've passed another threshold up here in Chappaqua, so I wonder... how will we fare in Seattle?"

Marius thinks about it for a moment. "We could just keep it simple and take it one day at a time. We did agree that our foursome should be strictly physical. We keep our expectations low and see where it leads." He pauses to give me a long, intense look. "It doesn't mean I plan on letting you go anytime soon, Shay. You and me, we're a different thing altogether."

"Are we?" Why do I sound surprised? I've been crushing on this man so hard for so long, after all.

"Of course. Don't you think so? Or am I delusional?" he asks, and I'm compelled to shake my head.

"No, definitely not delusional. I guess I'm just always expecting something to go sideways or horribly wrong. My past experiences haven't been indicative of great things being great for too long."

"This isn't that," he says, and it instantly makes me feel better.

He looks like he's got some thoughts of his own on his mind, so I ask. "What's up?"

"Just some work stuff. I know we aren't supposed to be talking about it here, but..."

"No, tell me," I say, reaching out for him.

Marius's gaze softens as he covers my hand with his. "You know my frustrations about the reception staff already. I'm just worried I'm going to reach a boiling point where I will simply start firing people left and right and be done with it."

"What happened?"

"I was checking my emails earlier."

"Earlier when I was in the shower, missing you?"

He gives me a sheepish smile. "Sorry about that."

"It's fine," I laugh lightly. "You're never too far from your work, no matter how hard you try. I know what that's like and I totally get it. So talk to me."

"It's just... I got an email from the accountant, and it's not looking good. There's a significant loss on the drinks stock, way more than it should be, and none of the reception staff seem to know how it happened."

My brows furrow slightly. "How can they not know? They work the reception desk. They sell the drinks, the supplements, the gym passes... That's not a reasonable answer."

"Right. I agree. The point is, if Richard hears about it, he'll be pissed."

"Shit."

The last thing we need is to give Richard one more reason to consider pulling out of the gym at a time when we need him the most.

Marius takes a deep breath and a sip of his coffee, his eyes searching my face. "I don't know what to do about this, how to approach the issue with the reception staff without firing all three. It's not even the first time, as you remember."

"How much of a loss are we talking about?"

"About a grand."

"Last time it was two grand, right?"

He nods once. "Yeah."

“Do the inventory again when we get back. Make sure all three are present and make sure they sign the stock sheets. Then have the accountant revisit the figures and see where you stand. Then call a meeting with us, then with the reception staff once we decide how we’re going to proceed. Either we fire all three or we take the loss out of their pay. There’s no other way around it.”

“I think I was happier when I was just training clients.”

“But you love the management side of things. And you’re really good at it. I doubt our gym would’ve worked as well without you behind it,” I tell him.

He smiles softly. “Thanks, Shay... but it’s not working as well as it should be. You know it, I know it, Jax knows it. Richard definitely knows it. We just can’t take any more hits at this point.”

Marius is right. We can’t afford losses on the drinks stock. We can’t afford missing gym passes. Tardy receptionists. Fewer clients altogether. We can’t afford any sort of dent, not when we’re so close to failing entirely. I reckon we will need to sit down and talk about this before we even go back to Seattle.

The accountant always makes sure we’re all carbon copied into her emails, so if Marius got these figures, so did I, and so did Jax and Richard. I’ve done my best to keep my nose out of my work email while we’re at the spa, but I’m pretty sure Richard won’t resist the temptation of checking his soon—if he hasn’t already.

Just as I suspected, Richard did read that email.

We meet downstairs at the restaurant for lunch, fully aware we’ll be broaching this hot topic. Jax looks tense, his shoulders tight and his jaw clenched as he cuts through his steak. Richard seems calm, but it’s the kind of calm that settles before the storm. I can almost smell the rain coming as he works his way through a plate of pasta. Marius and I were more or less prepared for this, but I still don’t like the feeling, the uneasiness with which we sit in silence and just... eat.

I break the silence eventually. “There’s an elephant in the room that we need to address, guys.”

“I was hoping we’d get to dessert, first,” Richard sighs and puts his fork down, his plate now cleared of most of the ricotta and spinach ravioli he ordered.

“Honestly, I didn’t want to talk about the gym at all,” I reply. “But that email...”

Jax shakes his head slowly. “It’s the second time.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“I was hoping we’d talk about it and reach a reasonable conclusion together,” Marius says. “We didn’t take action the first time because we were still in the beginning and there was a lot of stuff going on at the time. We had multiple errors and holes to patch, and things got lost in the shuffle. But now, we’re two years in. We shouldn’t have an issue like this at this point.”

“I agree,” Richard says. “For the sake of fairness, I’d say charge all three receptionists for the lost amount. We don’t fire them. Yet. If they want to quit in protest, that’s their problem.”

“Oh, I’m all for that,” Jax says. “Charge them. They need to pay for carelessness. The company paid enough the last time.”

I wonder what Alice will think of that. She is usually the loudest and often going on about workers’ rights without having done any of the work in the first place. I look to Marius for guidance in this conversation, mainly because he is usually the one who deals with the reception issues.

“What do you say?” I ask him. “Do we just charge them and see how they take it?”

“They’ll have to take it or leave it,” Marius replies with a tired shrug. “I’m done covering for them. I’m done rewarding incompetence. There’s no point in keeping people around if they’re sinking this ship we’ve worked so hard to build.”

Richard gives him a slight frown. “We’re not firing anybody.”

I think he’s trying to tell us not to fire Alice if she rebels and says she’s not going to pay the charge for our missing stock.

I'm compelled to respond, however, but not before a long sip of rose wine.

"Richard, if they want to leave, we can't stop them. But like you said, we have to charge them."

"Right. No, I agree," he quickly backs down.

It irks me. I never liked the subtle favoritism he showed towards Alice, and while I understand their previous history, I do worry that he might still be holding her to a higher rank than the other reception staff.

"Is there something we don't know about Alice?" I ask bluntly.

He gazes at me. "She's lived a tough life. But you're right. She doesn't get to take advantage. We'll treat them all the same."

"We can't sustain another loss like this."

"We should definitely implement new fitness programs," I say. "Lyle and Marius have their project; I've agreed to give them my full support on the matter. And Jax has new martial arts training programs he wants to advertise. We need to get our marketing team on top of that."

Richard gives me a soft smile. "Always our rock, huh, Shay?"

"We're in this together," I reply. "And I want the gym to work as much as you guys."

"Whatever we do, it needs to move quickly and it needs to grow fast," he says. "I'm not throwing the towel in, but I'm not feeling much enthusiasm for it, either. I don't want to put anybody out, but like I've said in the past, I'm not willing to inject any more cash into the business right now. I hope you all understand."

Jax pats his shoulder with a nod of understanding. "I get you, brother. You've already done so much. It wouldn't be fair of us to ask you to keep bailing us out. But we do need you by our side. Your whole network could be useful here, you know? Your bodybuilding connections, former colleagues, trainers, their clients... I mean, once we get some of the preliminary marketing materials together, could you at least forward everything to your contacts? You know it would help."

“Tremendously!” I agree enthusiastically. “Your social media following alone should yield some new clients in January and February if you post the announcements.”

Richard thinks about it for a moment, absentmindedly scratching his red beard. “I’ll ask my secretary to share and post everything as soon as you send it to me.”

“Rick, I know we’ve been through plenty together, and I know we’ll get through this, too,” Marius tells him. “I just hope you’ll stay on board. Through thick and thin...”

“I don’t plan on bailing anytime soon,” Richard says. “But let’s finish the gym-related conversation here, okay? I don’t want to talk about West Key until we’re back in Seattle. There is still so much for us to do here, don’t you think?”

Almost immediately, I feel the heat rising up to my cheeks. “What did you have in mind?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper as I finish my wine.

“We haven’t tried the Leather Room,” he says, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I’ve been wondering what you might look like in a black leather outfit. The hostess gave me a catalogue to pick from.”

“Oh, really?” Marius tries not to laugh upon noticing the blush on my face. His hand reaches under the table, fingers grasping my thigh and squeezing gently. “See, Richard, now you’ve got me curious about the leather outfit, as well.”

Jax grins broadly. “Shay, I’m thinking us three guys could go over the catalogue together and pick an outfit for you. How does that sound?”

“Only if you plan on fucking my brains out while I’m wearing it,” I shoot back confidently as Marius’s hand works its way up my thigh. “Or after I take it off.”

Somewhere behind me, at another table, I hear a woman gasping and moaning softly. I’m pretty sure her husband is doing something deliciously dirty, much like at every other meal we’ve had in this place. Everybody is so shameless and horny all the time, it’s almost making me wish the rest of the

world could be as open and as uninhibited as we are when we're here.

I'm already slick with anticipation as I think about the leather outfit. Whatever they pick, I know I'll get my fill in it. Judging by the hungry looks in the eyes of my men, I know they're going to give me everything and more if I ask. But what I find most appealing is our ability to keep business and pleasure completely separate.

Part of me worried we'd fail on this matter.

So far, so good. I'm still in danger, sort of. I'm falling for them. I feel it. Every time I look into Richard's wild green eyes. Every time I feel Jax's lips on me. Every time I breathe in Marius' scent. I'm falling harder and harder, and I'm not sure I have a working brake system. But at least I'm definitely and undoubtedly over Vincent. At least I have that.

Coming back to Seattle after a week of mad lovemaking and utter debauchery in Chappaqua feels like coming out of the longest, sweetest dream only to get smacked in the face by the real world. Yet I'm upbeat and spry about it. I've got more energy and a permanent smile on my face. Despite the gloomy winter, despite the constant switch between snow and sleet and ice-cold rains, despite the puddles and the high humidity... I find comfort and warmth at West Key Gym.

This is my domain, and I am the queen here. I certainly don't act like the frickin' monarch, but I do enjoy the feeling, especially since Richard, Jax, and Marius keep looking for the smallest of opportunities to spend time with me. At least we have locks on our doors and no cameras in our offices—it makes our clandestine encounters safer. I never thought I'd get serviced on top of my own desk before, but it seems to be Richard's favorite late-night activity. If there are still customers in the gym, even better. He enjoys the edge of it.

I enjoy it, too.

Life after the Hedonerie Spa feels different. Better. Brighter.

The whole issue of missing stock and low sales seems like the kind of task that can be accomplished if it's broken down into manageable pieces, so the guys and I have agreed to share the load. I keep forging ahead with my nutrition programs and online coaching via social media—which is usually just a taste of what my full-time clients get. Jax keeps developing his martial arts classes to appeal to a wider range of customers. And Marius works with Lyle to implement their evening

fitness packages with my personalized menus as an option. Plenty of folks want to begin their fitness journey but don't know where to start.

It can be overwhelming, especially in the beginning.

I'm walking around the gym with a fluttering heart after having just finished my cardio session on the treadmill. Marius is busy with another client, but he never misses an opportunity to steal a glance at me as I pass him by on my way out. It's not too busy at this hour, especially since it's early January and people are still on their winter holidays, but I did notice a small uptick in gym passes this week. I dare not feel too hopeful in the absence of our agreed-upon programs, yet I do smile more.

Once I reach the reception desk, I decide it's time for a second coffee. Alice is busy swiping through her phone, hip-hop music blaring through the overhead speakers. For a moment, I forget where I am while mentally traveling back to the spa resort. Gosh, it was so beautiful and erotic. We brought the magic back with us, though. We spend nights together aplenty, but we also spend plenty of time on one-on-one dates. Marius takes center stage there, always eager to take us to one cool place or another. Tonight, we're going ice skating.

I've never skated in my entire life and am understandably shaky about it, but he promised he'd make sure I don't make a fool of myself, which is such a sweet and naive thing to say, considering my propensity for falling on my ass whenever I lose my balance. My mind flies back and forth and all over the place as I watch my coffee pour into the cup, a smile blooming on my face.

"What are you so happy about?" Alice asks. I must've been grinning for a while for her to actually notice.

"Nothing. And everything. I had a great week away, to be honest."

"How were the Christmas holidays?"

Hands down the best I've ever had. The spa organized an intimate Christmas party behind closed doors. The tree was

lavishly decorated in red, green, and gold, and the baubles were actually jewelry boxes. I got a lovely set of emerald earrings, and Santa brought me more items from my naughty list. My sex toy drawer is literally stuffed. I may need a second one.

“Shay?” Alice says. I’ve yet to answer, I quickly realize.

“Oh, sorry, I’ve got stuff on my mind. The Christmas holidays were wonderful,” I tell her. “A nice resort up in Chappaqua, plenty of snow and mulled wine. You know, the classic winter tale.” And with a meaty feast to match.

“That’s nice.”

I’m about to ask what she did for Christmas when a man comes into the reception area. A man I never wanted to see again. My stomach drops, suddenly filled with dread and tons of lead as I recognize his fox-like smirk, his sharp hazel eyes, and his overall intrusive presence.

“Vincent,” I whisper.

“Hi,” he says, wearing a gentle smile that looks foreign on him.

All I can do is stare in disbelief as my brain shuts down. What can I even say to this bastard? Six months ago, he got me to fall in love with him, he even proposed to me before he vanished into thin air. He left me with my heart in shambles and my self-esteem crumbling. He broke me, and I have spent every waking hour since rebuilding myself, stronger and better, so no man can ever hurt me the way Vincent hurt me.

“Good morning,” Alice greets him with the politeness of a gym’s receptionist. “Gym pass?”

“Yeah, I’m new here,” Vincent says, giving me a sideways glance.

I almost forget I’ve got a coffee in my hand. I’m tempted to throw it in his face, scalding hot as it is. But I keep myself together. He doesn’t deserve my anger. He doesn’t deserve a single ounce of my energy or attention, for that matter.

“Oh, okay. Well, we have a number of different options for you to choose from,” Alice goes on, putting on her brightest smile. I can’t blame her. Vincent can be really charming to the untrained eye. “How often would you like to come to the gym?”

Vincent looks at me directly, and I feel like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming fourteen-wheeler. “Hey there, stranger.”

I can’t answer. Fury is boiling in my blood. All those nights and days spent crying my heart out. The misery. The heartache. The feeling of worthlessness and self-doubt that his disappearance left me with. It’s coming back with a vengeance. I’d thought my gym and therapy hours had fixed everything, but here I am, standing motionless by the reception desk, coffee in hand and completely triggered. Unable to breathe.

“Shay?” Alice gives me a curious look.

“It’s been a while,” Vincent says. “I owe you an apology.”

Again, I should say something, but nothing decent comes to mind. In the meantime, Alice’s gaze keeps bouncing between him and me as she tries to figure out what’s going on.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Vincent asks. He’s got his doe eyes on. Like that will work on me again. I can certainly see the appeal and how easy it was for me to fall for him the first time. But the rage inside me is too powerful to let me bite the bait twice.

“I have nothing to say to you,” I reply bluntly.

His eyebrows arch upward in surprise. “Shay, I know I’ve made a mess of things, but—”

“Are you here to buy a gym pass or to waste my time?”

“Shay,” Alice says, “maybe don’t push new customers away?”

“Maybe mind your business?” I shoot back with a stern glare.

Vincent clears his throat. “My apologies. I should’ve been more tactful about this,” he says, shifting his focus back on

Alice. “So, yeah, I’d like to buy a gym pass. You do monthly subscriptions, right?”

“That’s right,” she perks up now that she has his attention again, the little fool.

I choose to drink my coffee quietly, watching Alice as she tells him about other gym pass options and available amenities throughout the gym. But then the universe decides to throw another wrench right in my teeth as Marius comes out of the hall, having just finished a training session with one of his clients. He sees Vincent, and his mood suddenly changes.

Alice may be unaware of my history with this man, but she is right about one thing, as much as I hate to admit it. We do need customers, and we can’t turn any of them away. So I instinctively take the lead, fully aware that Marius is ready to kick Vincent’s teeth in.

“Hey, Marius. This gentleman would like to sign up for the gym,” I say, trying to sound as professional as possible.

“And I was just telling him about our gym passes,” Alice chimes in. “Oh, we also have fitness trainers who can coach you,” she tells Vincent. “Marius is our best, mind you.”

“You’re here for the gym?” Marius replies bluntly, giving Vincent the death stare.

Vincent turns to face him and smiles politely. He hasn’t changed much since I last saw him. A handsome man, I’ll give him that. Dark hair, hazel green eyes, a debonair smile and an athletic frame. He likes his high-end fashion brands, logos visible everywhere—I’ve always found that to be somewhat tacky, but Vincent manages to wear them with just enough style for the logos to seem passable. He’s not a rich man, though.

“I’m here for the gym, yes,” Vincent tells Marius. “I’ve decided to make some positive changes in my life, and my old gym wasn’t cutting it anymore. It’s been a while since I’ve done anything on the fitness side of things, as you can see,” he laughs lightly, pointing two thumbs at himself.

“What made you decide to come here?” Marius asks calmly. Thankfully, he picked up on my tone and my unspoken desire to remain civil in this uncomfortable situation.

“I lost a good woman a while back,” Vincent says. “And if I’m to ever get her back, I need to start working on myself. I figured going to the gym and taking care of my body would be a good first step.”

Marius gives me a long look, and I know he’s waiting for my approval.

My stomach churns. Part of me wants to throw Vincent out the door and maybe torch his car, too. But the truth is... we need more customers. Even lying, narcissistic pieces of shit like Vincent.

I give Marius the nod he needs to move this uncomfortable moment along. I hate having to do this, but the company, the gym comes first above everything else. We've worked hard to raise it from the ground up, and we're so damn close to success despite the hiccups. If it means I have to tolerate Vincent, of all people, then so be it.

"I think I definitely need a personal trainer," Vincent says. "It's been a while since I've set foot in a gym, and I'm behind on the technique. Besides, like I said, I'm determined to get the most out of my workouts."

"Okay, well, I can definitely recommend a trainer," Marius replies.

Alice, bless her nimble brain, perks up, eyes glowing for both of them. "Why don't you take him on, Marius? You did say you could use a couple more clients."

"I'd like to work with you, yeah," Vincent chimes in.

I could puke. Right now, in this moment, I could turn my stomach inside out and puke. Of course, Alice doesn't know my history with Vincent and she certainly hasn't got a single clue about me and Marius. And Jax. And Richard. She'd blow a fuse if she ever got wind of it.

Marius lifts an eyebrow at me. All I can do is offer a subtle smile of reassurance as I take a seat at one of the lounge tables in the corner. Next to me is the glass door leading into the martial arts room, where Jax is busy with a client. I catch

glimpses of him showing the guy how to maintain his guard during a fight.

“Alright, well, I’ve got an open hour in the evening at six. Would that work for you?” Marius asks Vincent, who keeps stealing glances at me. I try hard to pretend he’s not there, but the mere sound of his voice is enough to push me closer to an uncomfortable edge. I guess Cassandra was right. Some traumas never fully heal, but we learn how to live with them. We must also learn how to prevent them from affecting our present and our decisions for the future. “Three times a week would be a good frequency for you during the first few months,” Marius adds. “Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.”

“What about the weekends?”

“I don’t work on the weekends.”

“That’s cool. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at six, then,” Vincent says. “I’ll make the payments now.”

“Alice will help you with that,” Marius says.

I take a long sip from my coffee, watching Marius as he gets behind the reception desk to grab some of his things from one of the cabinets. Alice handles Vincent’s payment with a bright smile and plenty of giggles. It’s enough to make me roll my eyes.

Focusing on Jax for another second or two, I barely register Vincent approaching. As soon as I see him standing closer, a soft smile streaking across his face, my nerves tighten, my resolve trembling before him. He still makes an impact, as much as I hate to admit it. I only need to figure out if it’s just a ghost from the past or some form of lingering emotion his absence failed to reveal.

“How’ve you been, Shay?” Vincent asks.

I look up and raise an eyebrow. “Do you even care or are you just making conversation? There’s no need for the latter.”

“Shay, I was an idiot. I know that now, I see it,” he says. “I’m just trying to apologize.”

“It’s a little too late for that, Vincent. How about you go on with your stuff, and I go on with mine, huh? Wouldn’t it be better?”

“Better? No. I can’t live like this. It’s been torture without you.”

I laugh out loud. “Could’ve fooled me. Please, just stop. I’m not interested in anything you have to say. You said everything that needed to be said the day you ghosted me.”

“I’m deeply sorry for the way I left, Shay. I got scared.”

“And my tolerance for bullshit is at an all-time low.”

“I’ll earn your forgiveness,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ve come a long way in the last six months. I’ve had time to reflect, to deal with myself, to understand why I pulled back when you needed me the most.”

I roll my eyes. “You go do you, Vincent. I couldn’t care less.”

“You see, I’m not sure I believe you,” he replies, a smile teasing the corner of his mouth.

“Again, I’m not interested in your opinions or your beliefs. I will say this for the last time, Vincent. Mind your business, and I will mind mine.”

Finally, he understands this isn’t a good moment for him to keep pushing my buttons. His return alone is enough to make my skin crawl. The last thing I want to do is revisit a most painful breakup simply because he wants to feel better about himself. Screw that. He didn’t give a crap about how he made me feel when he vanished like a coward. Why should I care about how he feels now?

“I’ll see you around, Shay. And you’ll see for yourself. I’ve changed,” he says, then politely backs away and goes into the locker room.

Only when he’s out of sight can I breathe again. I look over to the reception desk and find Marius watching me intently while Alice taps away on her work computer. I smile at Marius, hoping he’s able to read it the way it’s intended. He mirrors

my expression and nods slowly. There are times when he and I can understand each other in the absence of words.

I'm not sure how this whole thing affects me. I'm with three wonderful men, and I've come a long way from the past version of myself. Yet I worry that the past version of myself isn't dead but simply lurking in the shadows of my mind. I worry she was merely waiting for Vincent to return. He did seem a tad different. Less domineering than he used to be. Perhaps even meek, at least where our dynamic was concerned. I don't know what to make of it.

Marius walks closer to me, coffee cup in hand as he takes a seat beside me on the sofa. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, I promise."

"It couldn't have been easy seeing him again."

I shrug and focus on my tepid coffee. It's still good. "I don't know what to say," I tell Marius. "But I do know he's part of a closed chapter. I don't make a habit of revisiting my past, particularly parts of it I associate with pain and uncertainty."

"He seemed pretty... meek. What do you think he's after?" Marius asks.

"I don't know, and I don't really care."

"Maybe he wants you back."

I can't help but laugh, yet I can tell it's not my usual laughter. It's more of a bitter cackle. "He can want me back. It doesn't mean I want him back."

"You don't?"

"How can you even ask me that?" I reply, giving him a hard look. "Marius, I'm with you. I'm with you, with Jax, and with Richard. Whatever this... this thing is between us, I'm infinitely happier and healthier with you three than I will ever be if I were to be stupid enough to get back with Vincent. He made his choice a long time ago, and I've accepted everything that happened."

Marius nods and stares at his coffee for a while. "I wouldn't blame you for considering it," he says. "I do know what it's

like to be tempted to go back to something familiar, even if it hurt you.”

“Marius, I don’t ever want to go back there. I’ve grown more in the past six months than in the past five years,” I remind him. “There is absolutely nothing waiting for me beside Vincent. Nothing except more confusion, gaslighting, emotional manipulation, and all the lies I can eat.” I pause and shift in my seat so I have a better look at him. “Do you think I wanna go back to him?”

He shakes his head. “No, but like I said, I would understand the impulse.”

“You shouldn’t,” I shoot back. “None of you should.”

“Do you want me to transfer him to another personal trainer? Lyle could easily fit him into his schedule,” Marius sighs.

“You’re free to do whatever you want, Marius. He’s your client. I can’t have a say in that.”

“I could drop him, too. Tell him something came up.”

“We need clients. Even him. I don’t think it would be a good idea for you to drop him, but if you want to hand him over to Lyle, again, that should be your choice, your preference, not mine,” I say. “We agreed from the very beginning that we would do our best not to mix our personal and professional lives, yet this is precisely what we’re doing here.”

He thinks about it for a moment, briefly scratching his trimmed beard. My fingers tingle with a muted desire to run through those black curls of his. I’ve grown accustomed to touching him, to feeling him close to my body and my heart. Maybe that’s why this conversation is so irritating. I’d rather focus on what I have with Marius, Jax, and Richard than linger over someone who is no longer a part of my life. I actually feel like Marius is probing my resolve, wondering how long before I cut everything off and go back to Vincent.

“You’re right,” Marius finally says. “I may not like it much, but you’re right. Vincent’s money is still money, and we need as much of it as we can possibly get.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page here.”

Neither of us likes it, but Richard's impulsive business nature is still a risk to us, despite his reassurances. I know how his mind works, and despite his honorable intentions, he may still decide to flip the switch. We need more income for the gym, more clients, and better PR in order to put Richard's mind at ease—at least until the gym is able to stand on its own. It's only a matter of time.

And a matter of putting up with people I would've otherwise turned away.

MARIUS

It's been hours since Shay and I spoke. Hours since Vincent had the audacity to try and come back into her life. I know what he's doing and how he intends to pull it off, but I can't get involved. If Shay wants to be with us, it needs to be her decision all the way through. I can't intervene; otherwise it'll feel like I pulled when she wanted to tug. It will lead to resentments and bitterness in the future. My previous relationships have taught me that much.

Even so, the prospective heartache hovers over my head like a looming shadow. A quiet promise of sleepless nights and misery as I try to imagine my life without Shay in it. It took us forever and one massive chunk of dumb luck for us to get closer in the first place. The balance we have is still a fragile and fickle thing, easy to break and to lose because there's four of us in this relationship. Four of us constantly lying to ourselves that it's strictly physical. That none of us want more, and that it would never work out in the long term.

Yet I can see it in Shay's eyes. And Jax's and Richard's, too. We all want more and need more from this dynamic of ours. Vincent popping up like a sore pimple feels like the universe's way of telling us it's not going to be easy. I struggle with doubts of my own, despite my heart and my body constantly screaming for Shay. It's unusual for us to go six hours in the same space without talking or at least cracking a joke. Something is definitely happening here, something none of us planned yet is something we will all have to contend with. Jax and Richard know about Vincent's return. I made sure they

knew as soon as Shay went back to her office. Neither is happy about it. So, that makes four of us.

I stare at Shay for a while. My clients are busy on the leg machines. One of them is counting reps on the leg press while the other is struggling with weighted Bulgarian split squats. Oddly enough, both are young males, yet Shay pushes and lifts better than them. I make a habit of teasing them on the matter, but I can't even joke anymore—not as I watch her alternate between running and active walking at a higher angle on the treadmill. I can tell she's not herself. Her shoulders are tight and her steps seem heavy. Her mind isn't fully into the exercise, but she does her best to finish her forty minutes like this.

"Keep going, Phil," I tell my client as he struggles with an added weight to his leg press. "You did way more last week and didn't bat an eye."

"Yeah, but I didn't do it with a hangover," he replies.

"Hey, I didn't force you to go out last night and chug all those beers," I shoot back with a cold grin.

Phil is in his early forties and zigzagging through a midlife crisis that recently culminated with a messy divorce, but he is eager to do more for himself—for his vanity and his health. Yet there are moments when he gives into his older habits due to peer pressure, and I always make sure to remind him there's a price to pay. I never tell him not to drink or enjoy something that gives him joy and comfort, but I often advise on moderation, especially before training day. At least he takes it like a man and pushes through with his set on the leg press, beads of sweat covering his reddened face.

"Well done!" I tell him, then turn my attention to Dave, my other client. He's almost twenty-five and wiry, a late bloomer still struggling to build his muscle mass. "How many reps did you do this time?"

"Fifteen," he says.

"Good. Keep going on the next set but try to bend that knee more. You need a deeper drop," I reply.

Dave looks at me as if I just told him to hit himself in the nuts with the dumbbell he's squatting with. "Dude, my knees are killing me..."

"And that's why a hip-and-ankle-mobility warm-up routine is essential," I reply bluntly.

He knows I'm right and he knows I don't make a habit of forcing my clients to do something they don't want to do. Nevertheless, I still enjoy yanking his chain whenever I get the chance.

Movement by the door has me turning my head. My heart stops for a moment.

Roxanne walks in wearing tight pink shorts and a matching top. Petite but exceptionally fit, her black hair is pulled into a tight bun on the top of her head and her piercing brown eyes scan the gym room until they find me. Almost instantly, I'm hit by the intensity of her glare, the weight of her unexpected presence knocking the air out of my lungs.

"What is this, Exes Day?" I mutter to myself.

I steal a glance at Shay, content to see her still on the treadmill and in the middle of an uphill sprint. I only hope she doesn't notice Roxanne anytime soon. It's not like I can send the woman away, though I didn't think she'd come back after the uncomfortable separation we went through in October.

"Hey, Marius," Roxanne says with a warm smile.

I can certainly remember what drew me to her. She was like a sweet wine—easy to drink but gave me a horrible hangover. Nothing came easy with her. I tried so hard to please her, I damn near isolated myself from everybody purely for the sake of managing her jealousy... only for it to blow up in my face. She walked out on me so many times, I'm genuinely surprised to see her walking toward me now.

"I haven't seen you in ages."

"Only a few months," I reply politely, fully aware that some of those present in the gym know precisely who Roxanne is. They witnessed one of her jealous fits. I still shudder as I remember that evening and entire episode. I should've closed

the door then, but I was dumb enough to let her back in a couple of weeks later. “How’ve you been, Roxanne?”

“Oh, it’s been a bit of a rollercoaster,” she says, laughing lightly and taking another step forward. The distance between us is getting smaller, and I don’t like it. I don’t want Shay to see her taking up so much space. “I went to therapy. Resolved many of my issues... I know I was a handful, Marius, but I’ve grown.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“In fact, I’m glad I ran into you. I wanted to apologize for my behavior,” Roxanne says. “I was so insecure about myself that I took it out on you, over and over until I pushed you into another woman’s arms...”

I shake my head and cross my arms, if only to give her a subtle idea not to take another step toward me. “You didn’t push me into anyone else’s arms, Roxanne. I simply decided it was time for things to end between us. It was better and healthier.”

“So you’re not seeing anybody?” she lights up.

“I didn’t say that.”

Her mask cracks, just for a second. The darkness returns to her eyes. The silent rage bubbles beneath the surface, and I begin to wonder how much of what she has just told me is even true. Or maybe she just hasn’t come across a good therapist. Her gaze bounces around the room, as if searching for someone—my significant other, most likely. Roxanne’s habits haven’t changed much, clearly.

“Well, either way, I hope you’re happy,” she says, her voice melting into a heavy sigh. “I know what I had and what I lost. I just hope the new woman in your life doesn’t make the same mistake.”

“Thank you for your kind words, Roxanne,” I reply. I also make the mistake of glancing to my right just in time to meet Shay’s gaze in the wall mirror mounted in front of her treadmill. My blood runs cold, and my brain refuses to process what’s happening. How do I regain control of a situation I

can't even ascertain as dangerous or just unpleasant? "So, what brings you back here?"

She follows my point of focus just before I shift it back to her, and I can tell she saw and registered Shay as a potential competitor—which is simply inane, since Roxanne doesn't stand a single chance with me. Not anymore. Not after the energy I burned and the misery she provoked in my life, even though I was always faithful and completely devoted to her.

"I decided to come back to the gym," Roxanne says. "It's a good habit to pick up again and to keep. I need to look after myself, both body and mind, and working out was always such a booster for me."

"I'm glad to hear that," I reply politely. "I'll get out of your way, then. I've got two clients I need to keep an eye on."

Roxanne places a hand on my upper arm, gently gripping the muscle as she smiles again. "I was hoping you might help me with a training plan. Or at least tell me what to work on today, given it's my first day back in... oh, almost four months!"

I stare at her in genuine disbelief, praying for the gods to unclench her hand. But she keeps it there, her touch firm yet tender, lips persisting in their willing smile. Shay's presence has me on edge, though, and I don't want her to get the wrong idea—not after the uncomfortable conversation we had about Vincent earlier, so I pull back and step away from Roxanne before I point her to one of the leg machines.

"You could start there after you do your usual warm-up," I tell her. "Three sets of fifteen reps each. Use the first three weights, though. Don't overwork yourself."

"Oh, thank you, Marius. You're always so kind and helpful. Even if I don't deserve it."

"Don't worry about it, Roxanne. It's my job."

She giggles and goes over to the machine. My blood reaches its boiling point as I turn around and see Shay slowing down on the treadmill. Her t-shirt is drenched in sweat, her cheeks crimson and her blonde hair puffy and curlier after a good workout. The look in her eyes punches me right in the gut. It's

dismay. Pure and simple. Dismay. Disappointment. Irritation. It's definitely not one of our better days, and neither of us chose this.

"Like this?" Roxanne asks as she takes her seat and slips her legs beneath the padded press.

"Yeah. Fifteen reps."

Shay gets off the treadmill and gives herself a minute under the AC vent to cool off faster as she pats her face dry with a small towel. I watch her in silence, admiring her curves and the way her thigh muscles twitch when she shifts her weight from one foot to the other. I remember our previous night together, the round shape of her gorgeous ass as I bent her over and gave her everything I had. I remember the raspy sound she makes during her climax, the dark look in her eyes when we look at each other, when I let go inside her, and she welcomes every drop.

I remember her steady breathing as she sleeps in my arms. Her colorful laughter. Her relentlessness in everything she sets out to do. This is a fierce woman I've come across, the kind of woman I can build a good life with.

I glance back at Roxanne, sensing old anxieties bubbling back to the surface. The uncertainty. The uneasiness. Love isn't supposed to feel the way it felt with Roxanne. It's supposed to be tranquil and energizing, uplifting and sweet. The way it is with Shay.

But the tension that has arisen between us since our exes somehow picked the same day to pop back into the picture is impossible to dismiss. We weren't ready for any of it. I think we're both trying to prove to ourselves and each other that we are over our pasts. We've been friends for so long. These are things we've talked about.

I can feel the discomfort, though. Hers and mine. They're on a similar wavelength.

It worries me.

There's no denying things have shifted in ways I'd hoped they never would.

I was convinced I was completely over Vincent, yet in the past couple of days I've been bumping into his ghost in most of my thoughts. I even had a dream about him, a memory resurfacing and making me feel incredibly guilty.

I don't have any feelings for him anymore—I'm absolutely certain of that. But he's still occupying more of my mind than I would like him to. And I think the same is happening for Marius with Roxanne.

Marius said she means nothing to him. That we're together. I want to believe that, and I do know he is stubbornly faithful. Yet I fear he is plagued by the same doubts as me, these fleeting moments of uncertainty. There shouldn't be any. We're a team. There are four of us in this dynamic, and that week in Chappaqua only served to solidify the bond, but because we all agreed we'd keep it strictly physical, I'm starting to think the emotional factor may be messing with our heads and hearts.

"You don't want Vincent back," Cassandra says as we walk to the gym. She has a training session with Lyle. "It's obvious you have deep feelings for Marius, for Jax, and for Richard."

"I'm not sure if my feelings for them are a good thing, though. We are trying to keep things simple."

"And only physical, yeah, I know, you've been reciting that mantra for quite a while, and I'm frankly amused you actually

think I might believe you,” Cassandra scoffs.

We enter the reception area and get her locker key first. Alice isn't here yet, but Lyle showed up earlier and is happy to assist. I feel bad since he's only a trainer and certainly not paid to do Alice's job, but since I can't fire her yet, all I can do is thank him as Cassandra and I head into the locker room to change. I've got my morning cardio to deal with, while she's on her second strength training session with Lyle.

“Even if we try to keep our feelings out of it, I don't know... Something has changed since Vincent showed up. Not to mention Roxanne. That was one hell of a day, let me tell you.”

“Shay, it's just an unpleasant coincidence,” my best friend says as she changes into her black tights and oversized cotton t-shirt. “If anything, consider this a stepping stone. A moment for you to reflect on the past and on how much you've healed since Vincent left.”

I nod slowly. “I don't want him back.”

“You've said it before, and I believe you. But I also know there is still a part of you that grieves for him, for what could've been. And that part of you may be responsible for whatever doubt you're dealing with. The what if he's different? What if he's really changed? That part.”

“Do you think he's changed?”

Cassandra takes a deep breath, hands resting on her bony hips. “Honey, a narcissist doesn't stop being a narcissist. And given Vincent's aversion to the basic concept of therapy, his toxic misogyny, and his track record with you alone, I have solid doubts he even regrets hurting you.”

“So what is he doing back here, talking about winning me back?”

“It's just fluff,” she says. “He couldn't find a better source to feed his ego and his poisonous vanity, so he's trying to see if he can have another go at you. You do understand this man is incapable of healthy love, right? Don't you remember how he used to treat you?”

“How could I forget?”

For every moment of affection, he would give me a week's worth of silent treatment and discomfort. For every date, he would spend days belittling me and diminishing my accomplishments, constantly devoted to making me feel small and worthless compared to him. For every soft word spoken, Vincent would double-down with micro-aggression and subtleties designed to make me question my own self-worth. He was impossible to please, yet I gave him my everything. I lost myself trying to keep him by my side because he'd made a habit of threatening to leave me whenever I did or said something that didn't suit him personally.

"As for Roxanne, you really don't need to stress yourself over her," Cassandra says.

"Do you think she's got a shot at Marius?" I ask my friend in a low voice, careful so Lyle doesn't overhear any part of our conversation.

Cassandra shakes her head and chuckles lightly. "Shay, that man is willing to share you with two other men just so he can be with you. I sincerely doubt Roxanne can even hold a candle to you."

"Are you ready?" Lyle politely interjects, his gaze fixed on Cassandra.

She raises her water bottle and smiles. "Give me a minute to fill this up."

"Alright. I'll go in, then," he replies, then looks at me.

I nod amusingly. "Don't worry, Lyle, I'll cover reception until Little Miss Muffet shows up."

"Thanks, Shay."

"No, no, thank you," I say.

Cassandra fills up her water bottle and leans on the desk. "My point is... Try not to overthink anything happening right now. Coincidences are just that. Coincidences. What matters is how you deal with them, and how you, Marius, Jax, and Richard deal with each other."

"Was Chappaqua too good to be true?"

“Not necessarily. But that kind of bliss never lasts. It’s often intertwined with reality, with other people, with stress and the struggles of everyday life,” she says. “It’s normal, it’s natural. Every relationship is like that, no matter how many participants. We have fears and doubts, we have skeletons in our closets, and we have varying degrees of anxieties as to where it will lead.”

I lower my gaze. I’d hoped this conversation would make me feel better, but the knot in my stomach is only getting tighter. Muffled grunts and growls erupt from the martial arts room. Jax must be in there for his regular morning training sessions. We haven’t spoken much since Vincent popped up. We’re due for a group date soon, but things keep getting in the way. The uncertainty isn’t helping.

“Thanks, Cass,” I reply with a heavy sigh. “I’ll see you after your training session.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” she asks, concern glimmering in her voice.

“Yeah, definitely. I think I need more coffee today, that’s all.”

She smiles and disappears into the gym. Marius is already in there with clients of his own, and I’m pretty sure Richard is busy taking calls in his office.

With a shaky resolve and hoping that today will be better between the four of us, I go about making myself a second cup of coffee. I listen to the machine’s brewing rumble and watch the soft, brown liquid pouring until a familiar voice draws my attention.

“Hi, Shay,” Roxanne says as she walks into the reception area.

I swallow a string of profanities and force myself to offer a pleasant smile instead. I’m pretty sure I’ve barely pulled off a grimace, but it will have to do. “Good morning, Roxanne. Welcome back,” I reply. “Let me get you a key...”

“Thanks. You look fantastic, by the way,” she says, extracting a gym pass out of her wallet. “You’ve dropped some more pounds since I last saw you.”

“Yeah, it’s a work in progress. I haven’t checked the scale lately, though. I don’t like to define myself by the number on that thing.”

“That’s a good outlook. How have you been?” Roxanne asks.

“Oh, crazy busy with this place,” I reply. “Just a lot of work, self-work, and more work in between, but I like where it’s going, so there’s no better motivation. How about you?”

She puts on a wide grin, and I can’t ignore the shivers suddenly running down my spine. I don’t know if she does it on purpose or it’s just part of her nature, but Roxanne has a way of creeping the hell out of me with her intensity. From what Marius told me, she tends to be a passionate woman, and not necessarily in a good way. On top of that, she holds an incredible amount of disdain for anyone she may perceive as competition.

“I’m determined to patch things up with Marius. I don’t know if he’s mentioned the conversation we had the other day,” she says. “He seemed pretty open to giving it another try.”

I know she’s lying through her teeth since Marius clearly said he has no intention of ever letting her back into his life. But damn the doubt that has been slithering through my heart lately.

“Really? He didn’t mention it,” I reply.

“Yeah. I apologized for my past behavior. That was my greatest hurdle, truth be told. Marius is such a good and honorable man. He was faithful to me, regardless of all the floozies he’s inadvertently surrounded by at this gym. I let my own insecurities get in the way, but I’ve been working on myself over the past couple of months. I’m in a better mindset.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’re working on yourself.”

“The fact of the matter is... What Marius and I have, it’s unique and strong. The time we’ve had apart has only strengthened our bond. I felt it between us the minute I walked in here the other day, and he’s been so responsive to my messages, as well.”

“He has?” I may have just given myself away here, but the words came out before I could put a lid on. “You talk on the phone, then.”

“Oh, just a few texts here and there,” she says. “I know he’s coming around. We were even talking about having lunch one of these days.” She pauses and measures me from head to toe. “I gotta say, Shay, you look absolutely stunning. I mean, you obviously still have some work to do, but you’ve got curves in all the right places.”

For a moment I’m absolutely stunned into silence. Did this bitch just call me fat?

“At least you’re not Marius’s type; otherwise, I would’ve had to worry about you.” Roxanne laughs lightly. And there it is. The carefully measured dose of venom she’s been saving for me. “He likes his women petite and slim. It’s a good thing you’re just friends, huh?”

I’ve been so focused on giving Roxanne the deadliest stare I can muster that I didn’t notice Vincent coming through the double doors. “Actually, Shay is one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever met, and any man would be lucky to have her.” He gives me a playful wink. “Good morning, beautiful. I’m here for a brief sauna session before I head into the office. Can I get a locker key?”

“Good morning,” I manage, then hand him a key.

He watches me closely as I scan his pass and leave it in the appropriate box, while Roxanne’s lips remain pressed into a thin, tight line.

“As I was saying, Shay doesn’t need to be concerned about being anyone’s type,” Vincent adds. “She’s so much more than her looks, unlike some women,” he says, staring pointedly at Roxanne.

“Yeah, whatever,” Roxanne scoffs and heads into the women’s locker room.

I can’t believe I’m actually thinking this—thank the stars Vincent showed up and cut her off.

“I meant every word,” Vincent assures me with a stern nod. “Granted, I overheard some of the conversation and figured she was trying to make you feel bad. Small-minded people do that. I used to do that, remember?”

“I could never forget,” I reply bluntly.

He’s about to say something else, but Jax comes out of the martial arts room wearing only a pair of dark green shorts and a sheen of sweat covering his muscular torso, tattoos glistening under the overhead lights. “Shay,” he says. “We need to talk.”

As if summoned by the universe itself, Alice finally arrives with a sheepish smile and a high-pitched voice, rushing into the reception desk as if nobody noticed how late she actually is.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she mumbles, quick to take her coat off before she gives Vincent a warm and bubbly smile. “Hi, there. How can I help you?”

“He’s already taken care of,” I reply and leave her with her duties.

Vincent watches me and Jax as we go into my office. I can feel his eyes on the back of my head. My skin prickles all over, but I keep my head up high and my ego intact. Besides, there’s something about Jax’s attitude that puts me on a different kind of edge. Less than an hour into my workday, and I’m already overwhelmed and hyper-stimulated. It’s going to be a long end of the week, that much is painfully obvious.

As soon as I close the door, Jax stops in the middle of my office and turns around, a grim look on his face. “What’s the deal with that clown, Shay?”

“Who, Vincent?”

“What other clown was there?”

I frown slightly. “Why are you mad?”

“Because I remember how badly he hurt you, Shay. I don’t understand why he’s even allowed to set foot in this place. I have a mind to snap his neck like a chicken.”

“Please, don’t,” I reply, trying to sound more upbeat and failing miserably. “We need clients, Jax. Even the likes of him. Besides, he’s harmless.”

“I heard him sucking up to you.”

And then it hits me as I look at Jax and notice the nervous muscle ticking in his stubbly jaw. “Oh, Jax... You’re jealous.”

“Not jealous. Ill-tempered when it comes to assholes trying to get into your pants.”

I’d laugh, but Jax is too bothered by this whole situation, and I know better than to stoke the fire. I’m also irked by the whole idea that I’d be foolish enough to take Vincent back, especially when Jax, Marius, Richard and I are together.

“He can try,” I tell Jax. “It doesn’t mean he’s going to get anywhere.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Jax... Did Chappaqua mean nothing to you? Friday night? Monday night? All the other moments we’ve had together?”

He stills, suddenly realizing where this conversation may lead unless he slows down. “Shay, I don’t want that bastard anywhere near you. I’d ban him and Roxanne in the blink of an eye. She’s a menace to our relationship, too,” he says. “I’m not a jealous man, but I know to kick any kind of trouble away as soon as it emerges.”

I don’t like where we’re headed. There is too much tension, too much doubt, and it’s causing strife between us. The last time Jax and I were alone in a room, he fucked me so passionately, I almost cried tears of joy. Now he’s all hard edges and threats. I cross my arms and walk over to the window, unsure how to handle this shift in our dynamic.

“I should be on the treadmill,” I tell him. “And I certainly don’t want to argue about Vincent.”

“You don’t have to argue. You just have to let me kick his sorry ass out.”

“Jax, I can’t do that. Marius and I agreed we need to be professionals for the sake of our business. Forget our personal

lives for a moment and really think about it. Can we really afford to send people away? Oh, and don't forget, if we kick Vincent out now, what kind of a public review do you think he'll post about us? We can't take a PR blow like that. We simply can't."

Jax curses under his breath and walks over, light on his feet and storms raging in his blue eyes. He takes me in his arms and kisses me deeply, harshly, hungrily. I moan against his lips, welcoming his rebellious tongue as it wrestles mine. I am soft against his rippling chest, our hearts thudding furiously as he runs his fingers through my hair and tightens his grip on the back of my neck.

I feel his cock hardening, pressed against my lower belly, as he pushes me until my back is glued to the window. Here's to hoping nobody outside looks up and sees us. Jax trails biting kisses down the side of my neck, one hand fondling my breast through the soft t-shirt.

"You're not getting back with him, you hear me?" he growls, pausing for a moment so he can look at me. I'm breathless and flustered, liquid desire trickling between my legs as his hand slips downward and under my gym tights. "We have an agreement, and you're going to honor it."

"What agreement?" I whisper.

"You've yet to receive the first item on your naughty list," he says.

"It's not like you have some kind of dominion over me," I reply, trying to protest, but as his fingers slide between my wet folds, I feel the last of my defenses crumbling. "Oh, shit... Oh, right there..."

He rubs my clit with added pressure before he penetrates me with two fingers, letting the base of his palm drive me over the cliff. He finger-fucks me so hard and so fast, all I can do is lock my arms around his neck and hold on for dear life as I feel the orgasm working its way outward from my tightened core.

“I have you for as long as I want you, Shay,” Jax says, his voice low and commanding.

He doesn't know it, but Vincent once said the same thing. I can almost hear the words echoing in the back of my head. The moment is lost, and I let the simmering anger take over as I push Jax away. I'm edging, close to climaxing and unable to reach it on my own. My knees feel weak, my legs shaking as I try to catch my breath.

“You don't have me, Jax,” I manage between sharp inhales. “This is just physical, remember? That's what you, Marius, and Richard wanted. You don't own me, and I don't own you.”

“It's not that simple.”

“Yes, it is!” I snap. “This thing between us isn't going to work out, not in the long run, so there's nothing for you to be jealous about.”

Jax's eyebrows shoot upward in surprise. He needs a moment to process the words I just threw at him. His breath is ragged and uneven. Some of his sweat drips down my jawline and into my cleavage. His rough, masculine scent lingers in my nostrils. And my pussy is in desperate need of his attention. He scoffs and shakes his head, his eyes never leaving mine.

“There is something seriously wrong with us, and it started as soon as that prick came into the gym. What the hell were you and Marius thinking? Are we really so desperate that we can't turn Vincent away?”

“Yes.” I take another deep breath. “But Vincent isn't the problem anymore. It's how you seem to think you own me.”

“I didn't say that.”

“No, you said something Vincent used to say. You have me as long as you want me. No, you don't have me. None of you have me, and I don't have any of you. We agreed to keep this strictly physical.”

Realizing the mistake he made, Jax glances to the side. The weather outside is cold and gray, and there is barely any light coming through the window. He's standing in a heavy shadow as he tries to analyze this moment. I make a move to head

back out, determined to get on my treadmill in lieu of an unfinished orgasm, but Jax isn't done with me.

He grabs me and kisses me—softly, this time, despite his sudden grip. I wish he'd say something to maybe reassure me that we're okay, that we're going to be okay, but our bodies are doing the talking now. It's primal and shameless, yet I cannot stop it. My own flesh responds, the heatwave rising as it blows through my veins.

“We should...” My voice trails off as he pulls my gym tights down with a single, swift move, then turns me around and bends me over the desk.

“Take care of yourself,” he commands me, guiding my hand so I can touch my clit.

I try to object, I try to get up, but I can't. My own body won't let me. I hear the shuffling sound of Jax's shorts hitting the floor, followed immediately by his gargantuan cock slamming deep inside me. I cover my mouth to muffle the gasping scream of raw pleasure as he starts pounding into me. The desk jiggles with each thrust.

My hand, my fingers... they move without my permission as I rub my clit and push myself into a much-needed release. It's quick and explosive, my pussy tightening around his cock and rippling relentlessly as he fucks me into the stratosphere.

He goes deeper, faster, harder. I can barely stand yet I don't want him to stop. I keep flicking my clit, squeezing every drop of this orgasm as I bite my lower lip. He has me. He has me, and I hate to admit it. I feel his cock throbbing, I listen to the sweet sound of his moans of pleasure as he comes, filling me with his warm, salty seed.

I crumble over the desk, covered in sweat, as Jax claims me. He has me for as long as he wants me.

Dammit. I was adamant that he doesn't have me. None of them have me, and this will never work out in the long term. Yet as I feel Jax stretching and filling me to the brim, as I surrender to him ... I understand the horrible truth.

He does have me. They all do.

A week has passed since I last touched Shay in her office after seeing her with Vincent. I still can't shake the rage. I have punched the sand out of the punching bags in my training hall, and I have yet to release the pressure that's been building up since. I took her so hard and so mercilessly... she loved every second of it, but I couldn't give her the reassurance she was probably hoping for. How could I, when the four of us have repeatedly insisted we're just fucking around and making Shay's naughty list come true? Nothing more, nothing less, because we're friends and business partners before anything else.

Then again, the business side of things isn't getting better, either. It's bad enough there's tension between the four of us on an intimate level. The gym's low performance in this financial quarter has only made it worse.

I sit in one of the guest chairs in Richard's office. Marius occupies the other one, while Richard shuts his laptop down and leans back in his recliner. The soggy Thursday afternoon has impacted my mood, and not for the better.

Things were easier in Chappaqua. It was just us. Four bodies and souls that made sense together. They still make sense, but the world around us is different. Colder. Meaner. Rougher. And Richard's constant shifts in attitude toward the gym are concerning.

"It's not looking good," he says. "If this quarter continues in the same fashion, we won't be able to cover our rent."

“We haven’t implemented all of our new programs yet,” Marius replies. “We only need a bit more time.”

“Time isn’t something we have much of,” he says.

I scoff, cracking my knuckles in a bid to relieve some of the tension. “Rick, we’ve got enough on our plates as it is. Marius is right. We’ve been working our way through the new programs, trying to kick start them in a way that actually draws new customers in. We did the soft launch on that fitness and cardio evening program on social media. We did the soft launch on my kids only training on the weekend. We’re doing full launches next week.”

“I’m well aware and grateful to you both for all the effort you’re putting into it,” Richard replies. “I’m just not sure how we’re going to manage.”

“You could cover another month or two,” I suggest. “We’ll consider it a business loan and pay you back as soon as the new programs lead to new sign-ups. Shay wants to do a six-month subscription offer where the seventh month is free. That should get us some hard cash in advance before spring.”

Richard thinks about it for a moment while I let my gaze wander around his office. Unlike mine or Marius’s or Shay’s, Richard keeps very few personal items in this room. There are plenty of fitness and bodybuilding books, business and finance books, sure. A couple of his bodybuilding awards gather dust on a single shelf. A few photos and his fitness certificates on the eastern wall. But other than that, there isn’t much to suggest this is his office, his sacred place within our gym.

I remember his old office. I remember his home office, too. Both were infinitely more intimate and welcoming than what’s in this room—oddly enough, it’s the first time I’ve actually noticed what should’ve been a rather telling detail before. Richard’s heart isn’t into this place, not as much as it should be. No wonder he keeps considering the possibility of dropping out. It’s a bothersome thought I can no longer shake, especially in light of this uncomfortable conversation.

“How would you go about paying the loan back?” he asks me.

“We’d do even rates on a monthly basis as soon as business starts picking up,” I reply, then look to Marius for approval.

He nods slowly. “I think we’d be able to start paying you back from June onward.”

“And what if you can’t? What if the gym fails to grow its clientele?” Richard replies.

“Ye of little faith.” I sigh deeply as my little joke falls flat. “We’ve come this far, haven’t we?”

“And you remember the deal we made in the beginning, don’t you?” he shoots back.

His doubtful demeanor is starting to get on my nerves. I love this man like a brother. We’re sharing an incredible woman, a business, and a fitness passion—all three were supposed to be elements that brought us closer together, not pushed us apart. It’s too much for me to handle at this hour. The idea of losing this gym, of losing him as a partner... I can’t fathom any of it. So I stand up to my full height, giving him a hard look.

“Listen, Rick. I’m not ready to discuss failure just yet. You shouldn’t, either,” I say. “It sounds to me like you were never truly into this gym like Marius, Shay and I were and still are. You might as well admit it.”

“Jax... I’m a businessman, first and foremost. I have to consider every possibility, and I have to know your thoughts on each possible scenario so I can better plan,” he replies. “This isn’t personal. And trust me, my heart is in it all the way through, but my pragmatism forbids me from simply jumping head first without asking reasonable questions. You would do the same if you were in my place.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” I say. “I would devote myself to the business and go out of my way to make sure it survives its first two years before I call it quits.”

“Rick, Jax has a point here. We feel like you’re getting ready to jump ship, not merely weighing your options for the future,” Marius interjects. “And I get where he’s coming from. We may not have as much invested in this place as you, but

we've got hours, sweat, and plenty of nerves at the foundation of this business. It counts as much as your cash..."

Richard concedes. "That's true, and like I said, I'm not pulling the plug anytime soon. I simply wanted to know how—"

"No, you simply wanted to know the best way to weasel out of this deal, and I'm not ready to let you bail out just yet." I point a stern finger at him. "I'm done for now. We'll talk about this again next month, Rick, after we see an inevitable uptick in our sales figures."

"Jax, hold on." Richard tries to stop me, but I'm already out the door.

I need more than a few deep breaths for this anger to subside.

I stand by the reception desk, mindlessly watching some customers come and go. A few head for the lockers to change. Others get their gym passes back before they can leave. Somehow, this gym functions smoothly, regardless of our difficult conversations. We shouldn't be having any difficult conversations. We should be working together. Sticking together through thick and thin.

Alice is busy sorting through the locker keys. For the umpteenth time, they've been scrambled and moved around. Either she or her colleagues put them in the wrong boxes again, and now they need to be taken out and put back in their appropriately numbered boxes. I watch her mumbling and grumbling like an old lady at the supermarket counting coins at the register. I can't help but chuckle softly. For a moment, my mind is pulled away from the gym and relationship troubles I never thought I'd have to deal with in the first place.

"Hey, handsome," Alice says when she notices me. Almost immediately, she shifts in her seat and turns to face me. "What brings you around here at this hour?"

I check my watch. "I'm always here at this hour."

"No, you're usually in there," she replies, nodding at the training room behind me.

"Ah. Fair enough. Just needed to clear my head for a minute. I had a meeting with Rick and Marius."

“You seem worried,” Alice says. The expression of concern on her face doesn’t stop her from straightening her back so I get a better view of her perky breasts. I don’t think she’s wearing a bra underneath our branded polo t-shirt. Not that it’s doing much for me. My mind is glued to Shay in every possible way. “Is something wrong?”

“Not really. Business stuff, mostly. Nothing for you to trouble yourself over.”

“You’re under a lot of pressure, I get it,” she says and slowly gets up. “I could give you a back rub to help with the tension in your shoulders.”

I stare at her, wondering where she gets the audacity. Fully aware that she and Richard had a bit of a thing before she came to work here, I know Alice only has a job here because he felt bad for her. She comes from a rougher neighborhood and had it rough growing up, but I also believe we are responsible for our choices and behaviors. Right now, her behavior is telling me she’s itching for something that would get other employees here in trouble.

“I’m good, thank you,” I reply with a dry smile. It should be enough to get her to back down.

But Alice comes closer. “Oh, come on, it’s not like I’m gonna bite. Besides, you need to chill out for a bit. Don’t you have clients coming in soon?”

“I do, which is why I’d rather just go in and work on my training program.”

“It’ll only take a minute,” she says, closing the distance between us.

The tension in my shoulders is certainly real, and it’s only getting worse as she puts her hands on my chest. She feels the muscles underneath the fabric of my t-shirt, fingers traveling upward over my shoulders as she squeezes gently. I can’t lie, it does feel nice, but her gesture carries an erotic component that is beyond inappropriate.

“See? I can already feel you relaxing,” Alice murmurs, inching closer.

“Maybe you should—”

“Oh, shush, Jax, we both know it feels good,” she purrs softly.

I should push her away, but my body won't move. It's not an attraction, I'm not interested in her. No, it's my own doubt and insecurity regarding our relationship with Shay that's messing with my senses. I'm hesitant in my response, even though every nerve cell in my brain is screaming at me to move back, to put some distance between us.

Alice giggles as she tries to wrap her arms around me, flirting outrageously. As if summoned by fate to smack me in the face, Shay walks out of the gym, pink-cheeked and sweating from her treadmill workout. She sees us, and whatever good humor she had until now is instantly gone.

The devastated look on her face has me reeling as I push Alice away. “I said no,” I growl and point at the keys still scattered across the reception desk. “You've got work to do, Alice, and so do I.”

“Okay, fine, Mr. Grumpy,” she scoffs and takes her seat, barely noticing Shay as she walks past us.

“Hold on, Shay.” I try to catch up with Shay, but she waves me away.

“I'm busy,” she says.

I hear the anger in her voice. I feel the disappointment. All it took was a moment of hesitation to further disrupt the balance between us. Naturally, I feel terrible. Unworthy. An absolute moron for not pushing Alice away immediately. It was bad enough that I've been constantly thinking about our business and its chances of success, about Richard's inconsistency on the matter, about Chappaqua...

How could it ever work between us in the long term? Shay was right. I was used to being on my own, never settling down with anybody and just focusing on my career and my passions. I was used to living alone, my heart completely unattached. Now, however, there's a string connecting my soul to hers, and the future isn't looking as bright as it did a couple of weeks ago. I'm not sure where we're headed, but maybe

implementing that whole naughty list of hers was a bad idea,
after all.

After yesterday's episode with Jax and Alice, I thought I'd gotten my own insecurities under control. I'm not the jealous type, I never was. But when I see women hanging around the men I'm with, I can't stop myself from feeling inadequate and insufficient. I'm foolish enough to compare myself to them, and at the same time I seem to have enough reason in me to at least be aware that I'm wrong in this approach.

It doesn't soothe the ache in my heart, though.

Jax has called me a couple of times, but I rejected his calls. I respond to his messages with simple and neutral replies. I pretend to be busy with nutrition plans and client consultations, sneaking in and out of the gym to avoid talking to him, to Richard, even to Marius. Something is definitely happening between us. I can feel the glue that once held us so tightly together drying up. I can feel us falling apart, and I don't know how to stop it.

Determined to stick to my own daily structure, however, I change into my gym clothes and head for the weight room. I'll need new tights and workout gear soon as my body continues with its remodeling process. I'm building muscle and burning more fat, making my curves look enticingly athletic and ridiculously appealing—I never thought I'd get myself to such a level. It's thrilling and exciting but also feels hollow.

How did I end up feeling so lonely with three men? I feel deeply for each of them, but the uncertainty and the more recent developments in all aspects of our lives have added

unnecessary tension and discomfort. It's making me doubt myself, especially in light of these growing emotions.

The weight room isn't very busy at this hour. I spot three of Marius's clients working on the machines, but Marius isn't talking to them.

Instead, he's talking to Roxanne. I didn't think she'd be here at this hour. I'm pretty sure she's supposed to be at work. But there she is giggling and throwing her long black hair over one shoulder as she talks to Marius by the leg press. What irks me the most is how bright and full of laughter Marius is. Whatever their conversation is about, they both seem to be enjoying it. I shake the bitterness away and take a deep breath.

I shouldn't let this affect me. It's hard to smile, though, as I walk over to them. It's my training hour with Marius, so I belong here. I'm Shay. I'm the woman Marius prefers to spend his time with. He has already assured me there's nothing for me to worry about regarding Roxanne. Why the hell is she here?

Then it dawns on me as I reach them. She's doing it on purpose. She must've figured out my training schedule with Marius.

"Hey," I manage.

When he hears my voice does Marius turn around. His eyebrows go up, and he gives me a warm, sweet smile. For a moment, I'm tempted to relax, to ease myself into the moment, but Roxanne is like a dark shadow hanging over his broad shoulders.

"Good morning, Shay," she says.

"Hey," Marius sighs, suddenly aware of her presence again. "Are you ready?"

"I just need to do my warm-up routine," I reply, trying to sound kind and friendly. I don't hear kindness nor friendliness in my tone. "A few minutes."

He nods once. "Okay. Let me know when you're finished."

I know he's being a professional, as always. It's been his ethos since before we even met. In the gym, he's Marius, the super friendly, chatty trainer, always helping and always smiling. Outside the gym, he's a different man, especially where I'm concerned. I shouldn't need his other persona now, not in a place where we both know he can't be that way with me.

"How've you been, Shay?" Roxanne asks me.

I offer a faint smile. "Busy as usual, but good, thank you. How about you?"

"Oh, I was just telling Marius I'm starting a new job with a more flexible program. It turns out my previous job was one of the main reasons I was under so much pressure. It had an impact on my personal life, too, not to mention our relationship," she says, placing a hand on his shoulder and watching me like a hawk.

Marius doesn't move, and it bothers me. He doesn't take his eyes off me, either, and the softness in them remains unwavering, as if he's trying to tell me it's okay. Yet my muted anxieties throw me for a loop, and all I can do is nod and smile.

"I'm glad to hear that, Roxanne. I hope it works out for you," I say, then point to another part of the room. "Excuse me, I need to do my warm-up routine."

"Of course," she says. "Don't worry, I'll get Marius warmed up for you, too." She follows it up with playful laughter, but I didn't miss the venom-tipped daggers.

I hope Marius didn't, either. Smiling still, I move away from them and focus on my breathing as I begin my stretching exercises. Opening my hips and ankles first, I work on mobility and knee strength to prepare for my leg day training.

In the meantime, I catch snippets of Roxanne and Marius's conversation. It sounds casual and innocuous enough. I shouldn't worry. Other customers briefly intervene to ask him questions about different exercises and some of the machines, and he is as affable as always, answering and giving them any support they may need.

At one point, I see him go over to one of the bench presses to spot a guy with a massive set of weights on the barbell. Roxanne stands by the leg press, completely ignoring her own routine as she watches him with a broad smile on her face. By the time I'm done with my stretches, my muscles feel stiffer than when I started.

"Ready?" Marius asks as I join him by the leg press.

Roxanne is done with the machine and still lingering beside him. She gives me a half-smile that irritates me. "You're a bit red-faced. Don't tell me a mere stretching routine is too much for you..."

"Nah, I'm cool," I reply bluntly.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. I'm gonna go do some Romanian deadlifts," she says, clearly content with the impact of her tiny jabs. I wonder if Marius is aware of what she's doing—or trying to do.

He gives her a slight nod, then moves his focus entirely on me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Ready," I say. But I have a hard time looking into his eyes without all this anger bubbling beneath the surface. I'm at my place of business and I need to keep a cool head about me. "We're doing leg stuff, right?" I try to sound upbeat about it.

"We'll start on the leg press first," he says.

I settle in as he takes the weights off. "Warm up," I reply, used to the routine.

"That's right, fifteen to twenty reps to get the muscles going."

I start pushing with deep breaths in between, constantly stealing glances at him. He's counting my reps, but I can tell he's uneasy, occasionally looking around the gym. Roxanne is doing her deadlifts, her toned ass moving backward as she goes down, and I know at least three guys are literally ogling her from the side.

"How's your day coming along?" Marius asks me. "We haven't talked much since yesterday."

“Honestly, it could be better,” I say. “There’s a lot of stuff piling up, and I’m really looking forward to launching those programs. I’d give anything to see an uptick in gym pass sales.”

“I know what you mean. I feel the same way. We’re doing better on the supplements, though. The guys are really amping up their protein and creatine intake now that we’re looking ahead at spring.”

“Spring break is still months away,” I chuckle.

Marius laughs lightly. “Yeah, but they want to look good for their photo ops. They’re already bickering over the solar...”

The conversation unravels in neutral subjects pertaining to the gym and our clients, and we talk about the more mundane aspects of life for a short while. The topic gradually shifts back to the gym and Richard’s plans. That’s a mistake, because the tension is quick to rise between us. We’re both on edge about the future of West Key, and we both know Richard may have stated one thing but might still do something else entirely.

“He’s not a bad man,” Marius tries to defend him.

“I never said he was. I never would,” I reply, tempted to remind him of where the four of us stand on a personal level. “I do know, however, that unlike most entrepreneurs in Seattle, Richard is often able to walk away from a venture before said venture reaches its full potential.”

“We knew that when we went into business with him. But I have faith in him.”

I give him a sour look. “You make it sound like I’m the only one who’s doubting him.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Yet it sounds like you do,” I shoot back, inwardly regretting the sharp tone of my voice.

As if smelling blood, Roxanne wanders over to us. “How’s the workout going?” she asks, all smiles and perky boobs in a thin, pale blue tank top.

“Great,” I grunt in between reps as I push 260lbs on the leg press.

She stares at the weight disks, likely doing the mental math, then smiles at Marius. “Can you help me out with the barbell? I need to add a few more pounds to it, but I’m not sure I can get the disks to stay on during a lift.”

“Sure,” he says, then gives me a quick glance. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

I almost curse under my breath as I watch him go. Roxanne stays close to him, constantly smiling and leaning into him. Once he sets the weights on, she bends over to grip the barbell properly, and I see Marius’s gaze slipping down to her behind. I know he’s only making sure her form is right, but it’s pissing me off big time.

By the time he’s back, I’m practically seething and barely able to speak. I’ve finished my fourth set, and we move over to the Bulgarian split squat section of my training. The more minutes pass, the harder it is for me to focus. It has a negative impact on my motions, too, and I keep losing my balance to the point where Marius takes the dumbbell away and makes me do the simple version.

It’s almost insulting, considering I’ve made considerable progress in this section. My ego bleeds but I can’t contradict him, either. My mind is clearly a mess.

“What are you doing later tonight?” he asks me when the session is over.

“I’m not sure,” I reply dryly, glancing at the treadmill. I could use a few steps on that, if only to soothe my frayed nerves. “Maybe you should see what Roxanne’s doing.”

Marius stares at me with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. “What did you just say?” His voice is low, almost a whisper.

“Never mind. I’m gonna go hit the treadmill.”

“Shay, hold on.”

“No,” I snap and walk away.

It's a terrible decision, and I know it. But after what Roxanne has been doing, I wish Marius had been slightly more proactive in pushing her away.

Jax let Alice get too close, and now Marius is doing the same with his ex-girlfriend, of all people. I feel disrespected and downright neglected. I'm worried this will go downhill—our relationship, our business, even our friendship. I'm worried Chappaqua was a terrible mistake and this is merely the beginning of a rather steep price to be paid.

I sense Marius's gaze locked on the back of my neck, but I refuse to look at him as I jump on the treadmill and start a fast walking pace. Getting my heart rate up, I put the headphones on just to make sure I'm not disturbed while I try to gather my senses. Roxanne got to me. Yesterday, Alice unknowingly did the same.

I'm supposed to be thicker-skinned about these things. Where did my confidence go? Why do I feel like the odd one left on the outside and looking in, where just a few weeks ago I had three men making mad love to me? Upstate New York was a frickin' fairy tale, whereas Seattle seems to be the splash of cold water I never asked for.

Despite our business-related disagreements, Richard has been an emotional comfort lately. I'm at his place for the weekend, starting with a Friday night dinner in his den overlooking the park. It snowed, so all I see is a blanket of white covering the evergreen bushes along the wrought iron fences. The sky is almost black on this side of town, where there's barely enough streetlight to muddle the stars.

Richard's house is a two-level villa wedged between a couple of colonial-style properties. Unlike his neighbors, however, he opted for a simpler and minimalist design. The backyard is humongous, complete with a pool and a basketball court, though neither are in use over the winter season. The interior is pretty and bright, with off-white walls and ash-colored hardwood flooring. Every storage space was custom-made to measure, making each cabinet seem like a natural extension of the house's original structure.

The den was decorated to serve both as a more intimate dining room but also as a spacious breakfast room, with soft seating and plenty of red tartan cushions. The round table is huge, currently loaded with sushi plates and a couple of bottles of sake, though I've been partial to the iced tea and sparkling water pitchers tonight. Alcohol hasn't been my thing for a while, particularly since I started working out. I may have had a few drinks during the Chappaqua break, but that was pretty much it. Lately, even the smell of it doesn't tickle me like it used to.

“I’m not a fan of sushi, in general,” Richard says as helps himself to another tuna roll, “but I’m glad I went with your suggestion. You were right, Wasabi’s definitely know their stuff.”

“I’m glad you agree. Cassandra bought me lunch there once, and I’ve been in love with the place ever since,” I reply.

We sit naked under our fluffy white bathrobes enjoying a casual evening. The central heating keeps the place warm and cozy, and the wasabi paste only serves to spike our body temperature further. Soft jazz plays in the background, since Richard is adamant about creating a pleasant atmosphere when I’m around. I like that about him. He’s always so attentive and caring; I certainly enjoy being spoiled like this.

I lean into him as we work our way through the rest of the sushi platter, leaving nothing to waste. It feels nice to be with him, especially after the more difficult days I’ve had with Jax and Marius. Richard may have me on edge in terms of our business together, but on a personal level, he has been my rock and source of comfort.

“How’s your work coming along?” he asks me, then downs a shot of sake.

“New clients are always a handful,” I tell him. “Especially the ones who have a complicated relationship with food. They’re so hell-bent on demonizing entire group foods that as soon as I show them a meal plan, they get anxious and doubtful, convinced they’ve come to the wrong nutrition coach.”

He chuckles lightly. “How do you get them to stay?”

“I just point out the flaws in their judgment. Bread doesn’t make you fat. Eating a whole loaf for dinner does. Chocolate doesn’t make you fat. Eating a whole bag of Reese’s Mini-Peanut-Buttercups, however, may add to the scale. The same with fried chicken and French fries and Oreos and anything else they find on the menu that, according to them, doesn’t belong there.”

“Wait, you add Oreos and stuff into their diets?”

I nod and laugh, always amused by how shocked people are by my approach to nutrition. “The first step in getting someone to start eating healthier isn’t to completely cut out the foods that bring them comfort and even joy. They need to make sensible substitutions. Less processed foods. More fiber, in particular. It takes a while, but they get it.”

“And do they stick to it?”

“My track record by now should tell you they absolutely stick to it and love it,” I reply, feeling my chest swell with pride.

“I’m honestly impressed,” Richard replies. “I mean, I’ve seen a couple of your meal plans, and I know your clients love you, but I’ll admit, I never really went too deep into your side of the business because I know you know what you’re doing.”

“And I so appreciate you for that,” I say.

“No wonder they all love you,” he smiles, his green gaze softening as his eyes search my face. “There’s plenty to love about you, Shay.”

“I needed to work really hard on myself to figure that one out. Loving myself the way I’m supposed to be loved by others.”

“Well, it shows, and it’s a beautiful look on you. Have I ever told you how proud I am of everything you’ve accomplished for yourself at such a young age?”

I shake my head slowly.

He puts an arm around my shoulder and pulls me closer, the emerald pools of his eyes darkening with desire. “Other women are still out there, wandering and trying to figure themselves out. You’ve got your self-development down to an art. You’re strong, Shay. You could build an entire fitness industry all by yourself. You wouldn’t even need me or Jax or Marius.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t mean I want to do it alone.”

Richard’s gaze settles on my lips. “I’ve missed you,” he whispers. “It’s been pretty tense between us lately. And I’m sorry for my part in that.”

“It’s okay. We’re here, now.”

I kiss him first, not wanting to let the conversation slide into unpleasant territories. I've had enough of that with Marius and Jax. This moment of peace is just what I needed, so I let everything go as I wrap my arms around Richard's neck and deepen the kiss. Our tongues play and swirl around each other, tasting the sake and the spicy condiments. I breathe him in, his orange-scented cologne filling my lungs with thoughts of a warm spring somewhere on a Greek island.

Before long, we're in the bedroom, our bathrobes on the floor.

I'm on my knees, my hands resting on his thick, muscular thighs as I take him in my mouth. I have to open my jaw wide to fit all of him, relaxing the back of my throat as I listen to his ragged breathing.

"Damn, I've missed this," he groans, running his fingers through my hair.

I feel him thrusting, ever so slightly, testing my gag reflex as I let him. The more I allow, the more he gives, the veins along his gigantic cock throbbing against my tongue. I slurp and lick him delightedly, then tighten my grip around the base of his shaft and fondle his rock-hard balls as I suck the head firmly.

"Fucking hell, Shay, you're all I want in this world," Richard gasps.

He's close to finishing first, so I pull back with a devilish smile and look him deep in the eyes. "Your turn, good sir. There are parts of me in dire need of your attention."

"Really?" Richard grins coolly. "Which parts?" He lifts me off the soft carpet and sits me on the edge of the giant, king-size bed, kneeling before me. "These?"

He kisses my left breast while his hand squeezes the other, massaging gently as he closes his mouth around my nipple. I gasp and arch my back, my bare flesh pressing against his lips. He moans harshly as his tongue draws wet circles, just before his teeth graze and playfully nip, sending thousands of sharp electrical signals through my body.

I'm already wet, the liquid heat glazing my pussy and trickling down my inner thighs as I spread my legs for him. "Or this?"

he asks, spotting my movement. He goes lower, careful to kiss every inch of my skin before he lets his tongue slide between my slick folds.

“Oh, that, definitely that!” I croak and throw my head back before I lay down.

He takes his sweet time devouring my core, tongue lapping hungrily from top to bottom as sweet pressure gathers in my lower belly. His fingers slip inside, two at first and curling upward. It’s enough to push me into a raw, ecstatic frenzy as my hips rock against his rhythmic movements. He suckles on my clit.

“Don’t stop,” I cry out.

Richard growls and slides a third finger in, stretching and probing while he teases my swollen nub to the point of electrifying release. I come hard, quivering and tightening around his fingers. He licks and drinks me whole, feeling my climax.

I barely catch a moment’s breath as he climbs on top of me, spearing me with his full length. I freeze, momentarily shocked by the sudden stretch, my eyes wide as they lock on his.

“Make yourself come again,” Richard orders me, guiding my hand to a very tender clit still throbbing from the previous explosion. “Now.”

“Gladly, baby,” I reply.

I rub it hard, delighted by the wetness I encounter. He pins me down, one hand gently holding him up over me and the other on my hip, fingers digging into the flesh as he fucks me decisively. My breasts bounce under his gaze, and I revel in the look of absolute pleasure imprinted on his handsome face as he claims me.

Riding the coattails of my first orgasm, I flick my clit firmly, causing new pressure to ball up in my core and send a knot right up to my throat.

“I’ll never get enough of you, Shay.”

“You are dangerously addictive, Richard,” I manage, his grip on my hip tightening. It’s enough to push me closer to a second, infinitely more explosive release. “Oh, baby, harder... Give it to me harder... Deeper...”

A devilish grin slits his face, his reddish beard twinkling with sweat as he goes deeper and harder like I asked. I’m stretched beyond belief, raw on the inside and feeling every glorious inch as I tighten my pussy around him. He listens to my ragged breathing, and I refuse to take my eyes off him as I pleasure myself and he pounds into me.

Harder.

Deeper.

Faster.

Until we both come at once, crying out and calling each other’s names.

He fucks me like there’s no tomorrow, and I welcome it all like a ravenous animal, succumbing to the decadence and the shameless pleasure, letting the orgasm wash over me in waves of hot and cold until I’m practically gushing my juices all over him. Richard holds me close, collapsing on top of me with the last of his thrusts, and I glance out the window, smiling as I see the snow fall through the night.

It’s not even midnight yet, and we’ve only just begun.

I’ll be tender and sated by sunrise, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. This man knows how to push the right buttons inside me, and I certainly know how to get his engine running. No wonder we’re nuts about each other. I miss the four of us, though...

I wish we’d find another moment to recreate Chappaqua.

Later in the night, we lay in bed, our bodies glistening with sweat and the shimmer of a sweet afterglow as the snow intensifies outside. I listen to the sound of his heart drumming, my head resting on his chest. I’m limp and soft like a marshmallow, melting against his body while my own heart sings songs of its own. I wish Jax and Marius could be with us. I’d like nothing more than to be sandwiched between them.

“How are you feeling?” Richard asks me.

I look up and find him staring at the ceiling. “Completely relaxed. I don’t think I have a spine anymore.”

“Good,” he laughs.

“And you?”

“I don’t want tomorrow to come,” he says, then glances at me. “I found a hall on the south side of the city. It’s huge. Third floor of a new industrial complex, next door to the business quarter. The owner said he wouldn’t mind leasing it to me if I intend to open a gym there.”

And just like that, my good mood withers and all the fears I’ve pushed down to the bottom of my consciousness return with a vengeance. Slowly, I lift my head and shift my weight slightly onto him so I can better look at him. “A gym?” I manage.

“Another West Key gym, to be specific.”

“Why would you want to open another one when this one isn’t turning a profit yet?”

Richard thinks about it for a moment. “You’re right. I could give it another name,” he says. “It’s a great opportunity. The structure of the building is brand spanking new, the central heating and air conditioning systems already installed. It has enough room for three weight rooms and three fighting rooms, plus massive locker rooms, sauna, solar, whatever. The reception area alone would be double the size of ours. We could do a proper lounge and café there with a focus on protein treats. Your recipes would work beautifully there.”

“Hold on,” I say, and sit up, increasingly alarmed by what I’m hearing. “How’d you come across that space?”

“I met a guy at a business meeting. The conversation just led there, and he said he knows someone who’s looking for new leasing opportunities for his building. Next thing I know, I’m in my car and driving over there. I was skeptical at first, but the place is fantastic.”

“Richard...” I swallow before I continue. “We’re already running a gym together and working hard to get it off the

ground,” I tell him. “You’re not willing to invest in West Key anymore, but you’re willing to invest in a brand-new gym, instead?”

“It wouldn’t be competition for West Key, since it’s on the south side.”

“That doesn’t matter. What are you thinking? I thought you were going to give us until spring before you make a decision on the matter.”

“This place popped up, and I know it’ll be leased really fast unless I make them an offer,” he says with a shrug. “The thing is... I don’t want to do it alone. I mean, I could, I’ve done it before, but I’d like for you to join me. Your experience as a nutritionist, your unique approach to healthy eating... I need that.”

“And what did you mean by giving it another name?” I ask, trying to wrap my head around this sudden deluge of startling and genuinely unpleasant information. “It wouldn’t be another West Key gym, then. It would be something else entirely. And you wouldn’t bring Marius and Jax along, from what I’m hearing.”

Richard shrugs and sits up, as well. “I’d let them have West Key. They’d be busy enough with that place, but I think they can handle it between them. They did suggest getting a business loan from me to keep the gym going until summer, and I’m inclined to offer them something meatier while I turn my focus onto this new space. It’s really good, Shay, you’d have to see it to really understand its value.”

“What I’m understanding right now is that you’re ready to bail out on us,” I reply harshly.

The tension has filled my body yet again, my muscles tightening as I scoot over to the edge of the bed. I glance around the room, trying to remember where I left my clothes.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“I don’t think I want to spend the rest of my night here.”

“Shay, hold on. Just listen to me. It’s a good business decision,” he says. “Reason alone no longer allows me to

invest further in West Key. It doesn't mean I don't believe in the gym or the people behind it."

"Yeah, since you're one of them. Remember, partner?"

Richard scoffs. "You knew I wasn't a one-pony show from the moment we went into business together. This move is a natural progression for me, and I want to take you with me. I appreciate your skills and your talents. You wouldn't have to leave West Key, of course. You could divide your time between the two. Financially, you'd be at a great advantage."

"Dammit, Richard, you really are considering this."

"Come with me tomorrow to see the place. I'll drive us there, first thing in the morning. All you have to do is have a look and convince yourself it would be a dreadful shame to let it go to somebody else. The last thing Seattle needs is another express coffee shop."

I curse under my breath and walk over to the armchair in the corner where my clothes wait. My boots are out in the lobby by the door, and so is my purse with my phone and keys. I'm already calculating my way back home—I'll need to call a cab since I left my car at the gym and came home with Richard.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," I say as I start dressing.

Richard gets out of bed and tries to stop me, but I push him away. "Shay, come on, don't be like that. I'm not leaving you or the guys. I just trust you to run West Key without me."

"No, you're bored with West Key because it's not the razzle-dazzle kind of gym you wanted, and so you've found a new place to focus on!" I snap. "You're being selfish and extremely superficial, Richard. Meanwhile, Marius, Jax, and I keep wracking our brains to come up with ways to keep you on board, fully aware that if you leave, we'll be pretty much screwed."

"I can give you guys a business loan—"

"It's not about the business loan! Screw your money, Richard! It's about your support. About your invaluable input, your sharp mind, your resilience and determination. We didn't get into business with you because of your fat bank account!"

He snorts a dry chuckle. “Well, my money did play a role.”

“Minor compared to the resources you came in with. Richard, this is heart-breaking, honestly. You know as well as I do that if you walk out, we’ll struggle horribly without you. I can’t stop you, of course... but I have to say... I’m disappointed.”

“Shay, wait.”

“No. I’m done. I have no interest in screwing over our other business partners,” I shoot back and walk out of the bedroom. A minute later, I’ve got my boots and jacket on, phone in my hand and purse on my shoulder as I leave his house behind.

Richard stands in the open doorway as I descend the front steps and tread through the snow until I reach the sidewalk, waiting for my cab. It’s weird to be standing out here in the middle of the night, darkness above and snow still falling around me as I begin to shiver. I glance over my shoulder and see him, only a towel wrapped around his waist as he looks at me.

“Let’s talk about this some more,” he says.

“Screw you,” I reply, then breathe a sigh of relief when my cab pulls over.

Once I’m in the backseat, I let it all out and start bawling, hiding my face in my coat as the driver quietly takes me away from here. I’m miserable and lonely, suddenly afraid and helpless. It wasn’t supposed to go south like this. He wasn’t supposed to do this. I’ve often worried he might, but part of me refused to accept the actual possibility.

It was one thing to voice my concern on the matter, and it’s a completely different thing to witness it happening right after one of the best and most beautiful nights of my existence. It’s not fair. It’s not fair to me, to Marius, or to Jax. It’s not fair to the four of us, either. Worst of all, I’m in love with these men. I’ve managed to accomplish the impossible, the crazy impossible. I’ve fallen for them, deeply.

And now I’m screwed.

A couple days pass, and my mood does not improve.

Marius and Jax must've heard about Richard's plans for a new gym. Our group chat has been blowing up, but I have actively avoided them all, even in person. I stay busy with clients and work more from home in a desperate attempt to put some distance between myself and these men who have come to occupy so much space in my life and my heart.

I've even skipped a couple of training sessions with Jax and Marius, which is unlike me. But my heart is telling me I need to wean myself from them, somehow.

Cassandra leans back in her recliner, watching me closely.

"I know I'm sulking," I tell her after a long period of silence.

"You're the one who came into my office to talk," she says, slightly amused, but the concern in her eyes is real. I love her more for it, truth be told.

"I'm just trying to gather my thoughts."

She nods slowly. "This is about Richard and the other gym?"

"And Jax and his commitment issues. And Marius and Roxanne. And Vincent. And so much more. I'm overwhelmed, and I don't know what to do with myself anymore," I say. Tears work their way up, making my eyes sting and my vision blurry. I try to blink them back, but a couple still manage to slip and roll down my cheeks.

"Okay, let's start somewhere, Shay. Talk to me about Richard first. How do you feel about him?"

“You sound like a therapist again,” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “I *am* a therapist. And even though I’m not *your* therapist, this is how I get to the root of things. You either want my help or you don’t,” she says, though not unkindly.

I sigh. She’s right. I did come here to talk to her. “Fine. How do I feel about Richard? Other than the fact that I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen in love with him? I feel abandoned by him. He was supposed to stick with us through thick and thin. West Key was supposed to be our baby, our project, our way of showing other gyms how to do things right.”

“Don’t you think you could forge ahead without Richard?”

I shake my head. “He’s the visionary, Cass. He’s the one with the business mindset. He’ll look at sales figures on a spreadsheet and tell us if it’s working or not. And he’s been right on the money every goddamn time, which is why his imminent departure is basically telling me we’re about to fail.”

“Ah, so it’s failure you truly dread.”

“Am I not entitled to dread failure after having invested two years of my life into that place?”

Cassandra gives me another nod. “Of course. You are absolutely entitled. But is it really failure? Or is it just time for West Key to spread its wings and fly without Richard as a safety net? Think about it this way. You already have a clientele there. Not as big as other gyms, true, but they’re loyal. With your new fitness programs, you could definitely get more people through the door. And if Richard is leaving, maybe it’s because he has faith in Jax and Marius and you. Maybe it’s not because he thinks the gym is going to fail.”

“I have a hard time believing that. Richard isn’t the kind to back away from imminent success,” I grumble, nervously cracking my knuckles.

“You’re mad at him.”

“Yeah. I am mad. He’s betraying us.”

“He did ask you to go with him.”

I can't help but scoff. "He's betraying the four of us. We agreed even before Chappaqua that we'd stick together. The four of us. Four. Not two. The four of us. We'd stick together and we'd weather any storm. Yet at the first sign of financial discomfort, his attention span is already drastically shortened. He wants another gym. Another plaything, because West Key isn't fun and exciting anymore."

"So your frustration with Richard is purely from a business perspective," Cassandra concludes.

"I guess."

"But it's spilling into your personal life. You told me you walked out of his place that night and took a cab home, and that you haven't seen or spoken to him in a couple of days."

"Yeah..." Why do I feel like a kid being reprimanded by the teacher? Why do I feel bad when Richard is the one screwing us over.

Cassandra quietly processes everything I've just said, while I try to gather more of my rambling thoughts into something more coherent.

"What about Jax? What was the issue regarding his commitment?"

I roll my eyes as I remember the incident with Alice. "I'm pretty sure he was flirting with Alice, the receptionist."

"Jax and Alice? No way. She's so far from his type, she's like Pluto to the Sun."

"Granted, I may have misunderstood the entire scene. Maybe she was flirting with him. He did tell her no, but only when he saw me."

"And did you talk to him about it?"

My face burns with the shame of acknowledging my own shortcomings on the matter. I sink deeper into my chair. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I got mad and needed some space."

"How do you feel about Jax, now?"

More tears coming, but I wipe them away with the back of my hand. I'm determined not to shed another drop for this. I've already cried myself to sleep twice in the past few days. My heart is wide open and bleeding, and the worst part is I'm pretty sure I'm at least partially responsible for this situation. It's a hard pill to swallow.

"I love him," I tell Cassandra. "And I know he's always had trouble settling down. When I saw him with Alice, I thought he was tempted to go back to his old habits, but now I'm beginning to realize I may have overreacted and ultimately... I may have pushed him away."

"And what about Marius?"

I let a heavy sigh roll from my chest. "Roxanne keeps hovering around him. She's started coming in right when my training sessions with him are supposed to begin. She's being friendly but not-so-subtly aggressive toward me. She's trying to reestablish a certain degree of intimacy with Marius."

"What does Marius do?"

"He's nice and professional like he always is." I'm close to sobbing, now.

Cassandra gives me a moment to pull myself together before she speaks. "You told him to take Vincent on as a client because you need more sales at the gym," she says after a while. "Wouldn't it make sense that he's doing the same thing with Roxanne? Tolerating her to help the business?"

"It's exactly what he's doing, but I'm being a paranoid idiot."

"You are not a paranoid idiot."

I give her a look. "I sure feel like one."

"You know as well as I do there are certain kinds of traumas we never heal from. We can only learn to live with them. We can only learn ways to not let them define us and our future relationships. It doesn't mean we don't get triggered once in a while."

"So, what, I'm triggered? Is that what you're saying?"

“Yes, Shay. You got triggered. Your abandonment syndrome is all over the place, and you are actively pushing the men you love away. I assume you love Marius, too.”

“More than anything,” I exhale sharply. It does feel good to say it out loud. “I love all three in equal measure, Cass. I think I’ve felt this way for a long time, but once we took our dynamic into the sexual realm, everything changed. Everything became... amplified.”

“Do you feel overwhelmed?”

“I think so.”

“But not by the external factors.”

“No. I think it’s my own feelings, the idea of being in love with three men at the same time.” I pause and give her a wry smile. “Shit, maybe you *should be* my therapist.”

Cassandra laughs. “You’re reaching the right conclusions on your own. I’m just asking the questions.”

I nod and run my fingers through my hair, giving myself another moment of silence and deep breathing as the whole picture of my life comes back into focus. “So because I’m in love with all three, I’m overwhelmed by the reality and the intensity of these emotions. And because it’s such a strange and fragile relationship, I perceive every factor coming in from the outside as a wrench aimed right at my wheels. Even if it’s not. Even if it’s just a pebble.”

“Sounds about right to me.”

“Me too. And that’s why I’m withdrawing, why I’m pushing them away. It’s not because I was irked by Alice’s advances toward Jax, per se. Or Roxanne’s return. Or Richard’s decision to try his hand at another gym business. It’s because I’m perceiving each of these issues as definite threats to my emotional wellbeing because I’m in love with them and don’t want to lose any of them.”

“And what about Vincent?”

That requires another minute’s worth of thinking. It’s a simple but troubling question which I’ve yet to answer for myself.

“There’s no love left there, not on my end, at least. Yet I keep remembering what it was like. There are times when the good memories outweigh the bad, and I start to doubt myself and my decision to keep my distance from him.”

“How has he been toward you?” Cassandra asks.

It’s clear from the tone of her voice that she hates his guts. More than once, my best friend has expressed a desire to rip his head clean off. But her professionalism is greater than her personal dislike of the man who ultimately broke my heart—the very heart I’m trying and failing to protect now.

“Calm and friendly. Humble, in a way, which is very unlike him.”

“Does he seem fundamentally different from what you remember?”

“Not really. His eyes still make me uneasy, sometimes,” I say, going over my more recent encounters with Vincent. He texts me once in a while, but I always leave him on read. I can’t exactly avoid him at the gym, however. He’s a paying customer, and I do have to work there, so bumping into him is more or less inevitable. “He still likes to brag about his new car and the new workplace... He’s trying hard to impress me, but I’m not sure he means well. It feels like a calculated act.”

“At best, he may try to sugarcoat himself in order to get you to buy into this supposed new persona of his. But if your instinct is telling you he isn’t safe, then he isn’t safe. If there’s one thing I urge you to keep in mind, Shay, it’s that your instinct is rarely wrong, especially in the case of a man who has already hurt you. Deeply.”

“Why do I keep revisiting the past, then?”

“Do you miss the times you had with him?”

“I miss how the good moments felt.”

“Is it because of your perceived troubles with Jax, Marius, and Richard? Have you considered the possibility that maybe your brain is trying to trick you into revisiting better feelings from the past because the present ones make you uncomfortable?”

I give Cassandra a broad, cold grin. “My girl, you’re on a devastating roll this morning, have I told you that? You keep kicking me in the teeth with these questions...”

“Only because you keep asking for it,” she replies.

It’s time for me to concede that she is definitely on to something here. The questions aren’t senseless nor poorly aimed. She knows what she’s doing, and I think *I* can finally see the truth. Closing my eyes for a few seconds, I surprise myself with the silence currently swelling through my mind. Clarity was never so close to my reach before.

“I think I know the conclusion here,” I tell her.

“Go on. I’m all ears.”

“I’m in love with three men, and I know it’s going to fail between us because, well, obviously... A relationship can’t work in the long term between one woman and three men, right?”

Cassandra shrugs slightly. “Maybe, maybe not. You never know, Shay.”

“Come on, let’s be realistic here. Especially since the four of us are also friends and business partners,” I say. “It’s doomed. It was doomed from the moment I let them get close. Going to Chappaqua was a huge mistake.”

It’s tearing me apart to say these words aloud.

“Whatever happens, you decide what you’re going to do for yourself. Relationship-wise, business-wise, anything-wise. You decide what is best for you and that’s what you do,” Cassandra says. And she’s right.

One way or another, I will find my way back to the light. For now, however, I sit in silence with a mixture of contradicting emotions, doing my best to process everything and to make sure I’m never broken by anyone or anything ever again.

MARIUS

I know Roxanne wants to get back together.

This isn't even her first attempt. I've let her back in before. This time, however, it's different. Our relationship, as rocky and as toxic as it was, took up space in my life, and that time wasn't exactly wasted. I've learned plenty from that hot mess, and I know never to return to places where I am surely going to get hurt again. Besides, my mind, my heart, and my body belong to Shay. I can't get her out of my head, even during these difficult times.

The tension between us is unbearable, and I don't yet know how to navigate these murky waters. Shay deserves the best of me, the best of *us*. There are moments when I feel like I'll never be good enough for her, yet I can't fathom the thought of letting her go, of losing her. And I know Jax and Richard feel the same way. We've fallen in love. Deeply. We will never be able to bounce back from this.

Sitting on one of the sofas in the reception area, I rummage through my laptop for some workout plans for new clients. Business is starting to pick up, but nowhere near as fast as we need. Richard is already looking into another gym, which leaves Jax and Shay and me to pick up the pieces with this one. I'm disappointed, but I also understand where he's coming from. Most importantly, I understand his way of thinking, and I can't be mad at him. It's still a tough pill to swallow though.

Shay is seated at another table next to mine, going over a nutrition plan with a client. I have a hard time looking away

from her, even when she's in her gym shorts and oversized gray tee.

I love how patient she is, explaining the technical side of the nutrition plan in a way that actually makes sense. Shay understood the assignment since before she came into the gym. She did her research on top of her college studies, she spoke to other nutritionists and fitness trainers, and she delved deeply into scientific studies until she had a clear image of what she wanted for herself. It still amazes me that she has this ability to absorb so much information, only to repackage it into simpler terms for the layman.

I'm reading through a training plan while eavesdropping on their conversation. I could get involved, but I don't like interrupting Shay during her client meetings, just like she keeps her distance when I'm in mine.

Roxanne waltzes in wearing short, lime green shorts and a skimpy white top, gym bag on her shoulder and a bright smile on her face. "Hey, Marius," she calls, her voice sweet. "Ready for our training session?"

"Hey, Roxanne," I reply politely. I can feel Shay stealing glances at us, but I can't do a thing. I can't say anything. "I'll be ready in a few minutes, but you can go in and get started on your warm-up."

I've only recently accepted her as a new client for one-on-one sessions—Roxanne insisted, and Shay said we could use the extra money. No argument there, but it's putting me in a tough spot, especially since Roxanne is shamelessly hitting on me. She bends over the coffee table in order to get closer to me and in order for me to see her cleavage underneath the small top she's wearing over the tight sports bra.

"I've got a couple of warm-up ideas I'd like to run by you. Or with you," Roxanne giggles.

I smile, working overtime not to cringe and embarrass her. "You're free to do whatever you want where the warm-up is concerned," I say. "You just need to make sure you target the muscles we're going to use during your strength training."

“Oh, I’m definitely focused on whatever muscle you wanna work on,” she flirts. “Hey, let’s have drinks tonight after the gym closes. There’s a new bar opening up on K Street. You’ll love it.”

Frozen in time, I simply stare at Roxanne. It isn’t enough to stop her advances.

“I know one of the bartenders. He’ll make your favorite extra-minty Mojito,” she adds, then straightens her back and rests one hand on her hip. “Come on, it’ll be fun. Just like old times. Besides, we have so much catching up to do.”

I still can’t find a damn word to say.

Shay heard her. She may be engaged in conversation with her client, but I know she heard everything. I know she’s waiting for my response. Why are my lips sealed? The answer should be simple. No. But the truth is... I don’t know what to say. Part of me wants to punish Shay for keeping me at bay the past few days. We’ve barely spoken since Roxanne came back, and I can’t get through to her. I keep trying to see her, but she always leaves before I can get her alone.

I’m aware that she’s doing it on purpose. She’s scared, especially given the complexity of our relationship. But I’m just as scared. We’ve only just started, and if she’s already headed for failure, where does that leave me? Where does it leave Jax or Richard, for that matter? I need Shay to be involved in this with us. All the way. The kid in me wants to be petty, if only to make it sting for her, yet I’m worried it’ll just push her farther away.

I’m still staring.

“Well, I’m going out tonight. And you have my number. You can always call me,” Roxanne says, loud enough for Shay to hear. “I’ll go get started on my warm-up routine in the meantime.”

“Okay.” That’s all I can manage as I stare at my laptop screen.

A few moments later, Shay wraps up her meeting, and her client heads for the locker room. He’s due to start his first training session with me, around the same time as Roxanne. I

made sure to schedule another client during Roxanne's hour. My hope is that she won't hit on me with other clients around.

"I'll see you later," Eddie tells Shay.

"I'll see you in there, actually. I'm gonna hit the treadmill for a bit," she replies, then gives me a sharp side-eye. I know that look, and it feels like a punch in the gut.

Shay only gets on the treadmill during the day when she's feeling anxious or angry or both. Roxanne's carefully calculated jabs may have stirred her up, and my inability to react accordingly may have made it worse. Obviously, I feel like the biggest idiot, but it's too late to fix anything, now. Shay barely talks to me these days, anyway. I can't force her to do anything. I can only figure out a way to make it up to her, to reassure her I'm still here.

As soon as I go into the gym, however, a hellish scene awaits.

Eddie is doing his warm-up routine. Roxanne has just finished hers, and she walks up to me with a skip in her step, eager to get started with her workout. There are about twenty other clients occupying different machines, but the one currently walking on the treadmill next to Shay's causes anger to roil in the pit of my stomach and my shoulders to tense up.

Vincent.

I didn't even see him come in.

They're talking. Well, he's doing most of the talking. Shay just walks at a higher speed, her beautiful face covered in a thin sheen of sweat as the treadmill adjusts its inclination according to a preset program. I can't hear anything over the music blaring through the speakers, but I can't get too close, either. My clients require my attention, and Roxanne is practically in my face.

Her presence alone fills me with uneasiness, a darkness working its way through my body as a mist spreads over my mind. I always felt like this with her, and it hasn't changed. My own soul is telling me this is a bad idea. But Vincent's presence fuels my anger, my muted fears about Shay. I may be dealing with my ghosts here, yet so is she.

How did we get to this point?

“Hey, handsome,” Roxanne says, inches from my face. “What are we doing today?”

“Back and chest,” I reply almost automatically as I guide her to one of the machines, choosing to keep an eye on another client’s warm-up routine. If I give Shay and Vincent another glance, my professionalism will fly out the window. I can’t afford that. Our gym can’t afford that.

But I do make a mental note to talk to the guys about Vincent. He keeps moving closer—one step at a time, patiently working his way back to her. Shay has a soft, forgiving heart. I shouldn’t doubt her, I really shouldn’t. Maybe this is my own insecurity talking. I mean, who am I to judge, right? Roxanne keeps giving me sweet looks with each pull of the machine, and all I can do is smile back. I should explicitly tell her I’m not interested in rekindling a dead fire.

Just like Shay should keep a reasonable distance from Vincent. I thought she couldn’t care less about the prick, so why are they chatting and even chuckling now and then as they walk on the treadmills together? It’s frustrating when I don’t have all the answers, and it’s even more frustrating when I know I should be stepping up for her.

Maybe I deserve the incoming fallout.

Maybe it was meant to end this way.

I've been feeling rather queasy the past week or so. It must be the stress of the entire situation. I barely talk to the guys, even though we see each other at the gym every day. I make sure to always be busy with a client or locked inside my office. I wear my headphones during my treadmill exercises, and any conversation with Marius, Jax, or Richard are the bare minimum. Hell, I wouldn't even know where to start if I wanted to talk to them about us.

We haven't been together in a while. I've rarely replied to their texts. They can feel me slipping away, and I have yet to make a decision about our relationship or our business. I know Richard saw the other space he told me about, though he hasn't mentioned more about it since. Maybe he's already leased it, or maybe he changed his mind. To my surprise, he's been spending more time here than anywhere else.

The gym is definitely starting to move upward now that the new training programs have been implemented. There is a significant uptick in memberships, and we're doing even better on the supplement side of things. It's supposed to be looking up for us, so why do I still feel so down and gloomy all the time?

The mere smell of cooked food makes me want to hurl. I can barely stomach a protein bar in the morning. Even coffee tastes... haggard. I'm guessing it's the emotional toll finally settling in. Everything has been gradually unraveling between us since Chappaqua, anyway, so I'm guessing we're nearing an unfavorable conclusion. There was only one way this was

going to end, despite the deepening and endless ache in my heart. I miss them. I miss the four of us together, tangled in the bed sheets, laughing and fucking each other's brains out. I miss losing myself in their arms and getting pampered with their sweet, loving kisses.

Reality doesn't allow for such good moments to last, though.

And Alice being late again isn't doing much for my frayed nerves, either. I'm behind the reception desk once more, handing out keys and scanning passes after one of our regulars called to let me know the gym wasn't open yet. That happened at 7:30 in the morning. It's 8:25 now, and Alice has yet to arrive. I'm done. Shaking my head slowly, I check my watch again. As if summoned, she finally walks through the doors in an apparent rush, the same annoying grin slitting her face.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she says.

"Late doesn't even begin to cover it," I reply bluntly.

"I said I was sorry," she mumbles, unable to look me in the eyes.

"Alice, being sorry isn't enough. You keep doing this, and I can no longer tolerate this kind of behavior."

"Oh, come on, it's not like nobody was here!"

"No one was here. Yet again, one of our regular clients had to call to ask me to come in and open the gym."

Alice looks around in a panic, her eyes wide and her lips slightly parted. It's finally dawning on her. "What about Rick? He's been coming in earlier lately."

"He showed up ten minutes after I opened."

"Did you tell him?"

She gives me a troubled glance, and I smell blood in the water. She's afraid. She knows this is the last straw. But before I can fire her, a couple clients walk in. One of them is new here, so she decides to take him through the on-boarding process. The other one is Vincent.

"Good morning," he says, approaching the reception desk.

I offer him a flat smile, hoping he won't engage in any kind of small talk. He's still trying to get closer to me, and while I've been nothing but polite and affable, I can't let him think I'd be willing to welcome him back in my life.

"Good morning," I reply.

My voice vanishes as I notice the large bouquet of red roses and the box of my favorite Belgian chocolates in his hands. He holds them up as an offering.

"For you, Shay."

"What is this?" I manage, trying to find my words.

I feel like a deer caught in the headlights. My blood runs hot and cold at the same time as I stare at him, then at the flowers and the chocolates, then at a slightly befuddled Alice, who's watching us while waiting for the new guy to fill out a questionnaire before he gets his gym pass.

This morning was already wrong on so many levels. I didn't expect it to accelerate downward. My gaze darts back to the flowers. Red roses. My favorites. Vincent knows they're my favorite.

"I needed to say something," he replies, his eyes smiling softly as he looks deep into mine.

For a moment, I'm almost fooled into seeing the old Vincent, or, better said, the image I had of him—the good man, the romantic, the charming man who walked into my life and changed everything, making me believe I was his choice. Until he made me feel like an option, of course.

"And I had to bring two of your favorite things in order to make a lasting impact," Vincent adds. "Shay... I still love you."

"Oh, no," I mumble, suddenly realizing where this is going.

"Please, just hear me out. You don't have to say anything, but I have to... Listen, I've missed you terribly. I was an idiot, I mistreated you, I lashed out at you instead of cherishing you, instead of treating you the way you deserved to be treated. The way you deserve to be treated."

“Holy shit,” I hear Alice muttering from behind the desk. Great. We have an audience.

“I vanished because I was scared. I loved you so much, I still do. So much it hurts. And it scared me. I was a coward and a fool, but I’ve learned my lesson. Honestly, I don’t expect you to take me back,” Vincent adds, his voice trembling slightly. I’m almost inclined to believe him. “I wouldn’t blame you if you never wanted to see me again. In fact, you can tell me you want me gone right now, Shay, and I’ll leave. I’ll leave and never come back, because the last thing I wish for is to hurt you again.

“But the truth is... I can’t fight this any longer. We were good together. I should’ve treated you better, and if by some stroke of luck you decide to give me another chance, I swear to you, Shay, I swear I’ll do more, I’ll *be* more. I’ll be the man you once knew me to be, and I’ll make you the center of my universe. I love you.”

The worst is just about to happen, as I hear the door to Richard’s office open. I manage to steal a glance for long enough to see him come out, accompanied by Jax and Marius. Their expressions send shockwaves through my body as they notice the roses and the chocolates in Vincent’s hands.

Fully aware that more people are now present and watching, Vincent decides to double down, never taking his eyes off me. “I hope someday you’ll forgive me for the egregious ways in which I’ve hurt you. I’m only a man, Shay, and I’ve learned plenty from my mistakes. But I have never stopped loving you. I’d still marry you, if you were willing to give me one more chance...”

“Vincent,” I whisper, further bothered by Jax, Marius, and Richard’s eyes on me. My face burns red.

They’re watching. They’ve heard him state his intentions loud and clear. Yet none of them react.

“Like I said, you don’t have to respond immediately,” Vincent says, handing me my gifts. “Just hold on to these and think about it.”

Before I can pull away or object, he leans in and drops a quick, soft kiss on my lips. To my surprise, I feel nothing.

There is, however, plenty of anxiety because Marius, Jax, and Richard saw the kiss. I should give Vincent his due credit—he may not know about our foursome, but I’m sure he can tell there is a bond between us. He’s no fool, his fox-like eyes dashing across to scan the three men with great care and precision. *My* three men. Are they still mine? Were they ever mine? Was I ever theirs?

“I’ve got a client waiting,” Marius says to no one in particular and crosses the reception area without so much as a glance my way. I hear the door close behind me as he vanishes into the gym.

Jax heads into the martial arts room with equal angst and tension in his voice. “Yeah, the kids will be coming in soon.”

“I’ll see you around,” Vincent tells me, smiling broadly as he gets a key from Alice and makes his way toward the men’s locker room.

I’m left standing motionless by the reception desk, Alice giggling to my right and Richard eyeing me curiously, arms crossed over his massive chest. I see his green eyes reduced to slits as he clears his throat to beckon my attention.

“Do you think we could talk for a moment?” he asks.

“Yeah...”

What else can I say at this point? I’m baffled and still trying to process the moment, wondering about the damage it may have caused. Chances are I made things worse much earlier by pushing my men away instead of talking to them about the slew of issues clouding our relationship.

Once I’m in Richard’s office, the door closed behind us, I can’t find a steady rhythm for my heart. It’s beating erratically, my breath ragged as I take a seat in one of the guest chairs. Richard sits behind his desk and give us a minute of silence during which he calmly and methodically analyzes my expression.

I feel like an open book under his emerald gaze. He hasn't slept much, that much is obvious. He's worried. Or stressed. Or both. I'm worse. Way worse. I could puke right now if I'm not careful.

"What's up?" I ask, my voice wavering.

"It seems like a lot is up," Richard replies, leaning back into his chair. "What was that whole thing with Vincent, Shay?"

"I'm not sure. He wants me back, but—"

"Do you want him back?"

"I didn't say that."

He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment. "But you're not saying otherwise, either."

"I don't really want to talk about this right now," I tell him. Anguish cuts deep through me, my pride hijacking my reason once again. "Tell me, why am I here?"

Richard's gaze softens, though the sadness remains. I should say something reassuring where Vincent is concerned, but my instinct is telling me to hold back. To keep a distance until I figure out what I want, what I can and cannot have under these particular circumstances.

"I've decided to leave West Key to you, Marius, and Jax," Richard says.

The words hit me like a hammer in the chest. "Seriously?"

"You three can handle it. I'd like to try my hand at the industrial complex I told you about. I'm expecting a lease agreement in my inbox by the end of the week," he replies. "No hard feelings, Shay."

"Hard feelings..." I scoff, shaking my head. The dismay is too much to bear, especially when combined with the swelling ball of nausea currently occupying my throat. "Do Jax and Marius know?"

"I just told them."

Oh, great. So, right after they found out Richard is backing out of the gym, they walked in on Vincent practically proposing to

me for the second time, while I didn't say a frickin' thing. Maybe I'm the villain in my story. I messed up and then some through my lack of action, my wavering resolve. It's shameful and infuriating... I wonder, am I even entitled to feel angry with Richard about this? Still, I can't help it.

"You're a coward, you know that?" I tell him.

Richard's left eyebrow pops up. "Excuse me?"

"This could've worked. All you had to do was have a little more faith in us. In me. Instead, you wanted me to come with you to the new place. You wanted to break up the band. And you succeeded. I can't believe you, Richard. After two years of working so closely together..."

"Shay, I really can't repeat myself on this matter. You already know where I stand, and you're a highly intelligent and capable woman, perfectly capable of understanding my business prerogative."

"What about your personal prerogative, huh? You've let us drift apart. The four of us. I may not have been the best girlfriend and I may have been overwhelmed by outside factors, but dammit, Richard, you were supposed to be the glue that kept us together," I snap, shifting the blame over to him. "I believed in you and in your promises of a great future with West Key. You promised we'd never let each other slip away, that we'd fight everything together, through thick and thin."

"I'm sorry, Shay. I really am."

His subtle frown tells me he's being honest. But my heart is breaking, and I can't accept a measly apology.

"Sorry doesn't cut it," I say. "I have to ask, though... Is this what you do with every single project in your life? If a business doesn't deliver the desired results, do you just drop it and move on to the next? Is this what you do with your friends, too? If one of them disappoints you or does something wrong, do you just throw them in the bin and make new ones?"

"No, Shay, I don't—"

“What about women? Girlfriends, I mean. Do you just chuck ‘em and move on to the next one?”

“No, it’s not—”

“Because that’s what it looks like from where I’m sitting. And I know we agreed to keep our naughty stuff strictly physical, but watching you now makes me realize that even if I want more from it, from the four of us, I wouldn’t be able to get it since you’ve already got one foot out the door.”

There it is. The harsh truth I’ve been mulling over. The doubt spoken aloud. I’ve fallen for a man who isn’t really here. I’d found balance in our foursome, I’d found a special kind of love in Chappaqua, and part of me had hoped we might be able to grow something out of it back here in Seattle. Part of me had dreamed of that impossible kind of love story where we could be happy and become a weird and complex family where I felt safe and adored three times over. What a fool I was to think it might actually work. All I got was a ton of heartache.

I can’t help but remember the precise moment when I asked myself: what is there for me to lose if I go ahead with this? Well, I’ve got my answer, and it stings.

“Shay, I know I’ve let you down where West Key is concerned, but our personal dynamic is another conversation altogether,” Richard says, one hand resting on the edge of his desk. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to talk about that when you’re this upset, though.”

“Why? Are you afraid you’re gonna set me off? Do I seem unstable to you?”

“No, but—”

“Oh, spare me,” I retort and get up, anger coursing through me like incandescent lava. “You’re the one fucking it all up, and I’m supposed to just sit here and be calm and considerate about it. No, Richard, that’s not how any of this works. You’re leaving, and that’s all there is to it.”

He stands up, visibly worried. “That doesn’t mean we’re not friends anymore. It doesn’t mean we’re not together anymore.”

“Right, because what works really well in an already fragile and complex relationship like ours? Resentment. Disappointment. Feeling abandoned as you go on to sow greener pastures while the rest of us are left behind to try and keep this ship from crashing into the rocks.”

I head for the door. He wants to say something, but I can't hear it anymore. I walk out, the blood boiling in my veins and the tears stinging my eyes. With everything that's happened here lately, I can't even fathom sticking around for another minute. I need the cold air of winter to fill my lungs and filter my thoughts, so I grab my bag and keys and leave.

RICHARD

The truth has a way of taking its sweet time before it really kicks in. I thought I knew what I was doing, and I was certain they'd understand.

When I told Marius and Jax about my plans for a new gym, I saw the disappointment in their eyes. I heard the anger in their voices. But they were calm and gracious about it. They said they understood. Of course, they're not under any obligation to agree with my intentions or decisions, but still, I'd hoped for some kind of support. Our friendship runs deep. After all, it runs deep enough that we're comfortable with one another, at peace with one another while sharing a woman the three of us are equally enthralled with.

Except it doesn't work out that smoothly in the real world. Shay's reaction makes more sense now than it did earlier when she walked out of my office, tears glistening in those beautiful smoky blue eyes. I hate that I hurt her. It wasn't my intention. I'd hoped she'd join me on this new endeavor, but that was selfish on my part.

I'm used to walking away. She was right on the money with that. I've always got one foot out the door because it's what I do. I drop everything like hot potatoes and move on because I'm so used to starting over. I prefer it to actually sticking around and fighting for anything. My biggest problem now is I feel I've lost too much for the sake of starting over.

Jax and Marius are still my best friends. They will eventually get over the dismay they're feeling in this moment, they will eventually see what I'm trying to do. But Shay... Shay won't

let me off the hook easily, and I don't deserve to be let off the hook, anyway. I don't. The minute things started to get complicated, my eyes were on the door, searching for a way out. It's such a wretched instinct. It used to help me in the past, but the present is something else entirely, and the future... I should have a say in that. I should be able to choose a different path.

Unable to think straight, I walk out of my office and take a look around the reception area.

Alice is behind the desk, watching funny videos on social media. It's almost midday on a weekday, so we'll be getting our lunch regulars in soon enough.

I wonder if my new gym will bring in similar clients. The early birds who rise with the sun, the lunch pack, the evening throngs. Will they be the corporate types who wild out as soon as they slip into their gym clothes, or the shredded fitness aficionados who live and breathe protein supplements? These are useless questions to ask myself given the regret currently swirling through me. I should be more excited about my decision, about my new project. Shay's words hit me deep, but only because she spoke the truth.

I go into the weights room, where I take a minute to observe the overall atmosphere. We've really come far with this place. We painted the walls in a charcoal shade of gray, with yellow and orange graphic designs here and there to liven up the room. We invested aplenty in our machines, which customers are delightedly using right now. The treadmills cost a fortune, but they were worth every penny. The weight machines are stupendous, the latest feats of engineering translated into efficient workout tools for beginners and experts alike.

"One more set," I hear Marius telling Roxanne as she picks up a pair of dumbbells from the rack. "Remember to pause at the lift."

"Sure thing, babe," she replies.

It irritates me. I can only imagine how it felt for Shay. I also remember how miserable Marius was during his on-and-off relationship with Roxanne. She kept coming and going,

sparking drama and jealousy fits over everything and everybody. I don't buy her whole "I'm a different woman now" routine. It's evident from her glare alone that she is still scanning for threats, constantly insecure about Marius's attention toward her. It's insanely toxic and unhealthy. I also know Marius is deeply in love with Shay, so it's decidedly different this time around for Roxanne—yet I still worry. It's easy to fall back into hurtful habits when we're left alone for too long.

I'm pretty sure he knows about Shay walking out. I'm pretty sure he understands what it means for us in the long term. We lost her. She was a fragile flower, despite her incredible strength and willpower. Shay needed us, she needed our support and reassurance. Instead, each of us wavered when all she wanted was emotional security. We gave her everything in Chappaqua, and I would give anything to go back there, to start over and do better. Shay deserves so much more than what we ended up giving her upon our return to Seattle.

"So, about that bar," Roxanne says, "I spoke to my bartender buddy, and he said they've got a live band coming as well. It'll be a full house for sure."

"Uh-huh," Marius absently replies, his attention focused on Jax.

Jax is going hard on one of the cardio bikes, covered in sweat as he pushes himself to the limit. Two minutes of intense, uphill work followed by four minutes of smooth cruising. He focuses on getting his heart rate as high as possible so he can then translate the effort into a proper warm-up for his kickboxing practice.

I can tell he's angry, but at least he's got physical effort to soothe some of the discomfort. The discomfort I caused, if I'm to be honest with myself. Then again, his own attachment issues prompted Shay to gradually withdraw from him. In many ways, Jax is a lot like me. He's always wanted a home and a family of his own, yet he was never able to stay in a healthy, long-term relationship. And while we all told ourselves we'd keep things simple between us after

Chappaqua, it's obvious now that we all failed. It was never casual to begin with.

And I bear some of the responsibility for the fallout. Or maybe all of it.

I spot Vincent on one of the treadmills, walking cockily at a higher speed as he admires himself in one of the wall mirrors in front of him. He smiles at the sight of the man looking back at him. I'll give him credit, he's a handsome and charming fucker, but he's filthy on the inside. I see him looking at other women in the gym, smiling and flirting when he gets the chance, when Shay isn't around. He's playing a long con on her, and I'm not buying those flowers and candy, either.

He's full of it. I only hope Shay has enough clarity to see it.

Shay was on point about Chappaqua, too. We had everything at the Hedonerie Spa. It was perfect there because it was just the four of us. That was the easy part of our relationship. As soon as we came back to Seattle, however, life started hurling wrenches at our wheels, and instead of dodging them like we were supposed to, we let them hit us.

We stumbled. We fell. We pulled away and wavered when decisiveness was crucial.

And now... I stand in the middle of a gym I'm about to leave behind, watching my best friends wallow in their own darkness while Shay is out of my sight, hurt and disappointed, but still very much on my mind.

I never thought I'd feel this way again. Or I'd hoped I'd never feel this way again.

There was a time when I was so lost in the darkness of my own loneliness, still crying over Vincent and wondering what I had done wrong for him to treat me the way he did. And in that time I felt so miserable. There was so much pain in my heart, I wasn't sure I could survive it. I genuinely thought the grief would eventually kill me. So when I raised my head and began the healing process, I swore to myself I would never allow my heart to be broken again. I would never put myself second to anyone or anything.

Yet the pain I'm feeling now is eerily similar. I walked away from Marius, Jax, and Richard because I didn't want to feel this way, but that is precisely what I'm going through. The blistering irony makes me scoff as I pad across the living room, a cup of hot tea in my hand as I settle on the sofa. It's cold and gray outside. The weather isn't helping, either. Cassandra said I could call her if I needed to talk—maybe I should call her, but I don't feel like further dissecting my emotions.

The nausea lingers in my throat, my head light and my senses unraveling since I first woke up. My period is late for the first time in eons, so I'm also staring at a boxed pregnancy test on my coffee table. I've been working up the courage to take it into the bathroom, but a part of me is utterly terrified of the possibilities. I can't avoid it, either. I need to know.

My phone pings with a message from Richard.

Can we talk?

Not today, I quickly text him back.

Marius called. It went straight to voicemail, and I've yet to listen to whatever he had to say. Jax is in full withdrawal mode, posting workout videos on his social media and nothing else. He hasn't reached out in the last couple of days. It shouldn't surprise me. I haven't even been to the gym since Richard told us he was walking out of the business.

"How do I get out of this?" I ask myself.

How do I get out of this state before it consumes me? I fear if I fall into my old coping mechanisms, I will lose all the progress I've made thus far with my body and my health. To my relief, I've got a fridge full of veggies and light cheeses and meat. There's only protein ice-cream in the freezer. I've got a couple of snacks in a cupboard, but not enough to qualify for a binge. I used to binge, I used to eat my feelings instead of just sitting with them.

I'm sitting with them now, though, and it isn't pretty.

"Ah, screw it," I snap and grab the pregnancy test. I might as well get it done and over with.

Vincent keeps texting me, asking if I'm okay. All he's getting are read receipts, though. He's the last thing on my mind, truth be told. I should be glad. I'm healed of him, at least.

But I've got three men in my heart and a situation I should have avoided. Damn that naughty list and the fire it ignited. We should've stayed friends and business partners. We should've left Chappaqua to somebody else. No, I'm lying to myself. It was good. It was beautiful. It was frickin' sublime, and I would give anything to go back there, to forget the rest of the world exists. We had a slice of heaven in those woods, in the warm comfort of the resort's plush beds. I miss the playrooms and the way I could forget myself at the door. I miss the intimacy of everything we did together—not just the mind-blowing sex but even the breakfast we had in bed, the hours spent talking in the hot spring pool, the loving embraces and the fleeting smiles.

I can't regret any of it. I can't even regret the sweetness that came afterward. Seattle welcomed us back with more of the same, why lie about it? We had it good, going on dates, spending the night at each other's place, working and laughing together, training together.

Until Vincent walked through the door.

Until Roxanne came back.

Until Alice hit on Jax, and Jax hesitated, even though I knew he'd tell her no.

Until Richard called it quits on West Key.

"Holy shit," I say as I stare at the plus sign on my pregnancy test.

It's a positive. The nausea, the bloating, the uneasiness, the trouble sleeping, the crankiness and the light-headedness. It wasn't just stress. I'm pregnant. And there are three possible fathers. The reality of this begins to sink in. Lead settles in my stomach, the weight traveling further down to my ankles as I sit on the bathroom floor. The pregnancy test is in front of me, the plus sign intensifying from a soft pink to a solid red.

Pregnancy should be a cause for joy and celebration, not dollops of anguish and crippling anxiety. I need to calm myself down. My heart is beating way too fast, my breathing is erratic, and my chest feels too tight. My pajamas are drenched in sweat, curls of hair sticking to my forehead as I feel another hurling session coming on.

It's only going to get worse unless I get my nerves under control.

After I finish heaving into the toilet, I take a cold shower and give myself a few minutes under the cool stream to release some of the tension.

I want a family. But I want it to come with love and understanding, with peace and growth. With kindness and emotional safety. This isn't it. I know I have options, but only one persists in my heart. This can only go one way. I know it. And as the hot tears stream down my cheeks, I understand that I am ultimately alone in this.

My men are out of the picture. Another wishes to return, but that is just a nightmare waiting to unravel. My best friend can't help me with this. I have no family to turn to. No other friends who would understand the complex relationship I have... or had with Marius, Jax, and Richard. Maybe I should tell them. No, not yet. How would I even tell them? How would it sound? Worse even, I'm terrified of their reaction.

We did agree to certain terms for our intimate dynamic, and we broke those the minute one of us caught feelings. A baby cannot fit into this conversation. Not in this moment, not when everything has fallen apart right in front of my eyes.

"I guess this means I'm going to be a single mother," I mutter to myself as I slip into a pair of jeans and an oversized hoodie, then go about making myself a hearty breakfast. Rich in protein, as usual. Simple but delicious. I need to take care of myself and this baby.

This is my responsibility, and I don't want anyone to stick around simply because I'm pregnant. I don't want a man by my side purely out of a sense of obligation.

"A single mother," I say it again, as if to get used to the concept.

I'm still in my twenties. I had other plans before settling down and building a family. But at least I've got a great career with a schedule that's flexible enough to work something out.

Oh, who am I kidding? This is a hot mess. West Key won't work without Richard. We'll fall farther apart in the end. And how long can I keep this a secret for, anyway?

The bump will start to show eventually. What will I tell Marius? What will I tell Jax? Will Richard even be around? I shake my head and let another wave of tears come out as I take a seat at the table, omelet slowly sizzling in the pan. There are fresh vegetables waiting to be chopped, but they'll have to wait for a few more seconds.

There's too much going on in my heart.

A week has passed since I discovered I'm pregnant. Seven days during which I've stayed at home and carefully weighed my options. I emailed the whole team at the gym to let them know I was taking some personal time off, but they could still reach me via email. My clients were worried, but once I replied to their queries, they eased up and continued with their programs. I'd almost forgotten how much they depend on me. It's not a bad thing, but I'll have to wean them off, eventually.

My heart is aching, and I'm constantly crying about it, yet the life growing within me has brought a different kind of focus into my mind—the kind of focus that is remarkably sharp and effective in giving me the strength I need to simply pull away for a while. I need peace and balance. And a few weeks away from West Key may very well be what the doctor would prescribe.

At night, the building looks lonely in front of an empty parking lot. It's snowing again, and given the absence of traffic at this hour, the snow settles peacefully over the road and the angled roof. I have keys for every door, so I walk across the parking lot, the white blanket crunching under my boots as I make my way through the front doors.

"I'd say I'll miss you," I mutter upon entering the gym. All the lights are off, so I turn a couple of them on in order to find Richard's office without tripping over anything. "But I'd be lying. I need a break from you, too."

Once I'm in Richard's office, I have another look around. His few personal items are still here, so he hasn't moved out of the gym yet to start the new business, which means he'll be in first thing tomorrow morning. I leave the marketing plan I've been working on on his desk, along with a handwritten note about it and about why I think he should give West Key another chance. I tried to keep it strictly business, though I know I failed. It doesn't really matter anymore. Sincerity is always better, no matter the outcome.

My phone buzzes. It's a text from Cassandra. *How much longer are you going to be up there?*

I message her to let her know I'm on my way down. She's waiting outside, still in the car with the engine running. We're going away together, and we've got a long drive ahead of us. A plane would've been a simpler option, but I don't mind spending time on the road with my bestie, and neither does she.

It's been a wild ride so far, and while I don't know where it will end, I do know that I am in love with three men who brought wonderful things into my life and my soul. I also know the chances of the four of us being together forever are slim to none. We should've discussed this early on. Maybe it would've prevented some of these feelings, some of the bitterness and doubts. Or maybe it would've only served to intensify what I was already experiencing.

Falling in love with each of them happened long before I wrote that naughty list. I'm aware of it, now. Falling in love with the four of them when they said they wanted us to go ahead with that naughty list, well... that was a natural and logical side effect. From the moment it started, I should've known it would end here.

I turn the lights off and give the reception area one last glance. I'm not going away forever, but it sure feels like I'm saying goodbye to an old friend. It's a strange feeling, yet I can't deny its persistence. There is a change coming, and I'm not sure how I will turn out once it comes.

In Cassandra's car, I give myself a moment to just breathe while she watches me in silence, '80s rock music playing through the stereo while the heating system makes me feel like I'm wrapped in three layers of thick cashmere. It's like the sun itself is hugging me, which compared to the biting cold outside is a welcome sensation.

"How are you?" she asks.

"I'm okay. I think I'm gonna be okay."

She smiles softly, her gaze never leaving mine. "Have you considered moving your nutrition business to another gym?"

"What?" I give her a troubled look. "What do you mean?"

"You said you were going over every option. That's one of them."

"Why would I leave West Key? I'm a partner in the company. I put so much of myself into that place. It doesn't make sense..."

Cassandra nods once, one hand on the steering wheel as she puts the car in reverse and gets us out of the parking lot first. "Think about it this way. You're pregnant, and Richard is leaving West Key. You yourself said there's a pretty worrisome possibility that the gym will ultimately fail without him. There is also a possibility that the guys won't be too happy when they find out you're pregnant. The truth is, things might get worse when you come back. Will you be able to still be here every day? Will you be able to still work with them?"

"I don't know." I let a heavy sigh out. It's a hard truth, but a truth, nonetheless.

"And if the gym fails, what will you do? You'll have a child to raise, a life to build, with or without a steady gig, with or without your career and your clients. Don't you think you should start looking into other gyms before you're able to fully branch out on your own?"

It would make sense. It would be the smart thing to do, for sure. There is no guarantee that Jax, Marius, and I can successfully take West Key to the next level. On top of that, our business relationship may suffer additional strain on

account of my pregnancy. We won't know who the father is until we test the baby's DNA. And between now and then, a lot more can happen. A lot of good or a lot of bad. Either way, Cassandra is right.

"I should prepare for any eventuality," I say.

We're driving through the north side of Seattle, headed for the interstate. There's not much traffic at this hour, and most of it is concentrated on the lanes going into the city, not the ones going out. Sunday nights are when people return from their weekend holidays, after all.

"You're on point, Cass, as always. Yeah, I guess I can look into other gyms and see if they'd be interested in my services. I could start something remotely, just to further build my client base."

"Exactly. You wouldn't even have to go there every day, so you can still focus on West Key for as long as you can. My point is... You don't have to expect failure, Shay, but you have to be prepared for it. You're going to be a single mother, so that comes with certain responsibilities you can't skirt past."

Part of me still hopes it will somehow work out between the four of us. But I am also aware it's mostly wishful thinking at this point. I've succeeded in pushing them away, and each of them has managed to come up short in one aspect or another—just enough to help me justify my own hesitation where our relationship is concerned. There's no point in dwelling on what could've been.

"I can't help but think I was pretty stupid for not taking more precautions," I mutter as we leave Seattle's glimmering night lights behind us.

"What do you mean?"

"The pregnancy. I should've been more careful..."

"Listen to yourself for a moment. You're living in the past," Cassandra says, her eyes on the wide road ahead.

We drive past an overhead pass with large green signs informing us the Canadian border is ninety-five miles away. That'll be the first of our so-called pit stops as we head for Flat

Lake Provincial Park, where we've booked ourselves a room in a small country resort by the lake. It's a beautiful place in British Columbia, Canada, and it's been on our travel list for years.

"You can't change what happened and you can't beat yourself up over it, either. It happened. And you decided you're going to go ahead with it. You're an incredible woman, you are strong and determined and perfectly capable of going through with whatever you choose to do..."

"You give me so much credit," I scoff.

"I'm only telling the truth," she states matter-of-factly. "I've known you since we were practically kids. Nothing has ever stopped you before, and nothing will stop you now. If there's one thing I can tell you from what I've learned from my patients who have children, particularly those who are raising children out of wedlock... honey, kids change everything, including how you tackle stress and every single situation you come across, sure, but your ability to adapt and evolve will only serve to make things easier in the long run. That baby in your belly is a lucky little thing to have you as his or her mom."

"You're just going to make me cry." I can't help but laugh lightly despite the tears working their way up to my eyes.

"I am not lyin' and you know it," Cassandra quips. "It won't be easy. It will definitely be messy. And you bet your toned ass I'm gonna be with you every step of the way, honey. You're not alone in this." She pauses for a moment, while I wipe my tears and take a deep breath. "Who knows? Maybe the guys will be thrilled. Or at least the guy who turns out to be the father." She laughs. "My God, woman, you sure love to complicate everything..."

"I should've stuck to just one guy, huh?" I chuckle bitterly.

"That would've been the sensible thing to do."

"It would've been difficult. Damn near impossible, if I'm honest. I fell for each of them, separately and together. It made sense when it was the four of us, away from prying eyes. It

made sense when we were dating one-on-one, too, but mostly because we wanted to grow as pairs so we could be more open and stronger when the four of us would be together again.”

Cassandra gives me a brief look, warmth and surprise glimmering in her eyes. “You really love all three of them, huh?”

“I guess that’s why it hurts so deeply to pull away from them.”

“It’s also why you’re so scared and pulling away in the first place.”

“It was beautiful while it lasted, right?” I choke on another round of tears.

“It was,” she says. “You were happy. I could tell.”

“Maybe it’ll be better once I take this time off. Maybe someday I’ll find what I need and deserve.”

“You’re gonna be okay, Shay, just remember that first and foremost. Enjoy this break we’re going on. You’ll love the lake, the forest, the tranquility that comes with both. You’ll find clarity in solitude.”

I give her a curious look. “You do this a lot, don’t you?”

“Every other weekend, yeah. I go away and come back with my batteries recharged and my mind cleared. Trust me, babe, the trees and the woods will always be there for us to hide and gather our thoughts.”

There’s so much unraveling inside me. There are moments when I can barely breathe, when every layer of my life comes crashing down, squelching me under the weight of all my decisions put together. There are moments when I look up and see a ray of sunlight piercing through the dark sky of my own thoughts. Days and days, I suppose.

But yeah, maybe it’ll work out in the end, and maybe it won’t.

Either way, I’ve got a baby coming and a broken heart to mend. I need to put myself first, and I need a good cleanse of the soul with a couple of weeks spent out in the middle of nowhere. Maybe I’ll emerge a wholly different person—or at least a sharper version of myself. A healed version of myself.

A few days by the lake have already begun to work their magic, albeit rather slowly.

I sleep better. Then again, Cassandra and I spend most of our time outdoors. The cabin is small but comfortable and with all the modern amenities. The town is just half a mile away, and the roads are surprisingly clear for late February in these parts of Canada. It snows a lot, but the local government has a huge fleet of snowplows constantly out on the road.

It's a beautiful place, surrounded by a deep green forest of majestic pines and ancient oak trees. It overlooks the south side of the lake, with waters reflecting a giant sky. At night, the view is a breath-taking spectacle of lights since we're so far away from light-polluting cities. The moon and the stars dance freely over the black heavens, strips of stardust and strands of our galaxy becoming visible on the clear nights. The air is crisp and fresh, while the snow stays fluffy and plump for days on end.

We start our mornings in the spacious living room by the fireplace. Flames crackle, and I love the smell of burning wood with my decaffeinated coffee. Cassandra makes sure I'm not eating or drinking anything that might affect my pregnancy. I mean, who needs a man when you've got a friend like her?

"Oh, look at that sky," she declares as she settles by the bay window. "It's gonna be clear and sunny today. You know what that means, right?"

“We’re gonna visit the farm next door...” I shouldn’t sound so disappointed. They’re only a hundred yards down the road from us, and they’re the sweetest people we’ve come across so far.

“You love hanging out with their goats! Why are you so glum?”

“I don’t think I’m glum, just... bloated,” I sigh deeply. “I do love hanging out with their goats.”

“We should definitely eat before we head out, though,” Cassandra says.

We’re still in our flannel jammies, thick woolen socks rolled down to our ankles—mine are slightly swollen, and my back hurts a little. She gives me a worried look, so I’m compelled to respond with a reassuring smile. “Don’t hover, Cass. I’m good. Just the joys of pregnancy.”

“Oh, you’re gonna go through it like a champ. All of those gym workouts will pay off, and you know it.”

I chuckle softly. “I hope you’re right.”

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“Nah, nah, I’m handling breakfast today. And I have no frickin’ clue. I’d kill for a bowl of fresh cherries, to be honest.”

Cassandra rolls her eyes. “Sure thing. Smack in the middle of winter, my girl craves fresh cherries. Anything else, milady? I’m pretty sure I can whip up a mean pickle with a strawberry jam dip if you give me a minute to rummage through the pantry. The owner was nice enough to stock it with some of the local good stuff...”

“Hey, I said I’m handling breakfast. And no, no pickles. I don’t think the baby likes them.”

In fact, I may be early in my pregnancy, but I’m pretty sure I already know what’s on the NO list. Pickles, blue cheese, and pork are absolutely at the top, with Cheetos and mushrooms springing for the runner up positions.

My phone pings. I check the screen and roll my eyes.

“Who’s that?” Cassandra asks, eyeing me curiously.

“Vincent. Again.”

“Can he not take a hint?” she groans, understandably frustrated as she takes a long sip of her coffee.

I finish mine and set the empty mug on the coffee table, then lay back on the sofa with my feet up on the armrest. “I told him I’m away for a while, but he’s still texting me. You know, ‘good morning, how’s your day’, that kind of stuff.”

“He’s definitely trying to wear you down until you agree to see him again,” Cassandra replies. “I know the tactic. A lot of narcissists use it. They pretend nothing happened, like everything is okay, like you could just pick up where you left off. I hope you’re not entertaining such ideas.”

“God, no,” I blurt out. “There’s enough on my plate without him. No. I just... I just need to block his number is what I need to do.”

“Finally,” she replies. “What about the guys, though? Jax, Marius, Richard. Have you spoken to them lately?”

I shake my head slowly and close my eyes. As soon as my eyelids come together, I see them. Marius’s warm brown eyes and broad shoulders, his playful smile and black curls hanging over his forehead. Jax’s bright blue gaze, his devilish grin and tattoos stretching across his arms and torso as he takes off his kickboxing gear. Richard’s wild green eyes, his red beard trimmed with a smooth fade up his square jaw, muscles slightly bulging against his neatly tailored suit.

I miss them terribly. The distance I’ve put between us was supposed to quell the fire currently burning in my heart, but I doubt I’m ever going to get over them. How could I, after everything we’ve shared? How could I, since I’m carrying one of their children in my womb? I have to let go of them, though. And maybe I’ll take an extra week here if it helps. I don’t know.

“They’ve left some messages, but I haven’t replied,” I tell Cassandra. “They were hoping we could meet and talk, the

four of us... I told them I was out of the country. Maybe when I get back, I don't know."

"My advice is don't do anything you're not comfortable with. Give yourself the time you need up here. I'm sure they will respect whatever decision you reach."

"I do need to tell them I'm pregnant, though..."

"It would be the sensible thing to do, yeah. And the sooner you do it, the better. But you're gonna have to do it in person. You know that, right?"

I give her a tired look. "After accidentally emailing them that naughty list? I could just 'accidentally' text them a photo of the pregnancy test on our group chat."

We both burst into laughter. What would that be like? No, Cassandra's got a point. This needs to be done face to face, once I gather the nerve to see them again.

"However you decide to tell them, Shay, it'll be your decision," she says after a while. "But you've been avoiding them for a while, now, and you're still suffering over it. I'm gonna be honest, you're in a purgatory of your own making here. Not that I can blame you. A love as strange and as intense as yours can be scary."

"Is it wrong of me to expect them to do more? To maybe hold on to me a little tighter?" I ask, my cheeks getting warm as the fire under the mantle gently roasts the room.

"It's not wrong, but I don't think it's entirely fair, either," she says. "Think about it this way... You're not the only one who gave that foursome thing a try. It's their first time, too, so maybe they don't know how to handle it. Maybe a regular relationship would've beckoned them to do more, like you said, to hold on to you a little tighter. But your dynamic was different."

My brows are furrowed with worry as anguish returns to my chest like a fist made of ice. "I was too hard on them, huh? I should've been more patient."

"Don't say you should've or could've. Accept your mistakes and learn from them, yes. But remove yourself from

something you can no longer control. You can still change the outcome, but only if you assume responsibility moving forward.”

I think about it for a moment. “I was hasty. I wasn’t patient enough. When I see them again, I need to tell them that. I need to be honest about how I feel without dwelling on the past.”

“Precisely,” she replies, smiling softly. “We all make mistakes, Shay. It’s how we learn. You know the deal, it’s not like we’re born with a user manual. And life has a way of throwing some pretty specific curve balls at us. They each teach us a lesson, but they don’t serve for us to dwell on them.”

Yeah, we all screwed up in this relationship. This is something I’m going to have to accept and move on from, for the sake of my unborn child. The prospect of a life without Marius, without Jax, without Richard... it’s awful. It fills me with a different kind of dread. It’s scary enough that I got pregnant without a clear intention and that single motherhood is a complicated experience, but to think I won’t have my three strongmen by my side... damn, it’s awful.

I unravel and start sobbing uncontrollably, rolling on my side as Cassandra puts her coffee down and comes over to hold me close. I let it out—the pain, the longing, the agony of their absence. “I miss them so much. I just... I just wanna drive back to Seattle and tell them how I feel.”

“You could do that,” she says softly, tucking a lock of hair behind my ear.

“I’m a coward, Cass. I don’t have the courage to do it. All I do is push them away and then wallow in my own loneliness. It’s pathetic.”

“It’s a natural defense mechanism. You are choosing a familiar form of discomfort in lieu of a new one, a much scarier one,” she reminds me. “We’re used to the traumas that resemble what we’ve already lived through. New traumas force us to face something new, and it’s scary. You know the saying, right?”

“Better the devil you know?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Better the sadness I already know. Better the misery I’ve become accustomed to. The very awfulness I thought I’d healed from. It’s more familiar, it’s somehow easier to handle than something new—telling Marius, Jax, and Richard I’ve come to love them deeply and I’m carrying their child. Because ultimately, that’s what this is, this unexpected pregnancy. Any one of them could be the father, and they’d all be just as important to me.

I haven't seen Shay in more than a week. I'm not used to her not being around here. She's an integral part of West Key, much like Richard and Marius. A prolonged absence may be justified in one way or another, but it doesn't make any of this better. It certainly doesn't make me feel better.

Hell, who am I kidding? I'm fucking miserable without her.

I haven't slept properly in several nights. I toss and turn, thinking about Shay and about how it all went wrong. I could probably pinpoint the wrong turns if I go through everything with a fine-toothed comb, but I barely have enough energy to get myself through the day. My clients need me, and the gym needs me now more than ever, with Richard leaving.

I'm mad at him for doing this. Shay did warn us. Marius and I suspected it might go this way. Deep down, I think we all knew he might pull out eventually. It doesn't make him a bad friend. It doesn't even make him a bad business partner. His decisions are reasonable and easily justified. It just doesn't make me feel any better. I don't know how we'll succeed without him. The gym is so close to getting out of the murky waters. With a little bit of luck, it could start turning a profit in the summer. But Richard was always the business brain behind the operation.

Sitting in his office, I flip through Shay's marketing proposal once again. I know Richard hasn't seen it because he hasn't been in yet, but I also know he's coming by today. I asked him to meet me here after I saw the document Shay left behind. It's brilliant. She's a brilliant woman, and I worry we might be

losing her, too. She came up with a whole new nutrition program for absolute beginners, the kind of folks who struggle to give up their disastrous eating habits.

Once again, Shay manages to make me fall even deeper in love with her without even being here. I shake my head as my heart hurts in her absence. Marius doesn't know where she is, and she didn't tell me, either. Just that she's somewhere in Canada with Cassandra. It's all the information we have, and it's not enough. I have a mind to head up there myself to see her, but where would I go? How would I find her?

The door opens, and I expect to see Richard come in as I turn my head to greet him. But it's Alice with a fresh cup of coffee for me. "Hey," I mumble, sounding downright disappointed.

"Hey, handsome. Thought you could use a pick-me-up," she says, hips swaying as she leaves the coffee on Richard's desk, then turns around to face me and smile seductively. "How've you been?"

"Good, thanks."

I try to keep our conversations neutral after the last time she hit on me, but I've got a feeling she came in for round two. I'm nowhere in the right mood for this—not that I'd accept her advances, but I may say some pretty hurtful things I might later regret. Unfortunately, Alice has an itch that needs scratching as she inches closer, purposely brushing the knuckles of my right hand with her thigh.

"You look particularly good in green, did I ever tell you that?" she asks, her voice low and sweet as she bites her lower lip.

"It's just a T-shirt, Alice. But thanks."

She leans into my hand on the armrest. It's making my blood boil. There's so much already swirling through my head. I have no energy left for this nonsense, and I don't understand why she simply can't take the hint. Maybe she's perfectly aware but simply pushing the limits, likely wondering where I'll draw another line.

"We both know it's more than just a T-shirt when you're wearing it," Alice purrs, then slowly bends in to bring her lips

closer to mine. “Did you know we have an office supply room with a lock on the door? The key’s in my pocket.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Come on, Jax. I see you watching me,” she says, inching even closer. It’s making me feel uneasy.

In the past, long before my heart set on Shay, long before I lost myself inside her, I probably wouldn’t have refused the advances of a mindless tart like Alice. I probably would’ve had some fun. Not anymore. My body isn’t even responding to her presence with anything other than awkward repulsion.

“And you know I’ve got a thing for bad boys who can throw a punch. Why don’t we see what could happen if we went into that supply room? Just the two of us.”

“Alice, do you realize what you’re doing here?”

“Stating the obvious. You know you’re into me. I’m into you. Why not give it a shot?”

“Just because I’m nice to you doesn’t mean I want to screw you,” I reply bluntly.

She straightens her back and chuckles softly. “It’s written all over your face, honey.”

“Then you’re either delusional or you need to get your eyesight checked. I’m your boss. You’re my employee. Professional ethics and standards aside, I’ve already rejected your previous advances, so what in the world made you think you could try again?”

Alice laughs. “Playing hard to get, then...”

“So, definitely delusional,” I mutter mostly to myself.

“It’s okay, Jax. I’ll catch you on another day, in another moment...”

She’s walking out, sashaying like she’s on some kind of runway, her chin up high and her eyes twinkling. I’m not sure if it’s delusion or just the kind of stubbornness that will someday get Alice in a whole other kind of trouble. Either way, it’s unhealthy, and I will have to address this with

Richard and Marius, too. It's bad enough that she's chronically late and lazier than her colleagues. Making passes at the boss is the kind of HR bomb we need to defuse before it's too late.

I'd fire her right now, but I don't know the legalities of this situation. She might be the type to turn this into a litigation nightmare, claiming I hit on her and fired her when she rebuffed me. The three of us will have to handle this with our lawyer.

Besides, I wouldn't touch this girl with a ten-foot pole. My body, my mind, my soul... they belong to Shay, and Shay is gone. At least for now. This hurts too much. And Alice's behavior has only amplified my anxiety, stretching my nerves beyond their otherwise extremely generous limits. I don't know how much longer I can take this.

I don't know how it will end. Maybe that's the worst part. Maybe that's what's keeping me awake at night. The lack of clarity. The uncertainty. I want the four of us back together—that's the only certainty I'm aware of. I want Shay back.

RICHARD

One of our clients and a close friend of mine texted me earlier to let me know that Alice was late yet again. This time, however, Shay wasn't around to open the gym in her stead. Shay is away in Canada, and I don't know why... but I'm worried. Or miserable. Or both and more. There's been a lot on my mind lately. Doubt has been a predominant companion of mine, particularly where the new gym project is concerned.

The enthusiasm I originally had about the place is starting to fizzle out, and I'm not the kind of man who backs down from a newly signed lease agreement. I'm ready to roll the project forward and set up a new gym in the space, but I feel... lonely. Lonely in this business endeavor, and lonely on a personal level. Marius and Jax have remained friendly and civil, yet I can feel them slipping away. They said they understood, but I can't stop them from walking away. I have no control over people's emotions. I barely have control over mine.

I walk into the West Key reception area just as Alice comes out of my office, giggling with stars in her eyes as she sees me. "Hey, bossy boss!" she quips.

"Good morning, Alice," I reply coldly.

It's one thing to have Shay cover for this girl when she's late, it's one thing for me to keep forgiving her transgressions on the matter, and it's a whole other thing for clients to call me—ME, of all people, to tell me our gym isn't opening on time on account of a lazy receptionist. It's unacceptable. And Shay was right on the money with this one, too. Instead of handling it

from the very beginning, like the man and the businessman I portray myself to be, I chose to shift my focus away from West Key and on to another project. How will I ever grow anything if I don't stick around to nurture the seedling?

We meet in front of the reception desk as I give her a subtle nod of acknowledgment. She is way too relaxed for the glower aimed at her. It's almost insulting.

"You were late again," I tell Alice, then briefly glance over her shoulder to find Jax sitting in one of the guest chairs of my office. Another person I need to sort things out with before I lose him, too. I'm pretty sure we've already lost Shay. "I don't think this is going to work out, Alice."

"Easy there, Rick," she giggles. "There was a lot of traffic down Ninth this morning. It wasn't my fault."

"It's never your fault, is it? You're late at least twice every week."

"Minor delays. Barely fifteen minutes!"

I shake my head slowly. "You were almost two hours late less than a couple of weeks ago. I could just pull the CCTV footage from the last month alone, if you want. We could go over each day and check the timestamp. Would that make you feel less in the wrong, Alice? Because I'm pretty sure your arguments would just wither away. Do you not understand how serious this is?"

"Rick, come on, it's not that big of a deal."

"The fact that you're constantly late and failing to open the gym on time? Are you serious? We've lost clients because of you. And honestly, I've tried to be understanding and supportive, fully aware of the difficult situation you're dealing with at home, but I can't take this anymore."

The humor fades from her eyes as she takes a step forward. Maybe she's used to intimidating men with her brazenness, but I think she's forgetting who she's speaking to. Maybe it's time to remind her. Some lessons must be hard in order for us to learn. This is going to be hers.

"You can't fire me, Rick. We've got history together."

“I don’t think you understand how interpersonal relationships work.”

“What will your clients think when they hear we were a thing, huh?”

She narrows her eyes at me, and suddenly... it hits me. She’s actually foolish enough to think she can pull this card on me. I gave her too much leeway. I was far too kind and patient with the wrong person.

“It’ll ruin your reputation, Rick. Especially since I’m just a naive twenty-something from the slums of Seattle. You used me.”

“Okay, so, I’ll keep this short and sweet,” I reply and raise a finger to silence her when she tries to talk over me. “No, it’s my turn. You listen. You and I had a bit of a fling before you came to work here. No professional standards were breached. From an HR point of view alone, my hands are clean, do you hear me? Should you be dumb enough to try and stir a shit storm on the matter, I will come down on you so hard, you will never hold any job better than restocking the shelves at a 7-11 for the rest of your life.”

“Rick...”

“Pack your stuff and be out of here. Accounting will wire you the last paycheck, and HR will send all the necessary documents to your home address. And if you want a recommendation for whatever job you get into next, I suggest you be civil,” I add sternly. “I gave you a chance, and I was nothing but grateful for the support you provided during the gym’s earliest days. You were compensated accordingly, and so it’s no excuse for these repeated offenses. It’s time for you to grow up and accept responsibility for your actions. You’ve been late on our time and money, and you know damn well time and money are the two things you don’t want to cross me with.”

She stares at me, disbelief and shock glistening in her wide eyes. “You’re serious...”

“Of course. I’ve given you plenty of chances, and you have repeatedly spat in my face. I’ve learned an important lesson here, too, mind you. No one will ever get as many chances as you got with me, Alice. And like I said, if you think of blackmailing me again, I will make you suffer in ways you can’t even imagine. This is my business, my hard work, my life. Do you hear me?”

All Alice can do is nod slowly as she pulls away and retreats behind the desk, utterly ashamed. I reckon the harsh reality is finally starting to dawn on her as she becomes aware of the repercussions corresponding to her actions. These are simple consequences, and I brush off any sympathy I might have for this girl. She’s had plenty of opportunities to do better. I should have listened to Shay about her a long time ago.

I should have listened to Shay about a lot of things.

I go into my office and close the door, fully aware that Alice is sobbing behind her desk. I couldn’t care less. The damage she has done outweighs my sympathy for her.

Jax watches me intently as I take my seat behind the desk and notice the brightly colored folder between us. I’m angry and riddled with guilt at the same time. Worse even, Shay’s absence is digging deeper into my soul. I don’t know how to deal with it because I’ve never felt this way about a woman. It’s as if I’m strapped into a rollercoaster cart that’s careening out of control.

“Everything okay?” Jax asks.

I shake my head. “No. And yes. A little bit of both, I guess.” I take a deep breath and lean forward slightly. “I just fired Alice.”

“Thank the fucking stars,” he exhales sharply.

“Pop the champagne bottle, will ya?” I shoot back, half-smiling.

“Come on, man, she had it coming for a long time. What made you finally decide to can her?”

“I got a call earlier from a customer,” I reply. “You were right. Shay was right. Marius was right. I was too lenient. And for

that, I apologize.”

Jax chuckles softly. “It’s cool, man. You’re a good human being, you give second chances aplenty. I wouldn’t want you to change that about yourself.”

“You make it sound so easy. Anyway, we’ll find a replacement. I’ll email HR to post a job ad online,” I reply. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“West Key. Shay. And that.” He nods at the colored folder on my desk.

“What’s this?”

“Shay left it before she went away,” he says, his voice dropping by several degrees.

I open the folder and find the handwritten note first. Her words hit me like hammers right to the heart. I can almost hear her speaking directly to me, her tone trembling slightly as she explains she needs some time away from everything before she can decide what she’s going to do next. It’s a subtle way of saying she is definitely considering walking away from it all—the gym, our friendship, our intimate relationship. And I can’t blame her. I’d do the same in her shoes.

“What is this, exactly?” I ask Jax as I put the note away and start flipping through the folder. I’m surprised by the amount of detail that went into each presentation slide. The more I read, however, the more fascinated I become with what the proposal actually entails. “Damn.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d feel the same way,” he replies, almost laughing. “See how brilliant she is? How she put the whole thing together? This is it. The edge we need against our competitors in the area. Rest assured that once we publish the marketing materials for this program, people are gonna be flocking to the reception desk to buy memberships and consultation sessions with Shay before she sends them over to us for training.”

“This is fantastic,” I manage as I continue perusing Shay’s proposal. “So, we’re targeting the hardest to catch segment of our population.”

“That’s right. She’s fucking amazing.”

“She really is.” I look up at him when he sighs. “We made a mistake with her. You realize that, right?”

“Just one mistake?”

“Well, a cluster of mistakes,” he sighs deeply. “We have to get her back, Richard. And for Christ’s sake, you can’t leave us. I know you’ve got your heart set on the new place and whatnot, but could you at least consider staying on here part time? We need you here, man. West Key needs you. We said we were okay with you leaving, but the truth is... We’re not. I know Marius isn’t around right now to agree, but I also know I’m speaking for the both of us.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, leaning back in my chair for a moment. This is it. The crossroad I’d dreaded yet knew I’d stumble upon.

“I’ve been going about this the wrong way, and it’s my responsibility,” I tell Jax. “You’re right, though. At the first sign of trouble or distress, I was ready to just pack my stuff and leave. That’s not a good business practice, even if the books speak in my defense. You stick the tough times out, you work with your partners to lift the place up to where you know you’re able to bring it. And West Key has enormous potential. It has always had potential. I was a fool to focus strictly on the financial figures, and I’m sorry.”

“Dude...”

Jax seems utterly shocked. Granted, it’s not every day that I acknowledge such a colossal mistake, let alone apologize for it. I’m a proud man—stupidly so, sometimes. But after what just happened with Alice, after I finally opened my eyes and understood the greater picture, Shay’s bitter words returned with a vengeance, cutting through my brain and making my very soul bleed.

“I was a terrible business partner in that sense. I wasn’t a very good friend, either. And as far as our relationship with Shay is concerned, I fell short there, too,” I continue. “I’m done letting other people interfere in our life, Jax. I’m done calling it quits

before trying hard enough to justify leaving. And I am done being afraid to speak my truth and my heart. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

My good friend nods in agreement and takes the folder back to flip through it once again. "It's okay, Rick. I know you meant well, and I know you were only trying to watch your back. The business side of things is never easy... but this, my man, this right here... it's solid gold."

"Yes. And we need to send it over to the marketing department so they can get started on designing the actual campaign," I reply. "I want it to be ready for a spring rollout, just in time for Shay's return."

"All this," Jax says, pointing around him with a bright and hopeful smile on his face, "all this is worth fighting for, Rick. We've come too far to let this place fizzle out like so many other gyms in Seattle. I never forgot why we started this project and who I started it with."

"I almost did..."

"But you remembered. It's why we're here, now, talking about it."

"Yeah. It is worth fighting for. And so is Shay," I say, reaching the final and most important conclusion. "We have to do something about her, too. We need to fix what each of us broke, Jax. She's going to need the three of us by her side, especially if we implement this program. It's insanely ambitious, even for her. We may need to hire more trainers if we get the figures she estimates we could get with a proper marketing campaign."

Jax nods again, satisfied with my decision. "Oh, we'll figure it out, I'm not even worried about that." A frown draws upon his brow, however. "I'm more worried about how we're going to get to her. This relationship of ours was supposed to be something else, something simpler. But you and I both know there are feelings involved, which is probably why she's been pulling away."

He makes a valid point. It's probably why we're equally stuck knee-deep in this mess, anyway. We thought it was crazy but easy. Keep it for the pleasures of the flesh only. Have fun. No strings attached. No actual commitment. Just three guys and one incredible woman, playfully ticking through a naughty list until we'd all be sated.

Love has a way of sneaking up on us when we least expect it.

The Hendersons' farm is a different form of therapy. Being out in the cold winter air, surrounded by so many friendly animals... it's doing things to my soul. Wonderful things I needed, clearly. Maeve is my favorite of the whole bunch. She's an old goat with a large brass bell hanging around her neck, her coat white with soft brown spots. I sit on a bench, oblivious to the lowering temperature while she snuggles up to me, always ready for another handful of sunflower seeds—of which I have plenty in my pockets.

Cassandra laughs as she watches two of Sherry's kids prance around her. Sherry is the matriarch of the goat family, and to the Hendersons' surprise, she birthed a couple of babies just last month.

"My God, they're like quicksilver," my friend quips as the kids dart across the snowy pen before they run back to their mother. "It's a shame I can't take them home."

"Maybe we could build a farm of our own," I reply, only half-joking. "You know you've always wanted to retire somewhere north of Seattle. We could totally pull it off."

The Hendersons are busy in the horse stables, but they allow us to roam around the place as we wish, especially since most of the animals are already confined to their spacious enclosures for the coming evening. We've been out here all day, only going into the farmhouse to eat and use the bathroom. I thought I'd have trouble with the cold, but honestly, I haven't felt this good in a long time.

“You know what? A farm isn’t the craziest idea you’ve had,” Cassandra says. “I could have a couple of children of my own, so yours will have company.”

“Cousins. Sort of.”

“Yeah. I mean, who needs men, right?” she laughs.

I need my three men. It’s hard to envision a future without them, but I suppose I will have to prepare precisely for that. As if sensing my sadness, Cassandra comes closer and sits next to me while the kids continue their head-knocking close by. She leans into me just as Maeve nuzzles my pocket for more seeds, making me laugh.

“You said you got some offers from other gyms,” she reminds me.

“Yeah. My West Key clients actually recommended my services to other friends of theirs,” I reply, remembering the emails I read through earlier. “I’ve got enough people interested to actually start my own nutrition-focused business. I think it’s funny. I didn’t imagine I’d be able to branch out like this... so soon, I mean.”

“You’re an excellent nutritionist, Shay. You’re a superstar in your field, remember?”

I can’t help but smile. “I’d almost forgotten.”

“Well, this is your reminder. You already have so many happy and satisfied clients, honey. They were bound to brag about you to other folks who may need your services. And I’m sure there are plenty of gyms in Seattle who would pay serious cash to have you on their team. See? You were worried about your career.”

“I really need to stop second guessing myself and have more faith in my abilities without the guys propping me up,” I say.

Cassandra nods. “Exactly. I know it’s scary to think about branching out on your own, but you don’t have to jump right into the fire.”

“Slow and steady,” I respond with a nod.

“That’s right. And the same applies to every aspect of your life. I’m glad you’re getting job offers, babe. I’m glad you’re seeing there is life outside of West Key. It will help you with your decision making process when you’re ready.”

I’m glad, too.

For a while, I’d worried there might not be much waiting for me beyond West Key. I’d worried I would have to hold on to the ship, even if it sinks. But Cassandra just said something I also inwardly believed—there is life outside of my business with Jax, Marius, and Richard. And should I decide to leave and carve out another road ahead, nothing can stop me. It won’t mean I failed.

It will hurt deeply, sure, but if it’s the right and healthy thing to do for myself and my baby, I will do it without hesitation.

MARIUS

The longer she is away, the more I miss her.

It's as if a hole was left where my heart is supposed to be. An emptiness in desperate need of filling, an emptiness only Shay can fill.

I've always kept a clear head in my previous relationships. I had a certain sense of balance, a clear direction, a logical way of thinking that helped me move forward. With Shay, it's different. It's not worse, but it's definitely strange and uncomfortable for me to be like this in her absence.

The mornings are gray and dreary, even if there's a bright sun shining outside. The evenings are cold and gloomy, even if I'm wrapped in the warmest blanket. And no matter what I do, my mind keeps wandering back to her, beckoning me to chase after her—Shay wouldn't want that, though. She needs her time and her space away. I can only respect that. But it's killing me. Slowly.

One day at a time, I tell myself as I walk into the reception area. It's snowing, giant flakes falling slowly outside the large windows flanking the reception desk. It's an early morning, but there are plenty of regular clients coming to and from the locker rooms. I greet each of them with the brightest smile I can muster, but the face behind the desk puzzles me. I don't know her, yet she's wearing one of our branded polo t-shirts and handing out keys to incoming clients. A pretty girl in her early twenties, and she looks nervous. It's clearly her first day.

"Hi, there, how can I help you?" the girl asks me.

I give her a polite nod. “I’m Marius. One of the—”

“Bosses, yes. Richard said you’d be coming in early,” she says with a sunny smile. “I’m Sarah. It’s a pleasure to meet you!”

“Likewise,” I reply. “I’ve been away for a couple of days, and I haven’t had a chance to check my emails and messages. So, you’re our new receptionist?”

“It was pretty short notice for me, since I only came in yesterday for an interview. I didn’t expect to get the job and to start so quickly, but here I am!” Sarah giggles.

“Well, I’m glad you’re on board, Sarah. If you need any help, please, don’t hesitate to ask. I’ve covered reception duties before, back when we were just getting started.”

“Good to know. I will definitely have questions,” she replies.

I look around. This place feels so empty without Shay. It’ll be empty without Richard, too, though Jax did mention he might’ve turned him around—we’re supposed to have a conversation about this today. Yet I can’t shake this nagging feeling that Shay’s absence may reverberate into something far more profound.

“Where’s Richard?” I ask Sarah. “Is he in yet?”

“He should be arriving soon,” she says.

“Alright, cool. I’ll do my own workout first,” I reply, quickly realizing I forgot my gym bag in the trunk of my car.

I leave Sarah to her reception duties and make my way back to the parking lot, only to freeze at the sight of Vincent and Roxanne making out by her silver BMW. They’re getting hot and heavy, too, judging by the roaming of hands and moans echoing all the way over to where I’m standing. I don’t know when this started, but I can’t help but feel genuine relief.

On one hand, there’s Vincent, the so-called good guy who wants Shay back. He had the audacity to bring her flowers and candy, to tell her he still loves her. Go figure, the narcissist asshole lied. On the other hand, there’s Roxanne, who has repeatedly tried to get back with me. I didn’t notice the chemistry between these two, but I find the entire scene rich

and funny as hell as I snap a couple of photos with my phone. Something tells me I'm going to need the evidence for later.

Shay needs to know who she's dealing with, no matter how she feels about the guy. She may reject him, she may reject us, too, but I don't want her ending up with someone like Vincent ever again. She deserves infinitely better, and whether I'm part of that "better" or not, the prick I'm looking at right now definitely isn't. Roxanne's move on him is surprising, though. I'd expected her to keep a low profile at the gym, especially since she's been so adamant about getting back with me.

"Huh, go figure," I mutter softly and move to the side so they don't see me.

Once they're done with their make out session, they straighten their winter clothes and walk toward the building as if nothing happened, as if they're simply sharing the same path up the sidewalk and into the gym. The cheapest form of theater, in my opinion, but a much-needed sight. It puts everything into perspective, and it certainly clears the air on so many levels.

Shay needs to know about this. I can't lie to myself. It doesn't change how murky things are between us, it doesn't soften my longing for her, either, but at least it gets Vincent out of the way permanently.

My phone dings with a message from Richard. *We need to talk*, he writes.

Definitely, I reply.

I meet with Richard and Jax in my office. There's a smidge of sunlight attempting to poke its way through the clouds outside, causing a powerful, filtered glow to make me squint when I gaze out the window.

My shoulders feel tense. The back of my neck tingles. I'm restless and eager to move forward, to do something, to stop letting fate take the reins and screw me out of the only relationship I've ever wanted. I can't believe I fooled myself into wasting all that energy on toxic people when I could've focused all my resources on the one woman who has always been there for me.

Richard sits on the sofa, subtly biting the inside of his cheek as he goes through his phone, checking new messages. Jax joins us, fresh out of the sauna and covered in a thin layer of sweat, wearing nothing but his gym shorts—not a strange sight in these parts, for sure.

“Alright, we're all here,” I say, taking a deep breath and looking at Richard. “We do need to talk.”

Jax nods in agreement. “We done messed up.”

“You can say that again,” Richard sighs deeply. “I can certainly say it. We have to do something about Shay.”

“I think the three of us are in agreement here,” I reply.

“You saw the marketing plan she left us before she went off on her break to Canada, right?” Jax asks me, and I respond with a single nod. “I think she wants to leave the gym altogether.”

I had my own suspicions on the matter, but the words still hit me like a punch in the gut as they leave Jax's mouth. Reality has a way of cutting deeper than theories and thoughts. And when you're faced with the hard truth, it's as if your worst nightmares have suddenly decided to materialize. Hearing about this now only serves to tighten my shoulders to the point where I feel as though I've got a humongous boulder strapped to my back.

"I wouldn't blame her," I mutter mostly to myself. "It doesn't mean we should make it easy for her to go." I pause and look at Richard. "Then again, you're leaving first. She's got every right to do the same."

"About that," Richard replies, pressing his lips into a flat line.

"Are you serious, Rick? Don't play with us, man, we're already going through enough."

"I'm serious," he says, lowering his gaze. "Shay was right. I'm being selfish and afraid to commit in more than one aspect of my life. Good things are worth fighting for, and I should've thought thrice before announcing my departure, before I even considered the decision. This place is great, it's got tons of potential, and with Shay's new marketing perspective, I'm pretty sure we'll finally have that competitive edge we so desperately needed."

"I cannot believe I'm hearing these words coming out of your mouth." I chuckle softly, leaning into the window frame. "Not that I mind. If anything, I'm happy to hear you've changed your mind on this, Rick. We do need you, man. Not just as a business partner but as a member of this... weird little family of ours."

"It's not a family without Shay," he says.

Jax clears his throat. "We have to get her back. There's no other way about it. I've sat with myself on the matter, and I can't say I'm happy with how I handled things. I should've been more attentive toward her, especially when I could feel her slipping away."

“It wasn’t her fault. Life sort of... got in the way,” I tell him. “I did the same. I didn’t push hard enough when she needed me to.”

“Same,” Richard sighs deeply. “This marketing plan of hers feels more like a goodbye, though. It’s as if she’s trying one last thing before she walks out the door. And if she’s already in that mindset, how do we pull her back in?”

It’s a good question. Shay isn’t the type we could appease with a mere apology and a promise of better days ahead. Shaking my head slowly, I look to my closest friends and allies and smile.

“We need to be honest with her. Whatever happens, we do have to accept the possibility that it may very well be over between us on an intimate level,” I say. “And we have to say it out loud. That we messed up. That we should’ve stayed closer, especially when outside elements started interfering with our relationship.”

“By outside elements you mean Vincent,” Jax says.

“And Roxanne,” I admit. “And the issues with the gym. Alice. Sales. All that jazz. We’ve always had a lot on our plates, if you think about it, but ever since we got together with Shay, the stakes went all the way up into the stratosphere, yet none of us adapted to that fundamental change in our lives.”

Richard checks his phone. New messages are pouring in, and he frowns slightly. “I know where she is in Canada with Cassandra.”

“How’d you get a location so fast?” Jax asks, slightly amused.

“Cassandra just texted me,” he replies with a cool grin.

“We could go up there,” I say. “The more time she spends away from us, the easier it’ll be for her to cut the cord completely when she comes back. And I know it sounds manipulative, but it’s not. Shay is probably trying to go through each day adjusting to the idea of a future without us, and the longer we let her, the less likely it’ll be for a reconciliation to actually work. She needs to know we’re still here and willing to make this into something more.”

Richard gives me a curious look. “Are you really willing to keep sharing her with the two of us for the long term?”

“I am. If she has feelings for the three of us, and the three of us are clearly having trouble being without her, why not give it a try for the long term, huh?” I reply with a shrug.

“I’d rather it be the four of us together,” Jax concedes. “We’re stronger and happier together. Hell, I never thought I’d feel this way, but I don’t see a point in fighting these feelings any longer. I tried that, and now Shay’s in Canada trying to get over us.”

“How would it work?” Richard wonders.

“Like it did until now. We each take time with her, we have time together, too. Who knows, we could even move in together. What would that be like?” Jax replies.

My mind wanders into a possible future. I can almost see the sun pouring through the window, casting sparks through her long, sandy-blond hair as she sips her coffee, wearing nothing but a smile. I can almost see myself holding her close and losing myself in her scent while Jax gets breakfast ready and Richard starts taking his work calls in the den. It may sound crazy, but it’s certainly not impossible.

There are seven days in the week and the possibility of spending a lifetime with Shay. If that involves a compromise here and there, I’d rather it be that than not being with her at all. Love is a funny and crazy thing, so why not play along and see how much we could build together, the four of us? I cherish my friends, I would do anything for them, and they would do the same for me. What happened in Chappaqua couldn’t have been a mere fluke. It felt too intense, too real, too beautiful for it not to last for a lifetime.

“I’m down with whatever the four of us agree on,” I say after a while. “As long as our most precious needs are met. And right now, my most precious need is to have Shay in my life, to be with her, to protect and cherish her the way she deserves to be protected and cherished. We each serve a role in this dynamic. All we have to do is assume it and live by it.”

“Shay has found something in each of us,” Richard agrees. “And that’s what made our relationship special, why we have never felt the need to compete with one another for her attention and her affection.”

“It’ll work if she’ll have us.”

“Alright, then,” Richard concludes. “We’re implementing the marketing plan as soon as she gets back. I’m letting a friend of mine take over the other gym space. And we’re going to Canada this weekend.”

“You’re letting some other dude snatch your precious new gym space?” Jax chuckles.

Richard gives him a shrug. “Meh, I’m not such a big fan of the industrial design, anyway.”

“Excuse me,” the receptionist comes in after a quick knock on the door. “Hi, Marius. Sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to let you know that your next appointment won’t be coming in today. Or for the rest of the week.”

I feel my eyebrows popping up in surprise as I remember precisely who my next appointment is. “Vincent’s not coming in? He never misses a training. Did he give you a reason?”

“Yeah, he said he’s off to Canada for a week,” she replies.

And that’s when the ugliest of truth begins to sink in. One look at Jax and Richard, and I can tell we’re all thinking the same thing. That son of a bitch didn’t stop at flowers and Belgian chocolates. He found out where Shay is staying. It’s no surprise. It shouldn’t be a surprise. He’s a relentless prick, and he’s clearly not done with her.

Richard takes a deep breath and clicks his teeth. “Well, then, I guess we’re headed to Canada today.”

It doesn’t matter that we’re going to have to cancel our appointments for the rest of the day, and probably for tomorrow and the day after, too. It doesn’t matter that I’ll be leaving most of the administrative duties to Lyle and the reception staff. They handled it well during the Christmas holidays. West Key won’t crash and burn for a couple of days

in our absence. It doesn't even matter that the receptionist is staring at us with genuine confusion.

What matters is that Vincent's got a head start.

And we need to beat him to it.

It will take some time for me to get used to a life without Marius, Jax, and Richard in it. Right now, such a future seems bleak, empty, devoid of everything I knew was good and sweet about drawing each breath. It lacks sense and beauty, and no woman would ever walk willingly in that direction. Yet there's a considerable possibility that it's precisely what awaits me.

The child in my womb fills me with hope that they might still be around in one form or another, but even that doesn't soothe my heart. I never planned for any of this. I didn't imagine I'd find myself experiencing such profound emotions for not one but three wonderful men. I didn't imagine I'd wake up every morning with their faces in my head, my body longing for their touch and for the comfort they so easily gave me.

I'm on my own this morning. Cass went into town to buy a few things for dinner, and knowing her as well as I do, she'll take her sweet time on the way back. It's a beautiful day outside, with sunny skies over an endless blanket of snow, and there's a forest stretching east of here she'll want to explore before she returns to the cabin. She says the trees are like therapy for her, a living and breathing network of interconnected organisms as old as these lands. She finds silence and peace in her solo trips. She needs the time alone while she's out her, and I certainly don't mind warming up by the fireplace, hot chocolate smelling wonderfully in my mug as the mini marshmallows melt into it.

While I'm not sure where the cravings end and my own preferences begin anymore, both the baby and I are in agreement as to the inestimable value of the cocoa bean and its numerous culinary applications. Chuckling, I sink into the armchair and listen to the flames crackle as they consume a recent batch of chopped logs, watching the orange tongues lick at the wood. I lose myself in the moment, wishing I could spend this and every morning thereafter in Marius's arms, with Jax's warm breath on my neck, and Richard's hard body covering mine. How sweet it would have been, if only it had worked out.

"Not again," I mutter as I feel fresh tears working their way up. It isn't the first nor the last time I'll cry for these men, but I do know the pain will eventually wear off. I'll pull them out of my soul one day. Today isn't that day, though, so all I can do is blink the tears back and imagine a future where the baby and I get to discover each other, get to grow up together.

This little creature only has me. I need to step up and make sure she or he's got everything they need and more. I'll be a better mother than my own, that's for sure. My baby will grow up to become a good and decent and kind human being. The kind of person who won't reduce anybody's value strictly to their looks, their perceived beauty and degree of fitness. The kind of person who will see another person as a whole—the flesh, the mind, and the soul. This world needs more people like my unborn child. Like the person I have always aspired to become.

A knock on the cabin door startles me. It's not Cassandra. She has keys to the place. The owner isn't around for at least another week. I get up, feeling my brows furrow as I set the chocolate mug down on the coffee table and walk to the door.

One quick glance out the window is enough to get my heart twisted and tied up into the most unpleasant knots as I recognize Vincent, standing on the porch and waiting for me to come out. I open the door and stare at him with a mixture of disbelief and doubt.

"What in God's green earth are you doing here?" I blurt out.

“Hey, Shay... I’m sorry to show up like this,” he says.

The Canadian winters aren’t easy, but I’ve actually gotten used to the cold, crisp air currently rolling into the cabin through the open door. Vincent, on the other hand, is almost blue faced despite having wrapped himself in thick ski pants and a matching gray ski jacket, woolen hat on his head and what I presume is a backpack loaded with equally thick clothes for this trip.

“I don’t understand,” I reply. “How’d you find me?”

“Oh, I know you’re not very active on social media, but Cassandra posted some photos of you two from some of your hikes,” he says. “The girls at West Key said you’d gone away for a while, so it didn’t take much detective work to figure out where you were staying.”

“This is a tad creepy.”

“I’m sorry.” He immediately takes a step back, cautious about my reaction. “I didn’t mean to make you feel uneasy, Shay. I just... I really wanted to see you.”

“Well, I’ll be back at the gym next week,” I grumble.

Vincent smiles, his piercing gaze searching my face. He’s studying me, reading every single micro-expression, gauging my tolerance of him. It’s a familiar pattern for me, and it makes me feel as though I’m on a small glass plate under the lens of a high-resolution microscope.

“The truth is, Shay, I’ve missed you. The whole time I was away and even lately, even while coming to the gym for my own stuff... I’ve missed you,” he says. “I miss us, I miss the way we were.”

“I don’t.”

He looks briefly startled by my statement but recovers quickly. “I’ll admit, I wasn’t the best boyfriend, let alone the best fiancé... I know.”

“You hurt me, Vincent. There’s no going back from that. You hurt me with purpose and intention.”

He nods slowly. “And I’m ready to spend the rest of my life making it up to you,” he says, then takes out a small velvety box. The mere sight of it has my stomach churning.

“What are you doing?” I manage, my voice barely audible.

I’ve seen this movement before. I recognize the gesture. I know what’s in the box, and while it brought me great joy a long time ago, it makes me anxious and nauseated now. Instinctively, I take a couple of steps back, wanting to put as much distance between him and me as possible. This shouldn’t be happening. It doesn’t make any sense. It’s downright insulting.

“I know I’ve done this before, but I mean it, Shay. I do love you, I do want to be a part of your life, I do want you to be a part of mine,” Vincent says. “Marry me. Give me another chance, and I swear you won’t regret it. I’m a changed man, I’m ready to prove it, over and over and over again until I draw my last breath. There’s no other woman in my life, there never will be another woman, not as long as I am with you.”

“Vincent...”

“It’s weird, I’m aware. But I couldn’t sit at home or at work or anywhere else, for that matter. Not while you’re away from me and out of my reach,” he says. “I love you, Shay. I will always love you. I never stopped loving you.”

There was a time when I would’ve given anything to hear these words coming out of his mouth. There was a time when I would’ve gladly sacrificed my body and my soul just to have this man back, holding me close and giving me a spoonful of so-called love for every week’s worth of misery and gaslighting. I didn’t know better. I didn’t think I deserved better. I worried that if Vincent wouldn’t have me, nobody would.

There was a time, but that time is long gone.

Moments pass in heavy silence. I stare at him as he stands on the porch, ring in its opened box as he awaits my answer. How did he imagine this would go? Did he actually think I’d just... what, burst into tears and jump in his arms and say yes, a

thousand times yes? Is he insane? Delusional? Stupid? Or all three neatly rolled under that layer of neoprene and synthetic down?

“So, you’re serious,” I mutter.

The rage I felt over half a year ago has returned with a vengeance—this time, however, I know precisely what I’m dealing with. I’m not blinded by the lies or the gaslighting anymore. I know who he is and what he is capable of. Truth be told, I never imagined I’d have the opportunity to confront him about things I couldn’t prove back then. Today, however... I have enough ammunition to blow him away. There’s a saying about being the better person and turning the other cheek and whatnot. I’ll save those for later and for another day. This bastard deserves everything he’s about to receive.

He stands there smiling his charming smile, thinking he’s actually got me hooked. “Yes, Shay. I’m serious about us, and I want to give you the life you deserve. I think we’ll make each other happy. Remember how good it was for us?”

“I don’t know,” I shrug softly, acting doubtful. “I do remember the lies. The girls you hooked up with while we were together. I remember the gaslighting, the emotional abuse, the many ways in which you worked so hard to make me doubt myself.”

“Shay...” His good humor fades. His pleasant smile withers. That’s the trouble with narcissists, in general. Once you see the cracks in their mask, once you take the mask off, there’s nothing underneath. Nothing but festering misery and the kind of poison not a single sane person would ever want to drink from. “I never cheated on you.”

“That’s not what Cherry said. Or Sarah. Or Laura. There were a few others who reached out after you disappeared. They saw my social media posts, they put two and two together, because apparently you did the same with them. You love-bombed them like crazy, you got them hooked and emotionally addicted to you. Sarah said you proposed to her, too. And then you dumped them. You ghosted them like you ghosted me,” I tell him, my face straight and my shoulders tight as I slap him across the face with a truth he didn’t even know I possessed.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t look into you after you left? That I wouldn’t do some in-depth research to figure out why you did what you did?”

“They’re all liars, Shay. I only ever loved you.”

“Me? You couldn’t even bring yourself to take me out on a real date. You told Cherry once that you’d never allow yourself to be seen in public with a, and I quote, ‘fatty’ since it would bring down your own market value. I was a ‘fatty’, wasn’t I?”

Vincent now understands that the cat is out of the bag. All he can do is stand on the porch as he slowly closes the ring box and tucks it back into his jacket pocket, his cold gaze never leaving mine.

“And the whole there’s-no-other-woman-for-me shtick is getting tiresome,” I add laughing, “given that just the other day you were tongue-wrestling the crap out of Roxanne. I mean, you two couldn’t even be discreet about it. In the middle of the gym parking lot, of all the places in this world. And now, you have the audacity to drag your sorry ass up here with what is likely a fake diamond ring and expect me to fall for the same bullshit twice? Seriously, Vincent, do I really look that stupid to you?”

I whip my phone out and show him the screen. Marius emailed me photos of Vincent and Roxanne earlier in the morning. He didn’t write or say anything about it, but I understand the assignment. I understand why he wanted me to see these images. No matter what, Marius will always be a good friend, and he will always look after me. That much is undeniable at this point.

“You spied on me?” Vincent croaks, feigning outrage.

“Oh, no, not at all. A concerned citizen sent these to me,” I reply, laughing. “I let you do your number, you know. I let you come into my gym like a pious little lamb, I watched you trying to weasel your way back into my life. I’ll admit, for a second there... with the flowers and the Belgian chocolates, I thought I saw a glimpse of the real you until I remembered

that was never the real you. That was always a lie. The coward standing in front of me, now... This is the real you.”

“Shay, you have to let me explain, it’s not what you think.”

“It’s not? So, what, you were giving Roxanne an in-depth tonsillectomy? What about Cherry and Laura and all the other girls?” I scoff. “Come on, Vincent, you know I’m not buying whatever it is you’re trying to sell here. You might as well stop wasting your breath, buddy. It ain’t happening.”

Vincent takes a step forward, his shoulders suddenly broader, a darkness gathering in his eyes—the kind of darkness that makes my whole frame tighten with tension. “You don’t understand, Shay. I love you, I’ve always loved you. You belong with me.”

“I need you to keep your distance,” I immediately warn him.

When did he become a threat? When did he lose the last shred of humanity? Or maybe he never had any. Either way, my adrenaline is ignited. My instincts are kicking in, and while I may be alone here in this cabin, I am anything but helpless. The child in my womb needs my protection. Vincent has no idea what he’s trying to wade into.

“Why, Shay? I thought you loved me. Missed me. I remember your social media posts. Those thoughtful, sappy pieces about how I would one day regret losing you,” Vincent replies with a mocking tone of his voice. “I’ve watched you for months as you struggled to regain your dignity and look at you now. All alone on the edge of some Canadian woods. Is this the life you wanted? Don’t you see? The only reason I walked away from you is because you kept telling me you would always be fine on your own. Are you fine, Shay? Are you, really?”

“I’m infinitely better with you out of my life,” I reply, lifting an eyebrow.

“We’ll see about that,” he says and tries to come in.

With lightning speed and all of my kickboxing training instantly activated, I kick Vincent as hard as I can right in the nuts. There’s not enough neoprene and synthetic down to protect him from the strength of my blow. He cries out in sheer

agony, doubling over before he collapses on his side with a disgraceful thud against the old, creaky wooden porch.

He curses under his ragged breath, steam rolling from his purplish lips as he looks up at me in sheer disbelief. This isn't an outcome he was even prepared for, and I thrive on the horrified expression on his face.

"You'd better be gone by the time I open this door again, or I'll call the sheriff," I reply bluntly. "Your choice, Vincent. But don't ever show your face anywhere near me ever again. And consider yourself banned from West Key Gym, as well. Disappear again. For good, this time. Or there will be consequences."

"Shay..." Vincent coughs as he struggles to pull himself back up, red-faced and sweaty. Every motion seems to amplify the pain in his groin, though. It'll take a while for him to actually get out of here, I reckon, noticing the rental sedan he parked outside the front gate.

"You've got five minutes," I tell him. "I was stupid once, Vincent. I'm never going to be stupid again. The girl you fooled once is long dead. This one, on the other hand, will hang you by your balls if you so much as breathe the same air as me ever again. Get lost."

I slam the door shut and lock it, too, for good measure, cursing until my ears turn red. I grab the fire poker, just in case, and settle back in my armchair, ready to call the cops if need be. I listen to the grunting and scratching outside as Vincent slips a couple of times before he finally manages to get up. A smile creeps across my face as his receding footsteps end with a car door slamming shut and an engine roaring to life.

Minutes pass in silence as the adrenaline begins to wear off.

I'm shaking like a leaf. I'm sobbing, almost out of my mind as I experience the strangest kind of relief. But it feels good. It washes over me, and a strange kind of joy flows through my veins. I'm laughing and crying at the same time.

Maybe I should've kicked Vincent in the balls the moment he walked into the gym. That would've saved me so much

trouble, so much uncertainty. I suppose hindsight is always 20/20. It takes a while for my breathing to recover, but I cherish every moment of this sweet recovery as I feel my own power—truly, for the first time. He almost had me going. I almost believed he'd changed, if only slightly enough to make things right with me.

It's a good thing he didn't.

Another knock on the door has me jumping out of my seat, though. Within two seconds, I'm tense and ready to fight again. What is he doing back here? I wasn't kidding. I'm still holding the fire poker, for Pete's sake. I will smack him until he can't get up anymore, if that's what it takes to free myself of him.

KNOCK KNOCK.

"Oh, for..." I gasp, then shout. "Vincent, go away! I'm calling the cops!"

"Shay!"

Marius's voice has my heart thumping in a different rhythm as I quickly realize who is standing beyond that door. I drop the poker and the phone and rush over to greet him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, a muted sense of déjà-vu lingering in the back of my head as I see Marius, Jax, and Richard standing on the front porch of my rental cabin. "How many people know where I'm spending my holidays? Jesus!"

The three of them stare at me, understandably confused. But by the stars, they're gorgeous and quite the sight for these sore and tired eyes. Clad in jeans and thick winter coats, my men tower over me as I'm compelled to take a couple of steps back, if only to better look at them, to take them in, inch by glorious inch.

"Are you okay?" Jax asks, frowning as he measures me from head to toe.

I don't feel particularly sexy in this plush, teddy-bear-style onesie I've settled for my cabin mornings, bare toes wiggling on the wooden floor, but hey... I doubt it matters at this point.

My core is already tightening, the longing in my heart swelling with every second I spend gazing upon my men.

“Yeah, I guess... I’m... Yeah, I’m okay. But again, I ask, how’d you find me?” I reply.

Richard shoots me a cool half-smile. “Cassandra told me.”

“I’m going to kill her,” I mutter, my teeth gritting furiously. “First, her social media posting habits. Now, this... I am going to kill her.”

“Don’t,” Marius replies, rather amused. “She was only trying to help.” He pauses to give me a long, meaningful look. “We drove past Vincent on the way up here. What happened?”

“Ugh, where do I begin?” I grumble, crossing my arms. “And you three still haven’t answered my question. What are you doing here? Who’s covering the gym?”

“Ever the hard-working girl,” Richard chuckles softly. “Can we come in? We just want to talk.”

I offer a weary shrug in return. “You’d better not be proposing, too. I’ve already kicked Vincent in the ‘nads for that.”

They don’t know what I’m talking about, but I’m pretty sure they’re trying to process the information as they look at me in disbelief and befuddlement. All I can do is let a deep sigh roll out of my chest as I welcome Marius, Jax, and Richard into the cabin. My soul is as light as a feather, my brain is conspiring against me with ideas of re-coupling and reconciliation but also fears that it will only go further south from here, somehow.

My body aches for them. My heart is thudding like a rabid drum.

Yet every inch of me wants this moment, this single moment to never end. I came up here looking for peace, and it turns out my peace was still in Seattle. My peace has only just arrived. In the form of three men who have undoubtedly changed my life for the better. No matter what comes next, no matter the purpose of their visit, I can no longer deny this singular truth. I am better because of them. I am better with them. I just don’t know how I’ll be without them.

Five minutes later, I'm still standing by the fireplace, flames radiating a pleasant warmth against the back of my legs. Jax sits on the armrest of the sofa, while Richard moves closer to me and Marius slowly paces around the living room, hands in his jacket pocket while a nervous frown casts shadows over his sweet, brown eyes.

My senses are alight, my whole being attuned to their presence. I'd forgotten how intense it was to simply be around them, let alone be touched and loved by them. Gosh, they're such a powerful combination of kindness, strength, and balance. No wonder I fell so deeply, no wonder not a day goes by that I don't miss them—my friends, my business partners, my lovers.

But I need to hear what they have to say, first and foremost.

"I'm sorry we showed up like this," Richard is the first to speak. "I was worried you wouldn't want to see us if we called in advance."

"To be honest, we were trying to get to you before Vincent," Marius adds, subtly amused. "But obviously you handled him without a problem."

"Just a kick in the nuts," I reply.

Jax chuckles dryly. "Attagirl."

"I didn't want to have to do that, but he didn't leave me with a more decent option," I say.

“Well, at least you’re the one who handled him,” Jax says. “I doubt I would’ve stopped at a kick in the balls.”

We laugh, and it feels nice as I sense the anguish dissipating between us. At least we’re still close, at least we can still laugh about things in a comfortable manner. There’s plenty of awkwardness and tension between us even now, yet I can’t help but... hope something is about to change. At the same time, my self-sabotaging brain keeps telling me not to get lost in any wishful thinking. My heart can’t take another disappointment.

“The point is, Shay... We didn’t do right by you,” Marius says. The pained look in his eyes has my very soul tangled, struggling for release. “When Vincent showed up, I should’ve been more adamant about keeping him out of our lives.”

“And when I started flirting with the idea of another gym, I should’ve paid more attention to you, I should’ve *listened* to you,” Richard says.

“Don’t even get me going with my commitment issues,” Jax grumbles. “I was getting close to you, to the idea of building something beautiful... you know, the four of us together. And I chickened out. Meanwhile, you were trying to keep us in the same field, to balance our dynamic and to protect our relationship while also working to protect yourself. We didn’t understand, we didn’t see what was happening until we felt you slipping away.”

Marius gently takes my hands in his. “The truth is, I love you, Shay. I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone in this life. You’re it for me. I can’t see myself being with anybody else. And I’m not the only one who feels this way, either.”

“We all feel it,” Richard adds, watching me closely. “I love you.”

“And I love you, too,” Jax says. “We’re fine with sharing you, we’re happier sharing you and being tight like this than not being at all. If anything, I think we’re happier when it’s the four of us together than the four of us apart.”

My heart unravels as I listen to these men profess their affection for me. I've wanted to hear these words for a long time, yet I almost can't believe any of this is real. Could it be a dream? Should I try pinching myself? No, Marius's touch is enough to remind me it's all too real and wonderful and scary at the same time.

"I love you all equally," I manage, choking up on another wave of tears. "But I wasn't the best girlfriend... I got scared. Insecure. I pulled back instead of talking to you about it."

"Shay, we messed up," Marius says. "But what I can say is... I hope you're willing to give us another chance. We're ready to try again. This time, we're ready to go all the way in with you. For the long run. A proper relationship. Well, as proper as a four-way can go."

"It's crazy, isn't it?" I try to laugh, but the tears are already streaming down my cheeks.

Marius wipes them away with a gentle stroke of the back of his hand, then kisses my lips softly. "Crazy but real, Shay. I want you in my life, I want to be in your life. We belong together, the four of us. It's weird, it's rare, but why not give it a shot if it works, if it makes us happy, huh? I'm a better man because of you, I'm a better man just by being around you. And I want to keep growing, to evolve by your side. Who knows where it might lead? Hell, I could conquer the world with a woman like you beside me."

"Whatever you decide, just know I'm not leaving," Richard says. "Screw another gym. Screw Vincent and anybody else who tries to get between us. We built something wonderful with West Key, and I'm sorry it took you leaving for me to really understand our value as a family unit. Because that's what we are. You said it yourself. You can't choose your biological family, but you can definitely choose and build your lifelong family. You're my lifelong family, Shay. You and Jax and Marius."

I look to Jax, profoundly touched by the warm blue of his eyes. "I never imagined I'd want something like this," he says.

“Honestly, if you’d told me I’d wind up in this type of a situation, I would’ve laughed my ass off.”

This is too much, but it’s also just what I wanted, what I’ve dreamed of. If I back away, if I weasel out now, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. There’s no point in preparing for a life without these men. They’re here, and they’re telling me they want me for as long as we’re breathing.

“How do we do this?” I wonder aloud. “Because I don’t want to be without you, either.”

“Why don’t we try to pick up where we left off?” Richard suggests, his green gaze darkening with longing and desire. I recognize that shadow well. I see it within myself. “We were going to spend our time together. Seven days in the week, surely, we could make room for one another in a way that keeps the four of us close and sated.”

“Sated,” I giggle softly.

Marius slips an arm around my waist, pulling me close. I am soft against his toned body, the rock-hard curves of his muscles fitting me perfectly, something akin to a second skin as I surrender to his embrace. “I love you, Shay. I’ll say it until I can’t breathe anymore. I love you. And I don’t ever want to leave your side.”

“Oh, Marius,” I mumble and wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him into a deep kiss.

Richard comes closer, then gently cups my cheek and captures my mouth for himself. “We’re perfect just like this,” he whispers against my lips. “Shay, we’re unbeatable.”

“Jax, come here,” I call out, my voice trembling as he gets up from the sofa and joins us. I’m nestled between three strong bodies with golden hearts and radiant souls. I’m simmering with desire and longing and weeks’ worth of steady inner wildfires, their absence having wreaked havoc on my heart. But everything feels better now, as they’re back and holding me tightly. “Kiss me. Kiss me until the end of time.”

Jax takes over for a moment, his tongue playfully searching for mine. I’d missed the taste of him, I’d missed his fingers

trailing invisible lines down my spine. Richard runs his fingers through my hair, nibbling on my earlobe and slowly licking the side of my neck. My skin catches fire as Marius swiftly pulls the zipper down on my pajamas.

Within seconds, I'm naked and surrounded, gleefully defeated and eager to be dominated.

"You're so warm and soft," Marius whispers as he kisses me next.

Richard's fingers work their way down my sides as he positions himself behind me. I hear zippers and buttons loosening, the shuffling of clothes landing on the floor, of boots thudding and belt buckles clinking, but I barely register anything until I glance around and see the three of them naked and hard, ready to take me every which way.

My core is on fire. And Richard quickly discovers I'm dripping wet as his fingers slide between my folds, stumbling upon a tiny nub in need of his attention.

"It's as if not a day has passed, and we're still in Chappaqua," Richard says.

"You know, there's something we never got to do," Jax adds, his index and thumb closing around my nipple. "The very first item on your naughty list..."

I suck in a breath as Richard continues his exploration. My back arches instinctively, and I rest my head on his shoulder as Jax massages my breast, occasionally pinching to get a rise out of me. Every whimper that escapes my throat makes him smile. Marius makes me quiver with his deep and hungry kisses.

There's no point in fighting this any longer.

Why would I, when I'm happy? Why would I, when it's all I ever wanted?

"The three of you at once," I manage, remembering the bullet point that started this whole thing, and laugh as they guide me closer to the fireplace. I'm not sure how long Cassandra will be out, but I hope it's for a few more hours, at least, because we're about to start something I don't want to ever end.

Marius pulls the furry rug right in front of the fire, then gets on his knees in front of me. I hold my breath as his fingers dig into my hips, and he pulls me in. A split-second later, he's eating me out like I'm his last meal, licking and suckling on my clit until I gradually begin to crumble.

"Oh, yes," I moan as I struggle to stay upright, my knees softening.

Richard stays behind me and slides a hand between my ass cheeks, fingers probing my wet pussy before they go in. One, at first, just to test me. Then two, to stretch me, to prime me for what's about to come later. Then three, increasing the rhythm and widening each thrust until my hips sway back and forth, until my core tightens. Marius closes his lips around my clit, and I shove my fingers through his curly, black hair, bracing for the impending release.

Jax strokes himself with one hand, devilishly grinning as he watches me come. His other hand comes up to caress my face, his thumb slipping between my lips. I suck it, breathing raggedly as I climax, as I fall apart, completely deconstructed in a desperately needed orgasm. My whole being pulsates as Richard finger-fucks me, wringing my pussy dry while Marius licks me into sheer madness, riding the wave of my climax until I'm spent, until I'm soft and ready for infinitely more.

"Come here," Marius commands me as he lays on his back.

I get on top, and he holds his gorgeously swollen cock for me to ease onto. My knees rest comfortably on the furry rug while Richard moves in front of me. I take him in my mouth just as Marius loses himself inside me. I tremble with delight as I'm stretched and filled to the brim, but it only gets better as Jax gets behind and joins Marius inside me.

"Oh, God!" I cry out, every fiber in my body losing all tension as two cocks dominate my pussy.

Richard quietly guides my mouth back, and I take him, gladly, hungrily.

"You wanted the three of us at once," Marius grunts as he plants his heels into the floor, waiting for me to start grinding

against him for a motion to be established.

I did want the three of them at once. I want the three of them at once, and this is more than I ever imagined. It's incredible. It's deliciously decadent. And I would take all three of them for life, until I can't even move anymore. My nipples perk up as shivers run down my spine.

"Hold still," Jax says, grabbing me by the back of the neck. He fucks me hard and deep, and so does Marius. I can only welcome them both as I'm held in place. Richard keeps my mouth busy and my lips stretched as I lick and swallow him whole. "That's it, baby, just like that..."

"Touch yourself," Marius tells me.

I don't know where this strength comes from, but I leave one hand on his muscular shoulder for support, while the other drops to where my tender clit awaits. I flick it hard as Marius and Jax pound into me. Faster. Deeper. Oh, damn, I'm so raw and hyper-sensitive...

"Mhm..." I manage as I suckle Richard's cock, tighter and faster. I feel the veins swelling, the taste of pre-cum dripping down my tongue as I relax the back of my throat under Jax's grip. He's keeping me in place for Richard to fuck my mouth as deep as he likes.

I surrender to them and come apart.

Marius caresses my breast, panting as he watches me pleasure myself with three men inside me. I'm struggling to breathe as I flick my clit harder and faster, the fiery storm unraveling. I tighten around them, sucking Richard ravenously until it hits me.

The ultimate release. The hot and cold ripples blowing through me like an electrical storm as I come, as I explode all over Marius and Jax. I'm held tightly as I ride the wave, as I'm claimed and stretched and dissolved into the sweetest nothingness before I'm put back together and shared and claimed some more. The rhythm doesn't stop. I dance with it, I live with it, I breathe it.

"Look at me," Richard gasps.

Our eyes meet, and I feel his seed filling my mouth and sliding down my throat. I swallow every drop, smiling in a sparkling haze as I welcome everything he wishes to give me. Jax's arm comes around my waist. He needs me to stay put, pounding deeper and harder until I cry out in ecstasy. I'm putty in their hands.

"Dammit, Shay, you were made for this," Marius says as he gazes lovingly up at me.

"Give it to me," I whisper. "All of it. Give it to me."

"I fucking love you so much it hurts," Jax growls and goes even harder. I'm stretched out of my mind as Richard watches, grinning like a lazy cat as pleasure twinkles in his emerald eyes.

"I love you!" I scream as my orgasm unfurls almost continuously. I don't even know how to stop or if I can stop, quivering like a leaf in the wind until I feel them... until I feel Jax and Marius blow up inside me.

The heat spreads through my core, my pussy tender as their cocks throb, as they spill everything within, as I let myself go and melt, coming over and over until there's barely a breath left in my chest. Moments later, I'm collapsing on top of Marius, while Jax and Richard settle beside us. Our naked bodies glisten with sweat and the ethereal beauty of afterglow as the fire keeps burning in the fireplace, as the flames dance with as much glee as our souls.

I forget myself. I leave everything behind me. The pain. The struggles. The loneliness. The nights I spent bracing myself for a lifetime of solitude, for a lifetime of searching for something I know I'll never again have with anyone other than Marius, Jax, and Richard. This it is for us. This is where we belong and how we belong. My own being is screaming this at me, the words loud and clear in the back of my head as I breathe Marius in, as I kiss his lips softly, as Jax playfully bites my shoulder, as Richard gives me the sweetest smile.

We were drawn together by life and a simple, innocent mistake.

But we're staying together because we make sense. Because our bodies fit perfectly on the same canvas. Because our hearts play the same song, and our souls shine through the same light. We make sense because the universe wanted us to happen, despite the tumbles and the hurdles, despite those who tried to steer us from our paths.

And as I watch the orange flames dim over the glimmering embers, as the silvery ashes shimmer underneath, and as the smell of burnt wood and masculine sweat and mindless lovemaking pours into my lungs, I understand we're staying together because it's the only way for us to even exist. I only hope a baby won't drive them away. But we'll address that later.

Right now, I just want this moment. I just want the four of us, precisely like this.

RICHARD

As soon as the four of us return to Seattle, we are prepared for the next stage of this relationship on every single level. Intimately, we're tighter than ever. After fulfilling Shay's ultimate, naughty desire, it's as if we became one, somehow. We're individuals with wants and needs of our own, yet when we are together, it's as if we're a hive mind clustered in a composite body. It just works, it's intense and strange and beautiful, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

Business-wise, we are attuned to one another. With the same goals in mind and with Shay's marketing plan ready to implement, we've all got that much needed energy to push the gym forward and high above our local competitors. They don't have Shay's brilliant mind nor her personal experience, so having her speak on behalf of West Key, of urging potential clients to follow in her footsteps, was an excellent idea.

On a more personal level, our friendship has flourished. We were always close and warm with one another, but having found a surprising balance and synergy in Chappaqua and then again in Canada... I don't know, everything feels different. I love every second of it. I love the calmness, the security, the laughter. it's as if we were all made from the same soul, just broken down into four smaller pieces wedged into different bodies. We simply belong together, there's no point in denying it anymore.

"I cannot believe it," Shay says as she steps out of her office.

We've made a new habit of having coffee in the lounge area on a daily basis so our staff and clients can see us together—

the four of us, leading the gym and the business on a united front. Nobody except Cassandra knows about our relationship, and we intend to keep it that way. Some things are safer and easier to protect when they're out of the world's sight and mind.

I'm seated on one of the gray velvet love seats, waiting with a fresh coffee for Shay while Jax and Marius are busy brewing theirs.

"What happened?" I ask.

She takes one of the armchairs closest to me, smoky-blue eyes twinkling as she spots the coffee. She knows it's for her, so she just gives me a soft nod and a wink, placing the cup on the table. Her phone is on the coffee table between us, constantly buzzing.

"I've got ten new clients," Shay says. "Not that I regret coming up with the new marketing plan, but holy hell, did I underestimate its appeal or what?"

"Having you as the face of a glow-up campaign pretty much sealed the deal," I chuckle softly.

"How'd you rope me into that? I forget."

"I ate you whole for two hours straight," I whisper, fully aware her panties are about to get soaking wet upon hearing my words and remembering that particular night. "It's not like you mind. Is it?"

Shay blushes bright pink and holds back a smile. "Not at all. It's just that my phone keeps ringing and pinging. Everybody wants a nutritionist who can prepare them for the gym, for personal trainers and that kind of jazz. I didn't expect this kind of success. Don't get me wrong, I love it, but holy smokes..."

"You're an inspiration," Marius says, smiling as he and Jax join us. "People feed on true stories. They're inspired and motivated to do the same for themselves. Jax and Richard and I could spend our whole lives setting healthy lifestyle examples, sure, but we've never been through the wringer like you, Shay. People relate better to you, which is why the campaign is so successful."

“Our membership has gone up and then some,” Jax adds with a cool grin. “I’m pretty sure we’re covering six months’ worth of rent just from this month’s sales.”

Marius nods his agreement. “It’s a veritable boom. We may need to hire a second nutritionist, though. Someone who can work with Shay on the regular food programs so she can focus on the glow-up clients who come in via this marketing campaign.”

“Wow, I didn’t think we’d do that so soon,” Shay exclaims, genuinely delighted.

I love this look on her, this sheer joy glistening in her eyes, shimmering all over her skin. It’s as if she is breathing and living happiness. I love seeing her happy and successful. It brings out the best parts of her. I love every part of her, anyway. The good, the complicated, the wonderful, the darker side... All of it. I love her. And I’m glad I wasn’t dumb enough to actually go through with my original escape plan. I would’ve missed out on this.

“Hey, it’s the boon we’ve prayed for,” I chime in. “The hurdle we needed to cross in order for West Key to thrive and no longer require any financial assistance from yours truly. It’s what we deserve.”

“How many clients can you even take on?” Jax asks Shay.

She goes through her phone, where I assume she has a list, a calendar, and a plethora of other related documents she needs to keep track of everything. I love the subtle frown of her light-brown brows as she checks something, full and glossy lips slightly moving.

“I’ve got about thirty so far, but I think I can cram up to about fifty. I’ll be doing group consultations, though,” Shay says. “I wouldn’t be able to hold space for anything more, so Marius may be right about hiring another nutritionist.”

“I’ll put the word out,” I say. “The sooner we have your regular clients switched over to the new guy or gal, the easier it’ll be for you to keep implementing the whole program.” I

smile brightly at her. “I’m proud of you, Shay, have I told you that lately?”

Shay’s lips twist into the sweetest smile. “Not since last night.”

“I’ll say it again tonight, then, on top of this one, right now. I’m proud of you,” I reply.

It’s been like this for a few days. Since we came back from Canada. Warm eyes, warm souls, warm smiles. This constant sense of knowing everything is going to be okay, one way or another. It is going to be okay. That’s not just wishful thinking anymore—each of us is actively working toward that result, toward peace and bliss, the sweetness of waking up and simply loving the idea of a new day that’s about to unravel, a day we’re going to spend growing and living together, one way or another.

We almost didn’t make it.

Looking back now, I’m ashamed to admit I was ready to give up on something so real and so wonderful. But I’m emboldened by my desire to do better. Shay is opening up to us like a flower in bloom. Every petal is a joy to discover, soft and silky and sprinkled with magic. I was so used to being myself, a solitary wolf in otherwise good company, I almost missed Shay gliding past me like the goddess she truly is.

It’s time for me to step up and bring this union to yet another level. “I need to show you guys something,” I say, grabbing my car keys. “We’ll take my car.”

“What about the gym?” Shay blurts out, understandably confused.

“Meh, Lyle can cover for an hour. Don’t worry about it,” I reply.

“I’ve got clients,” she insists.

I nod at her phone. “Text them and tell them you’re gonna be late. We’ll be done quickly, I promise.”

“Jeez, Richard,” she grumbles but her thumbs are already tapping away on her phone screen as I escort her out of the

building.

Jax and Marius are right behind us. They know what this is about, but they're not doing a good job of holding back their ecstatic grins, so I make a point of keeping Shay's eyes off them for as long as I can. "You get to ride shotgun," I say, opening the passenger door of my silver Lexus for her.

"At least it's a nice car," she giggles.

I motion for Jax and Marius to get in the backseat, half-smiling as I climb behind the wheel and give Shay a loving smile. "Buckle up, princess."

"Where are we going?" she asks.

"Home."

I bought a new place—a generously-sized townhouse with five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a sprawling kitchen and dining room, a modest den, and one hell of a living room space that can be easily broken into a lounge area and a home office to fit all of our needs. Shay stands in the middle of the living room, staring at the empty white walls as she struggles to take everything in.

"You can style this place however you like," I tell Shay after having already presented her with the main specs of the house. "Of course, the guys and I will do our own rooms as we wish. Home office, home gym, whatever works. We've got space for everything here... but the common areas, the bathrooms, the kitchen, the dining room... all of it is yours to handle as you see fit."

"Richard, what is this?" Shay finally speaks, her voice barely a breath.

"Home, like I said. You can stay at your place, or you can live here with us. I wanted us to have a home, a house where the four of us can live together as many days in the year as we'd like, and no one could ever bother us here," I tell her. "A safe haven of sorts. Our little corner of paradise."

"Oh, wow," she manages, unable to take her eyes off me. "You bought us a house."

“The three of us pitched in,” Marius says. “You deserve a home, Shay. You deserve a good life and three reliable men by your side. We had to prove it to you, somehow, that we were ready and serious about this.”

“I can’t... Wow, I’m sorry, I’m just at a loss for words,” she says, blinking rapidly.

Jax frowns slightly. “Don’t you like it?”

“Oh, I love it, God, I love it!” she exclaims, but we can all see the tears gathering in her eyes. She quivers underneath her loose, navy-blue linen dress. “It’s beautiful and big and I just can’t believe you did this.”

“You don’t have to live here,” I reply, though I’m not sure why I’m angling for a defense at this point.

“No, no, but I do. I’m totally on board with the four of us living together,” Shay says, and happily so.

“So... Why are you crying?” I ask.

“Because I’m happy. And also terrified,” she chuckles nervously.

Marius takes a step forward. “Terrified?”

Shay thinks about it for a moment, then heaves a sigh and caves in, shoulders dropping in utter defeat as she looks at us.

“I’m pregnant.”

Three simple words, yet the impact is undeniable. The floor vanishes from under my feet. The air gets knocked out of my lungs. My heart’s thudding a million miles a minute as I try to register the words, to comprehend the message, to adjust to a sudden, new reality. I’m not the only one who’s in shock, either. Both Marius and Jax are speechless, their eyes wide and filled with wonder while their jaws are in a tight race for the floor.

“You’re what now?” I mumble.

“I wasn’t sure how to tell you, but since you want us moving in together, I figured this is the reasonable moment. I’m pregnant,” Shay says.

I can almost sense the fear in her voice. She must be terrified. We've only been together for what, a few months—Chappaqua included. We're barely getting a sense of one another. It's way too early to start a family.

"I can handle it on my own if—"

"No!" Marius cuts in. "No, we're in this together."

"I wasn't planning on being a father anytime soon, but hey," Jax adds, still stunned but quickly adjusting to the new situation.

Where am I? What does my heart tell me? It doesn't take long for the answer to find its way to the surface, for my resolve to bubble upward until the words reach my lips. I walk over to Shay and take her in my arms, kissing her lips softly.

"None of us planned for any of it, but Marius is right. We're in this together. The four of us," I tell her. "You'll never be alone again. I... *We* won't leave you. Why would we, Shay? You're the woman of our dreams. And we're gonna be dads. I doubt there's a greater reward."

"I obviously don't know who the father is," Shay replies, giving me a worried look.

Marius leans in and plants a kiss on her cheek. "It doesn't matter," he says. "This kid is the luckiest in the world to have you as a mother. And he or she will have three dads who will love them with everything we have."

"Are you serious?" she asks, hope in her eyes.

"I am," Marius replies.

"Me too," Jax adds.

"Me three," I put in.

We laugh wholeheartedly, arms stretched out as we hold each other, as we kiss Shay and Shay kisses us. I can feel the love flowing through my veins. I can feel the strength of an entire sun energizing me and making me believe I can do absolutely anything. For Shay, for my friends, for our child. For our family. I will move mountains.

It doesn't matter who the father is. It's our child. That's what family is about. That's what home is about. And home is right here, with Shay. Whatever the future decides to toss our way, I know we've got the chops to crack it and sail smoothly through any kind of weather.

EPILOGUE: Shay

One year can go by in the blink of an eye when you're experiencing true happiness. When every day is loaded with the kind of energy that makes you feel like you can do anything. That's the thing with true love. It comes up unexpectedly, and it comes in ways I never even thought possible. It's an honest feeling that lives in the company of tranquility, of peace, of harmony and the simplest of ideas: anything is possible with the right people beside you.

And I got lucky. Oh, so lucky.

I didn't fall in love with one great man, but three. Each of them serves a purpose in my life, yet all three complete me to perfection. Marius is the kindness I've always needed, the laughter and hopefulness, the ambition and the drive I thrive on. Jax is the protector, the strongman with an ironclad determination and just enough darkness to make me feel safe at any given moment. Richard is the provider, the stability and the comfort I require in order to build myself and my family from the ground up. With them, I've blossomed. I've become a better woman in every possible sense.

And while the pregnancy was a surprise and one hell of a thrill ride, it concluded with the birth of a healthy baby boy. We named him Logan. His hair is black and curly. His eyes are brown and sweet. We know Marius had a role in his creation, but Logan has three loving dads who dote upon him and make sure he has everything he needs. They take turns looking after him, too, thus giving me the time I need to rest and replenish, to keep my career on track and to never lose sight of myself. I'd worried that three men in my life would be a crowd, but it turns out it was the best decision I ever made.

Nobody except Cassandra knows we live together. To everyone else, it's just me and Marius as the official couple, with Richard and Jax as our closest friends and Godfathers to our son. The world doesn't need to know. I doubt people would understand. Besides, I'm way too happy to worry about this kind of stuff.

Logan sleeps soundly in his carrier as I carry him into the gym. West Key has grown beautifully since we implemented my pre-coaching marketing plan. Our clientele is incredibly diverse. Cassandra has joined our team as a psychologist, so she and I work together to offer a psychological and nutritional approach to customers who would otherwise be too wary of even setting foot inside a gym. We're doing really well and walking into this place every morning is literally one of my favorite reasons to wake up —aside from my three handsome guys and our gorgeous son.

“Good morning, Sarah,” I say to the receptionist as I set Logan's carrier onto one of the sofas. “How are we doing today?”

“Good morning, Shay!” the perky brunette says as she stands up behind the reception desk.

A couple of clients come in for locker room keys. She quickly scans their passes and welcomes them into the gym, while a flock of college girls flutter past us, rushing into the weights room for their morning training. It's more crowded these days —not that I mind.

“We're great,” Sarah adds with a broad smile. “Everything is running smoothly, and the new coffee machine was definitely worth its pretty penny.”

“Let me guess, Marius hogs it at the break of dawn,” I chuckle softly.

“Yeah, pretty much. It's strong stuff, too. I don't know how his heart doesn't give out from all those espressos,” Sarah replies.

Marius overhears the conversation as he steps out of the weights room, lighting up like the sun when he sees Logan and me. “Hey, my heart is strong! It's accustomed to this kind of

abuse,” he says, then comes over and kisses me deeply. “Morning, my love.”

“Mhm, morning,” I mumble against his lips. “You left early.”

“Had a couple of clients who are going away for the week,” he says. “They wanted to get one last session in before their holiday. How’s our little man?”

Marius sits next to Logan’s carrier, careful not to wake him. At only six months, the kid still sleeps soundly through pretty much anything. I dare hope he’ll be like this until he grows up, because I’ve heard horror stories about sleepless nights and all that jazz—but Logan’s been a wonderful baby thus far. Maybe we got lucky, I don’t know. I do know that I love how the purest love shines from Marius’s eyes when he glances down at his son. Our son.

“He’s great,” I reply, unable to stop myself from smiling as I watch them both. “Slept through most of the night. Had a quick breakfast, and now... well, you can see for yourself.”

“This boy will sleep through his entire childhood,” Marius snorts a dry laugh.

Richard comes out of his office, accompanied by Jax. They both smile as they say good morning. We do make one hell of a team, I’ll admit. West Key wouldn’t have made it this far without each and every one of us.

“Sorry we left so early in the morning,” Richard whispers. “I had something I needed to take care of. I hope you don’t mind.”

“It was worth it, though,” Jax adds.

I shake my head slowly. “It’s okay. Logan let me sleep until seven, if you can believe that.”

“Who, Sleeping Beau over there? I can’t believe it!” Richard exclaims in faux shock.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, eyeing them both.

Richard nods enthusiastically. “And then some. I’m glad you’re here, actually. Why don’t we step into your office for a

hot minute? Sarah can keep an eye on Logan in the meantime.”

“Can you?” I ask Sarah, who’s already stepping away from the reception desk to take charge of my baby’s carrier. “Thanks, babe.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure. He’s such a good little boy! Just like his dad.” She gives Marius a friendly wink. “Though his dad talks a little too much too early in the morning. His dad could take a page out of his book on this one.”

We laugh as Marius, Richard, and Jax join me in my office. Sarah’s a good sitter, though she’s only had Logan for an hour or two, tops, while I’m at the gym and without a babysitter available at home. I do insist on paying her a little something extra, out of my own pocket, when she does babysit. I’m never worried, thank the stars.

The guys remain standing close to my desk as I go over to the large window and pull the shades back to let some sun in. Seattle’s late springs are as capricious as ever, with a blue sky occasionally cluttered with passing rain clouds. It’s unseasonably warm, too, though I don’t mind the heat as long as it’s the dry kind.

“Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?” I ask as I turn around to face my guys.

Only, they’re each holding something and smiling broadly as they give me a moment to understand what’s going on. Richard shows me a small, pale blue velvet box—upon opening it, I recognize a splendid sapphire and diamond bracelet I’d seen not that long ago. Marius’s red velvet box reveals a stunning white gold and diamond ring. The kind a guy proposes with. And Jax opens his dark blue box to offer me a sapphire and diamond necklace that matches Richard’s bracelet.

“Whoa...” I manage, barely whispering. “What is this?”

“What does it look like?” Marius asks. His voice trembles slightly, and I know he’s struggling to keep his emotions under

control. “It’s not like we could get you three engagement rings. They would’ve looked tacky as hell on your finger.”

I burst into laughter and tears at the same time, having lost my words entirely. My heart is thumping as I process this moment and realize this is it. The next step of my evolution, of our evolution as a family. It’s crazy, yes. It’s unprecedented, yes. But it’s also a natural progression. It makes sense. It’s been working out so beautifully between us, why not make it somewhat official?

“Marry us,” Richard says. “Legally, sure, you’d be marrying Marius alone, but Shay... Marry us. We’re ready. We want to be your husbands, we want you to be our wife. We’ve got a son. We’ll probably make a couple more. I know I’d love a red-haired little girl to keep Logan busy growing up.”

“And we’re already doing everything a married couple does, anyway,” Jax adds. “I love you, Shay.”

“I love you,” Marius says. “We love you. We want to spend the rest of our days with you, baby.”

“What do you say?” Richard asks, his eyebrows arched with anticipation.

I stare at them, my eyes filled with tears and my chest filled with thousands of breaths and dollops of sheer happiness. How could I say no? Why would I say no?

“I’m not gonna wear the necklace, the bracelet, and the ring all the time,” I say. “I’ll settle for the ring and keep the other two for our wedding day.”

Marius gasps. “So, that’s a yes?”

“That’s a hell yes!” I exclaim and rush over to them.

They welcome me with arms wide open, and we shower each other with ardent kisses, pouring all the love in our souls into every single touch. These fellas are determined to make an honest woman out of me, so I can only be grateful to the universe and respond in kind. I’ll be the happiest wife that ever lived. I’m already the happiest woman, mother, and business entrepreneur. We might as well add “happiest wife” to my list of earned titles.

EPILOGUE I

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“Oh, it’s my pleasure. He’s such a good little boy! Just like his dad.” She gives Marius a friendly wink. “Though his dad talks a little too much too early in the morning. His dad could take a page out of his book on this one.”

We laugh as Marius, Richard, and Jax join me in my office. Sarah’s a good sitter, though she’s only had Logan for an hour or two, tops, while I’m at the gym and without a babysitter available at home. I do insist on paying her a little something extra, out of my own pocket, when she does babysit. I’m never worried, thank the stars.

The guys remain standing close to my desk as I go over to the large window and pull the shades back to let some sun in. Seattle’s late springs are as capricious as ever, with a blue sky occasionally cluttered with passing rain clouds. It’s unseasonably warm, too, though I don’t mind the heat as long as it’s the dry kind.

“Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?” I ask as I turn around to face my guys.

Only, they’re each holding something and smiling broadly as they give me a moment to understand what’s going on. Richard shows me a small, pale blue velvet box—upon opening it, I recognize a splendid sapphire and diamond bracelet I’d seen not that long ago. Marius’s red velvet box reveals a stunning white gold and diamond ring. The kind a guy proposes with. And Jax opens his dark blue box to offer me a sapphire and diamond necklace that matches Richard’s bracelet.

“Whoa…” I manage, barely whispering. “What is this?”

“What does it look like?” Marius asks. His voice trembles slightly, and I know he’s struggling to keep his emotions under control. “It’s not like we could get you three engagement rings. They would’ve looked tacky as hell on your finger.”

I burst into laughter and tears at the same time, having lost my words entirely. My heart is thumping as I process this moment and realize this is it. The next step of my evolution, of our evolution as a family. It’s crazy, yes. It’s unprecedented, yes. But it’s also a natural progression. It makes sense. It’s been working out so beautifully between us, why not make it somewhat official?

“Marry us,” Richard says. “Legally, sure, you’d be marrying Marius alone, but Shay... Marry us. We’re ready. We want to be your husbands, we want you to be our wife. We’ve got a son. We’ll probably make a couple more. I know I’d love a red-haired little girl to keep Logan busy growing up.”

“And we’re already doing everything a married couple does, anyway,” Jax adds. “I love you, Shay.”

“I love you,” Marius says. “We love you. We want to spend the rest of our days with you, baby.”

“What do you say?” Richard asks, his eyebrows arched with anticipation.

I stare at them, my eyes filled with tears and my chest filled with thousands of breaths and dollops of sheer happiness. How could I say no? Why would I say no?

“I’m not gonna wear the necklace, the bracelet, and the ring all the time,” I say. “I’ll settle for the ring and keep the other two for our wedding day.”

Marius gasps. “So, that’s a yes?”

“That’s a hell yes!” I exclaim and rush over to them.

They welcome me with arms wide open, and we shower each other with ardent kisses, pouring all the love in our souls into every single touch. These fellas are determined to make an honest woman out of me, so I can only be grateful to the universe and respond in kind. I’ll be the happiest wife that ever lived. I’m already the happiest woman, mother, and

business entrepreneur. We might as well add “happiest wife” to my list of earned titles.

EPILOGUE II

It only took a couple more years for West Key Gym to welcome the addition of East Key Gym, our second business project together. We've got about five years as partners in a successful and unique fitness project. Three years as a loving and weirdly happy family. Two years since the wedding. Years and years will pass, and I know we'll always be as gleeful as we were in Chappaqua, as thrilled as we were when Logan was born, as energized as we are right now as we open the doors to East Key.

The gym is part of a huge corporate office complex on the east side of Seattle, encased in a gorgeous steel and thick, smoky glass structure overlooking one of the city's bustling shopping districts. Foot traffic here is spectacular, and we've already got about two thousand clients signed up for month-long gym passes. The opening event is a raging success, much to my surprise and exhilaration. We've got a DJ and a protein-rich, low-sugar kind of snazzy buffet, wicked protein shakes and macro-friendly hors d'oeuvres. We've got fitness models parading around in our branded gym gear—why start a Key Gym franchise without the matching fashion apparel, huh? We've got some local celebrities and plenty of fitness influencers roaming through the crowd, taking photos with various guests and selfies in front of our illuminated logo in the reception area.

Marius's mother is looking after Logan at our home. She is now the second person outside our relationship who's aware of our situation—and while she may be a bit of an old school kind of lady, Sofia has come to understand that love is love,

coming in all shapes and sizes. In my case, love came in three different sizes, each as wonderful and as necessary as the other. Besides, she is crazy about Logan, and she'll never miss out on an opportunity to spend time with her firecracker of a grandson.

He was a heavy sleeper as a baby, but the period of peace lasted only until he learned how to walk. He's been causing minor heart attacks ever since, my darling little kamikaze devil.

"Champagne for the missus?" Marius quips as he brings over a couple of glasses.

I'm standing close to the reception desk, watching Cassandra as she ropes a couple of local celebrities into conversation. She may not be a marketing guru, but I'll give my best friend the credit she deserves—she does know how to sell a product she believes in.

I'm constantly amazed by how much can be accomplished with just a tap of a smartphone camera and a carefully constructed series of hashtags. While I'm still kind of retro on the whole digital thing, I do appreciate the unseen work that goes into building a brand, and I'm certainly a happy camper knowing we've got so many people willing to get involved and promote East Key. I reckon we'll do a whole lot better now than we did with West Key in the beginning.

Marius chuckles lightly. "Look at her go, huh?"

"Hey, she's motivated," I reply, then shake my head at the champagne glass he's offering. "None for me, thank you, baby."

"But it's your favorite," he says.

"I know, honey, but I'm not into champagne anymore. Not for a while, anyway."

"Why not?" he insists.

I do know he went to a lot of trouble to get these bottles delivered in time for the event. Marius is always so sweet and thoughtful, always taking care of the little things in order to

make me the happiest I've ever been. I thought I couldn't love him more, but he keeps surprising me.

Richard and Jax slip out of the swelling crowd to join us. Just in time, too, since I'm about to make their night even better.

"What's up?" Jax asks, noticing Marius's befuddled expression.

"I specifically ordered Chateau Neuf champagne for tonight's opening event, because I know Shay would absolutely love a glass or ten of this stuff. It's her favorite," my husband says, almost pouting.

Richard gives me a curious look. "Are we getting prissy about drinks, now?"

"Not prissy, no. I still love Chateau Neuf and as soon as the baby comes and I can drink again, I'll gladly have that glass. Or ten," I answer with a grin.

Silence settles over the three of them as they mull over my words. Once they understand what I just said, they light up like firebugs. But because we're in public and surrounded by way too many people, Marius, Jax, and Richard can only gasp and struggle to find the right words without jumping out of their skin.

"Wait, what?" Jax croaks.

"You're gonna be daddies again," I reply.

"Now she tells us," Richard jokingly scoffs. "In the middle of an event."

"It's like you don't even want us to tear the clothes off you and make love to you until the morning," Marius plays along, covering his excitement with a layer of fake disappointment. "What a dirty play this is."

I lean in and kiss him softly. "Well, it's okay. You can tear them off me later."

"My God, the party ends way after midnight," Richard complains.

“Don’t you have an office here, too?” I reply with a raised eyebrow.

Jax takes my hand and immediately guides me away from the reception desk. “Our wife has a point, fellas. We’ll find plenty of privacy upstairs.”

I laugh wholeheartedly as the four of us sneak through the party crowd, smiling and waving at various familiar faces along the way before we rush up the stairs and disappear inside Richard’s new office. I’m excited and nervous about what’s coming next for our unusual family unit, but I love every second I get with my men. I’m going to be a mother again, and while that comes with inevitable ups and downs, I know I’m safe.

“Make sure you lock the door,” Marius tells Richard as he’s halfway out of his dinner jacket.

My heels are coming off as Jax comes up from behind to take me in his arms and trail wet kisses down the side of my neck. His hands cradle my belly, where another human being has decided to strap in for the ride of a lifetime. Marius kisses me on the lips, and I can feel his heart beating close to mine, two rhythms blending into one. When Richard joins us, the formula is complete, and the sweetest kind of bliss seeps through our pores. We surrender to one another as we celebrate this milestone in the best possible way.

I know I’m going to be the happiest wife with the happiest husbands and the happiest kids.

After everything I’ve been through, after the countless hurdles we’ve had to work past, it looks as though the universe has finally decided to crack open the rewards sack for us. We’ve earned every single smile, every single laugh, every single moment of love, joy, and peace. And tonight, my three men are going to claim me yet again—as their best friend, their partner in crime, their wife and the mother of their children.

The End

If you loved Christmas with my Three Best Friends, then you will love [Three Daddies Under the Mistletoe](#) and [Christmas with my Best Friend's Brothers](#).

Here's what readers had to say:

Three Daddies Under the Mistletoe Reviews

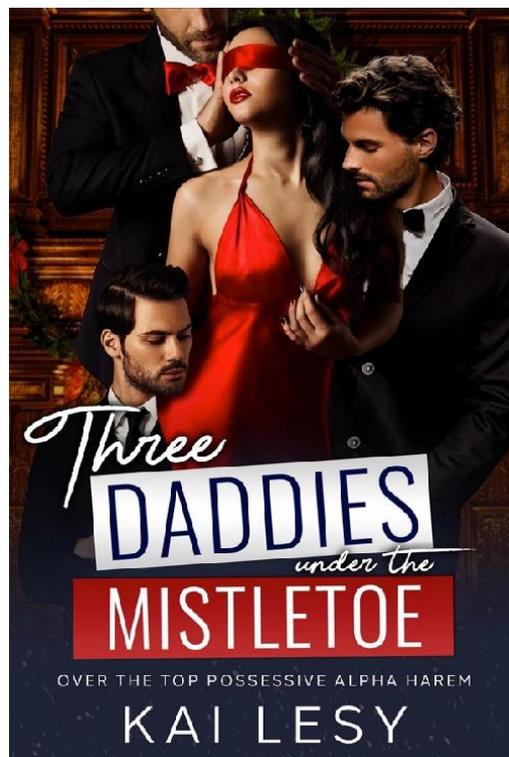
"I loved all the unexpected loops that were thrown into this book. I feel like just when I thought Selina was settling down and safe they gave my girl a run for her money 🤩. Fantastic storyline overall IMO." - Amazon Review

Christmas with my Best Friend's Brothers Reviews

"Who wouldn't want to be loved by three men let alone triplets. ... I couldn't put it down for the life of me."
Goodreads Review

I've included a sneak peek into Three Daddies Under the Mistletoe on the next page.

THREE DADDIES UNDER THE MISTLETOE (PREVIEW)



“You three are my clients. We shouldn’t cross the line.”

Three rugged ex-marines.

Rock hard bodies.

And filthy rich businessmen.

I’ve been their favorite personal stylist for years.

And when my ex stirs trouble, they tell him they’re my “*new boyfriends*”.

They even invite me to stay in their snowy mountain cabin for the holidays.

I figure it's mere sympathy – my life's a bit in shambles.

Then something insane happens: I find the juicy diary of their old flame.

Her vivid accounts with the irresistible trio make me wonder:
What if that could be me?

Let's just say years of bottled up sexual tension finally come to surface...

and I experience a holiday adventure more thrilling than I've ever dreamed.

I just hope they don't freak out when I reveal a Christmas surprise that could change everything.

PROLOGUE

I'm taken to the master bedroom.

It's significance weighs heavily on my shoulders as I walk in, taking deep breaths, trying to quell the building anticipation.

This is it, the night I've been dreaming of. I can't believe it's actually happening.

"Do you trust us?" Matthew asks.

I stand close to the bed, hands at my sides with trembling fingers as the three of them close ranks around me. I nod slowly. "I do."

"Then you will let us take the lead," he says.

"Yes."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. When he opens them again, he smiles then kisses me deeply. It's a tender kiss, not at all conquering nor dominant, but sweet, loving, and reassuring.

Sully helps me out of my sweater and bra, leaving my full breasts exposed.

My nipples perk, pink and hard under their smoldering gazes, as Jason peels my jeans and panties off me.

Seconds later, I'm naked between them, standing quietly as they admire every inch of me. I used to be more self-conscious about my curves, especially after I was forced to quit tennis, but there is something in their eyes, a muted adoration that I cannot resist.

It fills me with a new kind of confidence that beckons me to open myself up in every way with these men.

“Kiss me,” he says.

I cup his face, watching the warmth of his gray eyes melt into something that may obliterate me if I’m not careful. I kiss him, much like he kissed me, pouring everything I feel into this simple but meaningful gesture.

“Undress me,” he says next.

He lifts his arms as I take his sweater off. I have a bit of trouble with his belt buckle, a large oval made of silver.

I run my fingers over the cougar-shaped logo engraved on the front, then pry it apart and unbutton his jeans. They fall to the floor, revealing a rock-hard cock that’s begging for my attention.

Behind me, I can hear Sully and Jason removing their clothes. Knowing that all of us are now naked just makes everything that much hotter and harder to control myself.

They help me up and have me sit on the edge of the bed. “Lay back,” Matthew says.

It’s Jason who goes down on me first. I feel his tongue sliding between my folds as Sully and Matthew bring my knees up.

They take their sweet time massaging my breasts, squeezing them tighter and tighter before they pinch my nipples hard. I whimper from the sweet pain just as Jason slides his fingers into me.

He sucks on my clit, applying just enough pressure to send me over the edge while fingers curl inside, flicking my g-spot until I fall apart at the seams and cry out as the orgasm rocks through me like a savage storm.

Just then, Matthew and Sully take my nipples in their mouths, sucking hard and sending thousands of electrical jolts through my veins as my hips grind against Jason’s lips and tongue.

“Oh, God, don’t stop, don’t stop!” I moan, riding the wave of this shattering climax as it ripples around his capable fingers.

“Oh, yes.... Yes!”

My pussy fucking hurts at this point, and I can't wait for them to fill it with what it so desperately needs.

A Few Days Earlier

To put it succinctly: I'm in a tight spot.
Tighter than a camel toe in skinny jeans.

Using one's workspace as a makeshift home? Yep. A glaring sign things have gone south.

Imagine, if you will: Me, two weeks ago, entering my home to find my boyfriend of four years – initiating a “neighborhood meet-and-greet” in my bed.

But what stabbed my soul was seeing the two of them sprawled on my organic bamboo sheets.

Dammit, I miss my beloved bamboo sheets!

Four years tolerating Kieran and his tragic fashion choices. Wasted.

Sure, I could be staying on a friend's couch, but my pride is as tall as a stiletto, and sometimes as painful. That's what happens when you've managed to get by solo your entire life.

Now my glamorous life involves cozying up in a sleeping bag tucked behind the staff break room.

No one's the wiser. Not my boss, my coworkers, and definitely not the janitors who can't help but spread all the juicy gossip.

I work at one of the most luxurious fashion hubs in town, and I've mastered the art of glamping between haute couture.

Thank heavens for my top-tier ninja skills in managing the CCTV system. A little camera angle magic here, some footage editing there, and voila! My secret remains intact.

My entire life now fits in one suitcase. It's like a sad rom-com, minus the romantic lead.

There simply isn't any room left for more failure.

My phone rings.

It's Kieran. Again.

The man has the persistence of a dog with a bone, but I'm in zero mood to play his games.

Ignoring the call, I remind myself of tomorrow's agenda: hit the downstairs gym first thing in the morning, pretend I'm working out for fifteen minutes, then make use of the showers.

Talk about a hot mess.

Keeping up this ruse has been exhausting.

"Was that Mr. History?" Phil inquires, arching an eyebrow as he wraps up the day's figures. As the shift manager, Phil has traded tales of heartbreak with me during many late-night shifts.

"Yeah, he still won't leave me alone."

"I can't believe he did what he did," Phil replies. "Especially after everything you put into that relationship to try and keep it going."

"Honestly, he did me a favor, I should've ended things a long time ago. We'd been running on fumes for a while."

"You deserve better. I never liked the dude. He was always so into himself. It's time to find someone who deserves your time," Phil says as he tries to comfort me, but then his expression lights up and his posture goes ramrod straight as Etienne walks into the store.

My heart jumps.

Shit what's he doing here? I silently ask myself.

I hadn't factored in surprise visits from the higher-ups into my master plan.

The Sartorialist thrives on its pristine reputation, prioritizing its polished image and elite clientele above employees' personal challenges.

The idea of an employee treating the sales floor as their makeshift bedroom? That would be a PR nightmare.

"Mr. Lacroix, what a pleasant surprise!"

Etienne grins, looking like he's fresh out of "Dapper Gents Monthly." With his navy-blue suit, crisply ironed white shirt, and a red tie that might as well have its own spotlight, he's truly a sight.

"Sorry to pop in unannounced," Etienne says in his subtle French accent. He came to the U.S. in his early twenties, but the French flavor is still just as smooth with every word coming out of his mouth. "I won't be staying long. I just wanted to say hello before I head back to New York for the rest of November."

"It's a pleasure to see you, sir," I say, smiling softly.

"How is everything here?" he asks.

Phil finishes wrapping up and grabs his phone, bag, and coat before coming around the counter to shake Etienne's hand. "We're very good, sir. I reckon we'll have a profitable couple of weeks before the Christmas shopping season even starts," he tells Etienne.

"I'm glad to hear that," our boss replies, then looks at me. "And how are you doing, Selina? I trust you're happy with your position here?"

"Absolutely, sir, thank you," I say.

He turns to Phil and puts a hand on his shoulder. "How about I take you out for a nightcap before you head home? It's been ages since we've caught up."

"That sounds nice," Phil replies, only slightly surprised. "Selina, would you like to join us?"

I force a smile, trying to keep my voice light. “You two should savor the evening. I’ve got a gourmet microwave dinner waiting for me at home,” I quip with feigned enthusiasm. “Still, thanks for the offer. Always a pleasure, Mr. Lacroix.”

I hope he didn’t notice the tremor in my voice. Inside, panic consumes me. The last thing I need is for him to realize how desperately I wanted to avoid him now that he’s back in town.

Etienne laughs, we say our goodbyes, and I watch the two of them leave. I patiently wait for the sound of their footsteps to recede before I prepare to close the store for the evening.

Slowly, I go through the closing protocol, one step at a time.

I turn off the computers and tablets and plug them in for the night. Next, I lock the cases that hold the most expensive jewelry, including the designer cufflinks. Whenever I glance at the cufflinks a warmth rises within me - and today was no different.

Memories of Matthew, Sully, and Jason – three of the most irresistibly dashing clients – come flooding back. Their visits were never just transactional. The atmosphere would noticeably thicken with each lingering conversation, every teasing remark, and the playful challenges about who could make the better coffee, though we never actually shared one outside of these walls.

Their eyes told stories that their words never did. Matthew’s smoldering gaze would often drift from my eyes to my lips, making my heart race. Sully, with his witty banter, always managed to make me blush, while Jason’s soft-spoken compliments would send shivers down my spine. The raw, unspoken chemistry between us was palpable.

Despite the undeniable tension, the boundaries of the store were never crossed. I was in a committed relationship. If only I’d known what a ponzi scheme said relationship was.

Though we exchanged tales of travel, dreams, and weekend plans, the allure of what might happen next kept our encounters strictly within the confines of the store. Their

intermittent visits meant that their absence was deeply felt, leaving me yearning and wondering about the possibilities.

Just as I'm about to lock the front door, I spot Kieran's unmistakable figure looming in the entrance.

He's radiating disdain and arrogance.

"Why are you here, Kieran? We're done," I assert, attempting to mask my unease.

His eyes, sharp and condescending, meet mine. "Selina, you're overreacting. We need to talk."

"Overacting to what exactly?" I counter sharply. "Your latest escapade with Sandra from next door?"

He moves to step inside, frustration evident. "Selina, listen..."

But there's an unmistakable menace in his approach, and my heart races. His towering frame casts a shadow over me, and I realize how vulnerable I am.

"I said, leave."

The door eases open, revealing a trio that never fails to quicken my pulse.

Today, they look especially captivating, and the timing couldn't be more perfect.

Matthew stands tall six feet, his dark hair peppered with strands of wisdom. Those penetrating gray eyes, set in a face that's both rugged and refined, hint at tales of Marine exploits and mornings in the gym. Every tailored piece he wears, highlights a physique that's both powerful and graceful. He exudes a command that's hard to overlook.

Beside him is Jason, the embodiment of sun-soaked allure. Standing six-foot-three, his athletic build contrasts perfectly with that shaggy blonde hair and those mischievous blue eyes. Despite his casual, beach-boy demeanor, the tailored edges of his attire showcase an underlying sophistication.

Then there's Sully, the tall, dark, and undeniably handsome of the trio. At six-foot-five, he's a heady mix of mystery and strength. His dark eyes, sharp cheeks framed by a day's

stubble, and his sleek attire give off a magnetism that's difficult to ignore.

Each ex-Marine, with their own brand of charisma, has, for years, occupied my most indulgent daydreams.

Seeing them now, looking irresistibly dashing, it's clear why.

The mood shifts palpably as Kieran's confidence falters in the presence of the three men, and I feel a rush of relief.

"Hey, babe," Matthew says, smiling broadly as he walks past Kieran.

He doesn't bother to acknowledge his presence as he comes toward me.

I'm breathless as he gets closer and then kisses me.

His lips press against mine, beckoning me to soften and open up.

Heat instantly blows through me, my core ignited as I try to understand what's going on while also reveling in this unexpected snippet of intimacy. "Sorry I'm late, there was a lot of traffic on the interstate."

"Huh?" I mumble, barely able to discern my surroundings at this point.

"Yeah, we tried to get here earlier, but it's the weekend and everybody's in a rush to get out of the city," Sully says.

He and Jason stand by the door, hands in their jeans pockets as they watch me, flustered and wide-eyed and unwittingly leaning into Matthew.

Kieran, on the other hand, is pale and downright terrified—likely by the fact that another man just kissed me. And not just any man, either, but Matthew Parker, a renowned businessman and future heir of Dawson-Howes, one of the biggest import-export conglomerates in the United States.

"Selina," Kieran manages, but he can't find the rest of his sentence anywhere.

"Ready for dinner?" Matthew asks me, as if taken out of a completely different movie and plopped right into this one. "I

got us that reservation at Oyster Dream. You've been talking about it all week."

"Oh yeah," I mumble. "Oyster Dream, right."

I give Sully and Jason a wandering glance while also admiring their chiseled broad chests and playful eyes.

That's when it hits me: They must've overheard me arguing with Kieran and decided to step in. I look up at Matthew just in time to catch the subtle wink in his eye. I'd kiss him again, but I still can't move.

My lips tingle.

"Oyster Dream!" I exclaim and quickly settle into my role. "Oh, honey, you remembered!"

"Selina!" Kieran snaps, but the speed with which Sully and Jason turn to face him instantly reduces his frustration. He's small, all of a sudden, flanked by two tall men with broad shoulders and square jaws, the kind of men who would snap him like a twig if he so much as raised his voice at me again. "I can't believe this..."

"Who's the guy?" Matthew asks me.

I shrug. "Nobody. He was just leaving."

"Selina—"

"Goodbye, Kieran," I say in a forceful tone, emboldened by the guys' presence as I give him the coldest side-eye that I can muster.

He takes another second or two, but finally, he gets the message and leaves.

A minute passes in the most awkward possible silence before I'm able to breathe again.

Matthew's musky cologne works its way through my lungs and tousles my senses, forcing me to take a couple of steps back to regain my grip on the present.

The entire moment was way too intense.

Matthew eyes me intently. “I apologize for my gesture, but I had to sell the whole thing, otherwise he wouldn’t have gotten the point.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” I reply, barely able to look him in the eyes.

“Are you okay, Selina?” Sully asks, equally interested in my well-being. I can’t help but feel stunned by their care and sudden involvement. I mean, we always have some amazing interactions while they’re in the store, but I never imagined they’d stumble into such a scenario and deal with it so efficiently. “We heard you two arguing, and Matthew figured you had a problem that needed taking care of.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” I tell him and Jason, then turn back to Matthew. “We broke up a couple of weeks ago, and he still won’t accept it.”

“Pretty sure he got the message now,” Jason chuckles dryly.

I can’t help but allow a short laugh to escape from the back of my throat, as well. Despite the tension and the discomfort, as I look back to Kieran’s befuddlement, well, it’s funny. Not to mention fully deserved after how he made me feel. My heart is still racing, albeit for different reasons, as I give the guys a curious glance. “What are you three doing here at this hour?” I ask.

“We’re sorry,” Matthew says. “But we kind of needed some last-minute shopping before we go away for the winter holidays. This place is always our first choice. Would you mind letting these three stragglers in before you close the store tonight? We’ll make it worth your while.”

“I could never say no to my three favorite fellas,” I giggle sheepishly as I motion for them to settle in and shop at their leisure.

As miserable as I’ve been feeling and given all these emotions burning through me, overwhelming me on every possible level, I could do with a triple-manned distraction right about now.

“So...sweaters you say? What kind?” I ask. “We have casual, formal, some in-between styles, too.”

Matthew leans in, his scent tantalizingly fresh, “Casual. We like to retreat to my Aspen cabin for a good chunk of the winter.”

“Aspen, Colorado,” I murmur, as I picture snow-covered escapes and warm fires.

Sully’s affirmation comes with a nod.

I feel the urge to run my fingers through his messy black hair if only he’d let me. His dark brown eyes are practically impossible to read, but sometimes I catch shadows dancing in them.

Nearly a decade older than me, he’s the most mysterious among the three, and the subject of plenty of my most erotic fantasies—of which I’ve had many over the past couple of years.

Cheating on Kieran was never an option, but the fact that I’d been dreaming about these guys should’ve been a clear signal that my relationship was going downhill.

“Okay, so casual then,” I say, trying to keep my professional head screwed on. “These styles here would suit you best, Matthew,” I point to several neatly piled and folded sweaters made from the finest wool and cashmere blends in deep shades of gray, sand, and a warm off-white I happen to really like. “The earthy tones look great on you.”

Jason comes closer, his eyes never leaving my face. “What about me?”

“Oh, the off-white colors are definitely your thing,” I tell him, offering him one of the sweaters on display to try out in one of our dressing rooms.

Jason is tall, taller than Matthew, with bright blue eyes and a shaggy mess of blonde hair that often has my heart beating a little faster than usual. The surfer vibe he carries himself with often makes people underestimate him, most of them not realizing that this man used to drive tanks and dodge bullets while serving in the Corps.

I’ve always prided myself in being able to style each of these men in precisely what works best for them, with what brings out their finest features and adds a hint of timeless charm to their overall style.

“Off-whites, you say,” Jason replies, accepting the sweater I offered him. “Let’s see if you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” I quip.

Sully gives me a playful nudge, with a teasing glint in his eyes. “I bet you were counting the minutes till you could send your ex-boyfriend packing, huh?”

I chuckle, but his words stir a torrent of emotions within me. I sense he meant no harm, but my vulnerability is amplified tonight. The weight of it all feels crushing.

My vision blurs, and I feel that familiar sting in my eyes. Breathe. Just breathe. Swiftly, I pivot, trying to blink away the tears. “I need a moment,” I whisper.

But these men, with their sharp instincts, see right through me.

The facade can’t hold.

I sense their concern, even as I present them my back.

That knot in my throat tightens, making it hard to breathe, until Matthew’s gentle voice breaks through. “Selina,” he murmurs. “Talk to us, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m peachy.”

I try to pull away but Sully and Jason are quick to flank me. I'm tiny again, wedged between layers of hard muscle and broad shoulders. "Talk to us," Sully says.

"I'm okay, I promise."

"Selina," Matthew says my name again, and every time, the sound of it rolling off his tongue has the hairs on the back of my neck rising. "Whatever you're going through, you obviously need to talk about it. And since we've come so late in the evening to bother you, causing you to work overtime, the least any of us can do is listen to you."

I look up and realize they're still watching me, still waiting for me to say something.

It's not like the floor is going to open up and swallow me whole, regardless of how attractive that idea might sound this very moment.

"Oh, God.... Where do I start?" I shudder, all of my emotions coming back to the surface like a frothy whirlpool, completely out of control.

I take a deep breath then begin.

"The fact that I broke up with my boyfriend of four years barely touches the surface of the worst part of it all. It's the fact that I walked out of an apartment that I'd been paying rent for without having any kind of backup plan because I just recently paid off my student loan years in advance, not knowing that I'd be splitting up with that jerk a week later. It's the fact that I'm a fashion design graduate who's still working the sales counter at a men's store that I've also been sleeping in for two weeks now, because I've got nowhere else to go. And let's throw in the fact that I can't afford a new place yet, and if my boss finds out, I'll lose my job. It's the fact that..."

My eyes burn as the tears roll down my cheeks, wet and warm and loaded with everything that I've been holding inside for far too long. The guys don't say a word, they just watch me demolish myself, sobbing as I struggle to get through the last part of my statement. "...I'm a complete failure at an age

where I should be leading the charge and making the whole world my bitch.”

That’s all I’m able to say, my shoulders dropping as I finally let go.

I cry my heart out, no longer caring that three older, devastatingly handsome men are watching me and witnessing this pitiful meltdown.

I cry, until I feel Matthew’s arms snaking around my waist as he pulls me into a comforting hug.

Without even thinking, I hide my puffy face against his chest, unloading the weight that I’ve been carrying around on my shoulders. I melt in his embrace as Sully gently moves some of my curly locks away from my cheek and behind one ear, while Jason rests a hand on the small of my back.

“You know, it could be a lot worse,” Matthew says once he senses that I’m slowly calming down. I think he can tell from the receding hiccups. “You could be completely homeless. At least you have the store.”

“God, Matt, comforting isn’t one of your strong suits, is it,” Jason scoffs and yanks me out of Matthew’s arms but only to hold me himself. It’s a different kind of hug, yet I let his warmth envelop and soothe me while Matthew and Sully chuckle softly. “It’s going to be okay, Selina. We all have hurdles. Some might seem taller than others. A few might even seem impossible to cross. But you’re strong enough to get through this.”

“How do you know that? Can’t you see me completely melting down like the most pathetic creature that ever lived?” I blurt out, still eager to chastise myself for having allowed the situation to reach such a critical level to begin with. “I have no idea how to get myself out of this mess, and now look at me. I’m crying in my customers’ arms.”

Sully clears his throat. “It’s perfectly normal considering what you’ve been through. And you deserve better, Selina.”

“We’d like to help,” Matthew says.

I give him a sideways glance. “What do you mean?”

“We’re going away for a couple of months. Why don’t you join us?” he asks.

I’m staring blankly at Matt, unable to leave Jason’s comforting embrace. “Huh?”

“There are plenty of rooms in my cabin in Aspen,” Matthew says. “Come stay with us for a while. You shouldn’t be spending your holidays here, Selina. You’ve been through some pretty traumatic events lately and you need a safe place to gather your thoughts and figure out your next move. I’m offering you the chance to do that.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, slowly but surely the information connecting to the appropriate receptors in my brain.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he replies, holding back a laugh.

All I can muster is a shameful shrug. “I’m just a salesgirl here. I mean... why would you do that for me?”

Matthew, Jason, and Sully exchange glances again. This time, however, I spot a playful glint in their eyes. A sparkle of amusement accompanied by something downright enticing, a curiosity of sorts that has my full attention. Yet when Matthew’s gaze finds me once more, it’s smoldering hot and making my skin tickle everywhere.

“You’re not just a salesgirl, Selina. You’re a woman, a beautiful and talented woman who has been nothing but kind and gracious to us, every time we walk into this place. You’re a human being, first and foremost, who is going through some difficult times. You deserve empathy and a place to rest without having to look over your shoulder every night and without having to worry about losing your job on top of everything else. It makes sense that I can offer you precisely that, at least for a couple of months, until you get your feet back on the ground.”

“Don’t you have some vacation days?” Sully asks.

I nod slowly. “Plenty, actually. Almost two months’ worth.”

“Then talk to your boss and let him know you’re taking time off. You’re exhausted, you need some time to recover, you’re

healing from a bad relationship,” Sully says. “It’s not like the store is going to fall apart without you until January.”

“No, not at all. My colleagues are great people, they could definitely fill in for me,” I consider out loud.

Jason smiles and comes closer. Every time the space between us shrinks, I can feel my heart beating faster, wanting to jump out of my chest, if only to be closer to his. To theirs, for that matter. Damn, what the hell am I doing? I should be telling them no, thanks but I can manage. I can, but the better question to ask myself is.... Do I really want to keep doing everything the hard way? Am I not tired of always taking the long road and busting my ass for the smallest respite?

“Then why not take this opportunity?” he asks.

“I’m offering. We’re pretty fun guys once you get to know us,” Matthew adds.

“Oh, I have not a single doubt about that,” I reply, almost laughing. “You’re my favorite clients, truth be told. And you’re all so kind...” Oh no, I think I’m going to start crying again.

Sully gently squeezing my shoulder isn’t helping, either. “We won’t bite unless you want us to.”

“Good grief, man,” Matthew chuckles.

I can’t help but release a good, genuine belly laugh, the tears blinked away and my soul just a little bit lighter as I look up at them and say the craziest thing I’ve ever said in this lifetime. “You know what? I think I’ll do it. I think you’re right. A couple of months away, tucked into the wilderness somewhere nice could be just the fix for me.”

Matthew’s sexy mouth curls into a big smile. “Great. We leave the day after tomorrow.” His expression shifts into a different kind of softness, though. “But you’re not spending another night here, in the store, Selina.”

“It’s not like I mind.”

“That’s not the point. We’re taking you to a hotel for the next two nights, my treat,” Matthew replies.

“No, I can’t accept that, you’re already doing so much!” My ego can’t allow it.

But Jason and Sully flank me, a recurring pattern at this point, making it harder for me to resist. How can I, when I’m suddenly on the receiving end of such care and attention?

“Selina, we’re taking you to a hotel tonight,” Sully states, his tone low and firm.

I glance up at him and finally understand. They’re not the kind of men who take no for an answer. And judging by the heat spreading between my legs, I’m not really into telling them no, either.

I HOPE you enjoyed the sneak peek, [Click here for full story.](#)