



DADDY'S 
DIRTY
FIREFIGHTERS

RAVEN BLAIRE

DADDY'S 3 DIRTY FIREFIGHTERS

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS AGE GAP ROMANCE

RAVEN BLAIRE

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CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter 1

Jamie

Chapter 2

Thomas

Chapter 3

Jamie

Chapter 4

Adam

Chapter 5

Jamie

Chapter 6

Ethan

Chapter 7

Jamie

Chapter 8

Thomas

Chapter 9

Jamie

Chapter 10

Ethan

Chapter 11

Jamie

Chapter 12

Thomas

Chapter 13

Adam

Chapter 14

Jamie

Chapter 15

Ethan

Chapter 16

Thomas

Chapter 17

Jamie

Chapter 18

Adam

Chapter 19

Jamie

Chapter 20

Thomas

Chapter 21

Jamie

Chapter 22

Ethan

Chapter 23

Jamie

Chapter 24

Adam

Epilogue

More from Raven Blaire

PROLOGUE

ETHAN

The flames lick the sides of the building and smoke billows out of the windows. It looks like a bad one, but that doesn't discourage me.

“Alright, guys, let's go in.”

Thomas' word is all I've been waiting for. I rush inside, looking through the smoke, trying to see signs of movement. There are other teams dealing with the flames. Thomas, Adam and I need to get the people out of here.

A thin wail reaches my ears. It's faint, but I'm conditioned to pick out that kind of sound in the chaos of the roaring flames and the noise of the building crumbling around us.

I hurry toward the noise to find a woman trapped behind a burning beam. I grab the end of it that's not on fire and haul it away from her. She stays rooted to the spot, too terrified to make a break for freedom even though the way is now clear.

That's ok; I'm used to these kinds of reactions. I hurry forward and put an arm around her waist.

“Come on. I'm getting you out of here.”

Her feet move slowly as I half guide, half drag her out. There are paramedics waiting for us just outside the building and I hand her over to them. Fortunately, she doesn't seem

badly hurt. She probably has smoke inhalation, but nothing worse than that.

I go back in. The apartment building is groaning under the strain of having its supports collapse. I know that it won't be much longer before we're ordered out. I need to save as many people as possible before that happens. Once we're pulled out, anyone left in the building is as good as dead.

"Ethan! Over here!"

I follow the sound of Adam's voice to a portion of the building where the floor is collapsed. There are two women on the lower floor, backing up as flames lick the walls, getting closer to them every second.

"I think I can get down – just hold this."

"Got it." I take the other end of the metal cord Adam has clipped to his belt and brace myself. He starts making his way down the steep incline of the collapsed floor.

Once he's at the bottom, he gestures to the women, who immediately run to him. He grabs one around the waist and gives me a thumbs up.

I'm strong, but I'm not strong enough to pull both Adam and two women up at once. We'll need to take them one at a time.

They're half way up the incline when everything goes wrong.

The floor groans and crumbles beneath Adam's feet, leaving him and the woman swinging by the line I'm holding. I squat down, leaning all my weight back, trying not to tip forward, but their swinging motion has me off balance.

I grab my radio with my free hand. "Thomas! We need some help here! Second floor, near the stairwell."

"On my way, Ethan."

My feet are sliding and I don't know how much longer I can hold them for. I can see that Adam is trying to steady them, but he has nothing to grip or push against.

My heart pounds in my chest and adrenaline rushes through my veins. I know that if I fall, the three of us could very well land directly on the blaze below.

Thomas' arms are suddenly around my waist, steadying me and pulling me backward. I manage to get my feet under me and together, we pull Adam and the woman up off.

Adam scrambles over the edge and hauls her along with him.

The three of us turn back to the other woman, who is still trapped on the floor below. If we work together, we can probably get her out too. We just need to be quick, before –

The floor below us grumbles and starts to shake.

“Get back!”

I don't need Thomas' warning to know what's about to happen. I grab the woman's arm and pull her back as fast as I can. The floor where we had been standing moments before groans and crumbles, burying the other woman in a shower of rubble and flame.

“Patricia! No, PATRICIA!”

The woman frantically tries to get to her friend, struggling to break free from my grip. I muscle her under my control and start dragging her out. “She's gone! We have to get out of here!”

As much as I wish we could have saved her friend, getting ourselves killed trying to recover a corpse won't do anyone any good.

Thomas grabs her other flailing arm and together we pull her out of the building. My radio crackles to life.

“Everyone out! This place is about to go down.”

I glance back bitterly. If only I'd been better, stronger, faster... maybe we could have saved Patricia.

We get her friend out, who collapses to the ground, weeping. I don't know what to say to comfort her. I've never been any good at that stuff. Give me someone to rescue from a

burning building and I'm in my element. A grief-stricken friend, however? Best leave that to someone else.

The paramedics advance on her with oxygen masks and heart monitors. Maybe they'll do a better job of comforting her than I could.

I turn away and kick the wall, swearing as I watch the building collapse. I'm good at my job and I take pride in it. It's not often that I lose someone like that, and it gets to me every time.

Thomas is glaring at the rising flames and Adam's hands are clenched into tight fists. I know they hate this just as much as I do.

I'm in a foul mood, to say the least, when we return to the station. I know there's a new dispatcher arriving and I do my best to get my head straight. I don't want to scare her off with a bad attitude on her first day, but it's difficult knowing that someone died because I wasn't good enough to save them.

I know it's part of the job, but it sucks every time. Maybe one day, losing people will get easier, but today is not that day.

JAMIE

“Well? Did you get it?”
“I got it!”

Charlotte squeals in excitement and grabs my hands. “Jamie, that’s great! Wait, why aren’t you looking more excited?”

I grimace. “Well, you know how I applied to be a dispatcher at fire station nineteen?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, it turns out that vacancy was already filled, but at the same time, the dispatcher at station twenty-two quit, so they gave me that position instead.”

“And this is a problem because?”

“Station twenty-two is where Thomas works.”

Now Charlotte is the one grimacing. “Oh. That sucks.”

I don’t know what my dad sees in Thomas. They’ve been best friends ever since high school, but I’ve always thought Thomas was a bit of an ass. What makes it worse was that he has the *finest* ass I’ve ever seen – and that’s not to mention the rest of his fit firefighter’s body. I’ve always felt weird having lustful thoughts about someone my father’s age, let alone someone whose personality leaves so much to be desired.

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know who I’ll be working with yet, but even if I’m dispatching for different firefighters, I’ll still have to interact with him.”

“That’s true. So, are you taking the job?”

“I have to, unfortunately. I need a job, and this is what’s available. I suppose if it’s really unbearable, I could always look for something else in a few months, but at least in the beginning, I’ll have to stick it out.”

“Well, hopefully he won’t be as much of a dick at work. I mean, we’ve never heard of him getting into disciplinary trouble. He should know how to be professional, at least.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Charlotte and I chat for a bit more about her upcoming clothing design business before I let her out. I want to get an early night tonight to be well-rested for tomorrow. It’s going to be a stressful job and I need to make sure I don’t burn out.

It’ll also be exciting, though, and I’ll get the satisfaction of knowing that I’m helping people every day.

The next morning, I arrive at the station half an hour early and go through to see Renard, the station chief.

“Jamie, I take it?”

“That’s right. It’s good to meet you, sir.”

“Please, call me Renard. You’ll be working with three of our best men. They’ll be in here shortly to meet you.”

“Only three?” I’m surprised. I would have thought I’d dispatch the entire fire squad at once.

“Most of the fires we deal with are small house fires. It doesn’t make sense to dispatch the entire squad at once, when all those resources aren’t needed, and we could need additional teams at the same time to deal with another small fire. We tend to split up into small teams, each with their own dispatcher who deals with the 911 lines. For bigger fires, multiple teams work together.”

That makes sense. As long as I’m not working with –

The door opens and three men walk in. I bite my lip to hold back a groan. Of course, I have to be working with Thomas.

The other two men are slightly younger, though still older than me. I almost choke when I see them. They're exactly like Thomas.

Well, no, that's not it, really. They look completely different to Thomas, but they're also as hot as the fires they pull people from. All three are tall, built and muscled. I can see tattoos streaking down the arms of the one on the right, and the one on the left has shoulder length curly hair that frames his face perfectly.

Thomas, of course, is his usual, annoyingly handsome self, with his blue eyes, clean-shaven face and dark brown hair.

"Jamie, this is Ethan and Adam. And I believe you know Thomas?"

Adam – the one with the tattoos – gives me a nod and Ethan smiles at me. Thomas makes a grimace similar to the one I'm sure is on my face right now and I quickly work to correct it.

Renard probably thought that it would be kind to pair me with someone I know. Either that or he knows how Thomas and I feel about each other and Thomas has done something to piss him off enough to earn punishment.

I give them a very forced smile. "I look forward to working with you," I say through gritted teeth, holding onto the my and Charlotte's hope that Thomas can at least be professional. Maybe Adam and Ethan will be decent enough to make up for him.

"Well, Thomas here is the team leader. He'll show you the ropes."

"Great."

"Let me know if you need anything, Jamie."

"I will. Thank you, Renard."

Thomas beckons for me to follow and I do.

He gets right down to business. “You’ll be working over here. This is the dispatching board. When you get a 911 call, you’ll press this button here to answer it, and this one to patch yourself through to my radio. If I’m not available, go to the next channel by using this lever. Got it?”

“Got it.” I grab a notepad and start making notes. I know I can’t afford to make mistakes in a job like this.

“Right, then we’ll leave you to it. If you need to use the bathroom or go on lunch, ask one of the other dispatchers down the hall to cover your station. We can’t afford to have any station unmonitored.”

“I understand, Thomas. I won’t let you down.”

He gives me a stiff nod before leaving, taking Ethan and Adam with him. I can’t help watching their three fine asses as they go. All the physical work they do in their jobs is *really* working for their figures. I find myself blushing at the thought and quickly put my mind back to the job, going over my interaction with Thomas in my head.

It wasn’t so bad, really. He was short with me, but not exactly rude. It’s not like I need to be friends with him. I just need to work with him.

It’s not long before the first call comes in. I click the button to answer. “Hello?”

“Emergency services, calling fire station twenty-two, come in, please.”

“Yes, you’ve reached fire-station twenty-two. How can I help you?”

I wish they’d given me a script to read from, to say all the correct things. I’m sure there must be one, but Thomas seemed in such a hurry to get away from me that he didn’t bother to cover that.

“We’ve got a house fire at sixteen Barnon Avenue. Send first responders immediately.”

“Sixteen Barnon Avenue,” I repeat, writing it down. “I’m on it.”

“Emergency services out.”

There’s a click on the other line as the operator hangs up.

I click the button to take me to Thomas’ radio, but all I get is static. Ok, that’s fine. There must be a problem with the radio, or maybe he’s offline. I can just get Ethan or Adam.

I reach for the lever and try to pull it down, only to have it veer to the left.

Fuck.

I had assumed that the lever went only up and down. It seems that it goes in all directions, and I have no idea which way to pull it in.

I try going down and the intercom crackles to life.

“Simon coming in.”

Who the hell is Simon?

“Uh, is Adam or Ethan there?”

“I’m sorry, but there isn’t an Adam or Ethan working at the fifteenth station. Who is this?”

Fuck and double fuck. This is a disaster. Someone could be burning to death right now and I’m fiddling with levers.

I shove it to the left instead, but I get static again.

Abandoning the switchboard entirely, I leap to my feet and fly through the halls.

“Thomas! Ethan, Adam!”

I don’t know where they are, but they must hear me shouting, because they tumble out of a room to my right.

“What’s wrong?” Thomas demands.

“You have a call – a house fire, sixteen Barnon Avenue.”

“Why didn’t you radio us!”

“I couldn’t! It wasn’t working!”

Thomas glares at me before brushing past. Ethan and Adam follow him, leaving me staring after them, shaking. I

make my way unsteadily back to the switchboard. I messed up, and it was only my first dispatch.

No, *Thomas* messed up. If he had just taken the time to explain properly, I would have known how the switchboard worked and I would have been able to put them on the case immediately.

Somehow, I don't think that excuse is going to help whatever poor soul could be dying of smoke inhalation right now.

I wait on tenterhooks, resisting the urge to try to radio them and find out what's happening. I'm sure they're very busy right now and don't need me pestering them for news. I'll find out soon enough, when they return.

Such logical arguments are all well and good, but they do little to quell my rising anxiety. Surely, this is taking too long. What if they got to the scene too late? What if the building collapsed on them because they didn't get there on time?

I don't like Thomas, but I would never wish him dead, and I don't even know Ethan and Adam. They could be wonderful people, for all I know. Wonderful people who I may have sent to their deaths. The fact that it's not my fault is little comfort right now.

I'm in the midst of trying to talk myself out of my impending panic attack when the door opens and Adam, Ethan and Thomas troop in.

Their uniforms are a little singed, but other than that, they look fine.

I nearly collapse in relief, clutching the doorframe for support. It's ok. I didn't mess up irretrievably. Unless –

“The people in the house? Was anyone hurt?”

Thomas turns his glower on me. “Some minor burns – burns that could have been avoided if you *did your job* properly.”

Minor burns. That's not great, but it's so much better than it could have been. I take what feels like the first full breath

since I realized that stupid lever didn't work like I expected it to.

"I'm glad everyone is ok."

"Ok? People are injured because of your incompetence!"

Right, now that's just going too far.

"You know what? Maybe if you had explained properly, I would have been able to call you sooner, and there wouldn't have been any injuries!"

"What are you talking about?"

"The lever, Thomas! Oh, just pull the lever – well, your radio wasn't going through, and you hadn't bothered to tell me which way to pull the lever. I did pull it, and it took me through to another fire station! My second attempt just ended in static!"

Thomas doesn't even have the good grace to look embarrassed. "It should be self-evident! Did you not pull the thing to the right?"

"Why the hell would that be self-evident?"

Adam throws up his hands. "Left to right, Jamie! That's how we read, how we right... it's supposed to be instinctual – to most people, at least. Are you dyslexic or something?"

"No, I am not dyslexic, I just don't have the ability to read your fucking minds!"

"Well if you can't even pick up such simple things, then maybe you don't belong here!"

"Shut up, Thomas! You never were going to give me a fair chance, were you? You –"

"I knew hiring you was a mistake!" Thomas rants. "I advised Renard against it, but no, he insisted you were the best candidate for the job. I should have –"

"Enough." Ethan cuts smoothly into our screaming match. "Arguing isn't going to change anything. Jamie, why don't you come with me? I'll show you how to use it properly."

“Thank you, Ethan.”

I give Thomas and Adam a dark look, which they return in kind. Turning my back on them, I follow Ethan back to the control room.

“It’s quite simple once you get the hang of it, really, but there’s a trick to it. This thing tunes into different stations. To get to our station, you pull it to the right, here. Down and to the left gets you to other stations, and up is back to emergency services.”

“That seems like an incredibly bizarre system. Why aren’t there just buttons for all this?”

“A lever is quicker than buttons and, in this job, speed saves lives.”

I suppose that makes sense. “So, it’s like tuning a radio? I’ll just have to fiddle with it until I get it right?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it quickly. You probably won’t have to use it much anyway. Thomas’ radio is almost always working. It was just plain luck that the battery needed replacing today and he didn’t realize.”

“He didn’t charge it?” I ask in disbelief. How irresponsible can you get?

“No, he charged it for the full time it needed to be charged, but the battery was old and faulty, and it died within ten minutes of him taking it off charge and he didn’t realize. I think he was in the bathroom when the battery low signal beeped.”

I suppose that makes sense. I’m annoyed that I don’t have anything to blame Thomas for.

“Well he still messed up when he was explaining this stuff to me. How in the world was I supposed to know all these lever directions?”

“Don’t be too hard on him. Some people are good at teaching and others just aren’t. You often don’t think to explain things that are obvious to you.”

“I guess.” I sigh, glancing at Ethan out of the corner of my eye. He’s very close to me, and his chiseled jaw is driving me to wild.

I wonder what it would be like to kiss him. I could lean over and do it, right now.

Of course, that would be an incredibly stupid idea. It’s not as if a guy like Ethan would ever be interested in someone like me.

And yet, I’m positive he’s thinking the same thing, too. I see his eyes flick down to my lips before meeting mine again.

I lick my lips. “It seems I’ve messed up, Ethan. How can I possible make it up to you?”

Ethan grins as he picks up my meaning. “Well, I’m sure we can think of something.”

The two of us lean in, rapidly closing the space between us.

“Well, I’m sure we can think of something.”

THOMAS

Ethan must be done explaining to Jamie by now. I don't know what the two of them are chatting about, but this is time for work and not for chat. I kick the door open and enter the room.

Jamie squeaks in alarm and jumps up. I narrow my eyes suspiciously at her and Ethan. They are sitting awfully close to one another, and now Jamie is blushing hard.

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” Ethan says calmly. “I was just finishing up showing Jamie what to do.”

The fact that he’s calm says nothing. He’s trained to remain calm under immense pressure. I’m more interested in Jamie. She’s red as a beet and refusing to look at Ethan or me.

Did something... did something happen between them? I don't like the idea. Jamie is an employee and Ethan shouldn't be taking advantage of her.

If something did happen, neither of them look ready to spill the beans any time soon. Well, I'll just have to keep a close eye on them both. I can't have unprofessional behavior going on here under my watch.

My insides squirm guiltily at the thought. I know I was unfair with Jamie earlier. I'm not happy to have her here and I

took my feelings out on her. I didn't explain properly and we both know it. I'm not going to back down and apologize, but I should at least try to make it up to her.

She improvised in a difficult, unforeseen situation, and it all turned out alright in the end. I remember Melanie's first day. She turned down the volume of her ringer to take a personal call – which is absolutely not allowed – and forgot to turn it on again. She missed three 911 dispatches like that. It was a disaster and it was a miracle she didn't get fired. She shaped up in the end, though. I was sad to see her leave.

“Ethan, let's go,” I snap. He nods and gets up, throwing Jamie a parting smile as he goes.

The rest of the day is easy – no calls come in. Ethan, Adam and I spend time hanging out in the rec room. Ethan and Adam carefully avoid the subject of Jamie, which has me leaving the station in the evening in a relatively good mood.

Unfortunately, I bump into Jamie on my way out – quite literally. She's fiddling with her handbag and not watching where she's going. I try to step out of the way, but I'm not quick enough and we collide.

She gives another squeak of alarm, just like the one she did when I walked in on her and Ethan earlier, and it's rather adorable. She starts falling backward and I reach out to steady her.

“Careful now. We don't want you getting injured on your first day.”

“No, I – thank you, Thomas.” Jamie pulls away and turns, but not before her eyes flick up and down my body. I've seen those looks from her before, and try as I might, I haven't been able to resist checking her out in return.

Of course, I've never tried anything with her. She's my best friend's daughter. I've known her since she was sixteen.

She's not sixteen now, though. She's an adult and a stunning one at that. I wonder how mad David would be if I tried to sleep with her.

I shove that thought angrily out of my head. Jamie hasn't even been here a day and already she's causing a disruption. It's not her fault that she's attractive and that the disruption she's causing is in my own mind, but it still irks me to no end.

I go home with Jamie on my mind, thinking of how her ass looked as she walked away from me. By the time I step into my apartment, I'm half-hard.

Well, fuck.

I could take a cold shower, but that would be miserable, and I don't want to do it. No, I'll indulge myself in this. After all, there's no harm in a fantasy, right?

I get into the shower and turn it on hot. I think back to the argument from today and imagine it going a very different way.

"YOU MESSED UP, Jamie. You messed up badly and I'm going to see you fired for it."

"What? Thomas, you can't! Please, I need this job."

"Well... maybe I could be persuaded otherwise."

"What can I do. I'll do anything."

"On your knees. Show me how much this job means to you."

I take my already hardening cock out of my pants. Jamie doesn't hesitate, going smoothly to her knees, as though she's done this a thousand times.

She starts licking along my shaft, pressing soft kisses along the sides before taking just the tip into her mouth. She looks up at me as she sucks softly and I groan, my head falling back and my eyes slipping shut. Her mouth feels so good, and her tongue is positively magical.

Jamie takes me in deeper, right until my cock is hitting the back of her throat.

She starts bobbing up and down on my cock, pausing every now and then to swipe her tongue over the head. With one hand, she reaches into my pants and starts fondling my balls.

It's all too much. I can't resist her. I grab her hair, controlling her movements and start fucking her face in earnest.

Jamie doesn't seem to mind at all. In fact, her pupils darken, and she moans around my cock, sending delicious vibrations all the way through my length. Her jaw hangs loosely open as she lets me do what I will, taking what I want.

Her hands come up to clutch at my ass, moving with me, encouraging me.

I glance up to see that Ethan and Adam have their cocks out. They're pumping themselves furiously, their eyes fixed on Jamie.

"Jamie – fuck, your mouth – JAMIE!"

I come down Jamie's throat, pulsing into her in hot bursts as my orgasm sweeps me away in wave after wave of ecstasy.

Jamie swallows it all, pulling back and licking her lips before licking my cock clean.

She doesn't break my gaze as she reaches into her pants and starts fingering herself.

Watching Jamie get herself off to what we just did is so hot that it sends a twitch through my spent cock.

Beside us, Ethan groans at the sight, coming into his hand.

Jamie's hand is working quickly in her pants and she's breathing in short gasps.

I want to touch her, and I move to do just that, but I'm too late. She cries out as she comes, and I see a wet patch appearing at the crotch of her pants.

"Fuck," Adam gasps, as he comes as well.

Jamie falls to her hands and knees, panting, revealing her cleavage perfectly, which is glistening with a fine sheen of sweat.

I LET OUT a strangled cry as I come in the shower, so hard it makes my knees weak and I have to lean against the wall behind me.

I close my eyes, letting the hot water wash over me, as if it can wash away what I've just done.

Masturbating to the thought of a colleague, fuck what's wrong with me, not to mention she's my best friend's daughter.

Well, there's nothing I can do about it now. In this line of work, you quickly learn that agonizing over regrets and past mistakes will destroy you faster than anything else. I can only move on and try to make sure it doesn't happen again.

I think back to the scene in my mind and my spent cock twitches.

Yeah, right. I'm fooling myself if I think it won't happen again, but for now, I allow myself to believe the lie.

I manage to avoid Jamie the next morning. I don't know quite how I'm going to look her in the eye after having such a vivid fantasy of her mouth on my cock. I'm worried that I'll get frustrated or stumble over my words. Both of those things are extremely unlike me and would be highly embarrassing, not to mention Ethan and Adam would no doubt tease me for having a thing for Jamie. Which I absolutely do not have.

Fortunately, I'm not given long to ruminate on my disturbed thoughts. My radio crackles to life.

"Thomas?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Fire on six Hudson street."

"On it, Jamie."

Adam and Ethan are already getting up. I slide into the driver's seat and they quickly take their places in the back of the truck. I turn the sirens on and we head out.

By the time we arrive at the scene, there's smoke everywhere, but once getting inside, it seems that the smoke is

the worst of it.

“Someone left an oven on again,” Ethan grumbles as he turns it off at the switch. Adam and I spray down the few flames that are licking the walls.

Luckily, no one seems to be home, and we got here in time to stop the fire from spreading. The building will still need to be evacuated temporarily because of the smoke, but all in all, it was an easy call.

We return to the station and I head to the showers to get the smell of smoke out of my hair. I take a quick shower and go into the changing room to get dressed, drying myself and wrapping a towel around my waist.

The door opens and I look up, expecting to see Adam or Ethan, but it’s not either of them.

It’s Jamie.

She lets out another one of her adorable squeaks of alarm and quickly covers her eyes with her hand.

“I’m sorry, Thomas! I got turned around – I thought this was the women’s bathroom.”

Perhaps I should be mad, but she looks so mortified that I can’t find it in myself to reprimand her.

“It’s ok, Jamie. Accidents happen.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeats. “I should know the layout of this place by now. I honestly thought I was going through the right door.”

“Hey.” I go over to her and pull her hand off her eyes. It’s not like I’m standing here naked, after all, I have a towel around my waist. “It’s alright. Like I said, accidents happen. At least your accident didn’t cause a building fire.”

“The call you were just on?”

“Yeah, some idiot left the oven on. I swear, at least half of our calls are because of fucking ovens or stoves left on. You’d think that with how many people die in house fires each year,

they'd learn to turn their appliances off, but no, they insist on leaving them on, and then we have to deal with it."

I pause in my rant to find Jamie grinning at me. "Well, I always turn my stove and oven off. It's one of the things on my checklist before I leave the house."

"You have a checklist before you leave the house?" I ask, impressed.

Jamie nods, and I can't help but notice her eyes taking in my half-naked body. I know I'm well-built, a byproduct of having to remain fit and healthy for the job I do. I figure that if she's looking at me, it's only fair that I get to look at her in return.

Her long red hair is loose today, and it brings out her green eyes even more than the braid of yesterday did.

Her breasts look particularly good in the top she's wearing. It's not overly tight, but it's cut in a way that hugs her form perfectly. I imagine taking one breast in my hand and rubbing my thumb over the nipple. I could –

No, I'm going to stop right there. The last thing I need is to be getting hard in front of Jamie while I'm wearing nothing but a towel.

"You were saying?" I force out. "About the checklist?"

"Yeah, I want to make sure I'm prepared for every situation, so I have a little checklist. Handbag, keys, pepper spray, water, energy bar, stove off, alarm set, doors locked, make sure the water is turned off."

"That seems like a lot of things." I have to admit, I'm impressed. I wouldn't have the energy to do half that stuff every time I left the house.

Jamie shrugs. "It's become second nature by now. Anyway, I'll leave you in peace. Um... which way to the women's bathrooms, please?"

I chuckle. "Down the hall to the left. Don't sweat it, Jamie."

"Thanks, Thomas."

She leaves the room smiling and no longer looking like she wants to sink into the floor and vanish. I smile after her. Surely, treating her well when she really did mess up makes up for my horrible behavior yesterday? She certainly doesn't seem to be holding a grudge.

Now, I just need to make sure she doesn't find out about the lustful thoughts I've been having about her. As long as I can keep a clear head and stop myself from getting hard around her, I should be good. Theoretically.

I go back to the rec room to join Ethan and Adam, who are chowing down on hot dogs. I grab two and shovel them eagerly into my mouth. I'm always hungry after going on a call.

Ethan looks up from his hot dog. "What kept you?"

"Ran into Jamie," I say vaguely.

"Oh yeah?" Something about my tone must have piqued Adam's interest, because he puts down his hot dog and turns to look at me.

"Yeah... she kind of walked in on me in the changing room."

Adam snorts. "That must have been something to see."

"She was mortified. I didn't give her a hard time about it."

"How noble of you. It's the least you owe her after your meltdown yesterday – you and Adam."

"I know," I agree. "I'm going to try to give her a chance. It's difficult, though."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Adam frowns at his hot dog. "I've never had trouble keeping my hands off the female employees, but Jamie... well, she's a different story entirely."

Perhaps I should feel jealous, but I don't – all I feel is relief. "I'm not the only one, then?"

Ethan shakes his head. "Not by a long shot. She's... she's really something."

“Does that mean you’re going to tell me what I walked in yesterday?”

Ethan goes red. “Nothing.”

“But?”

“Nothing... but I may have wanted it to be something.”

“I don’t blame you, mate.” I clap him on the shoulder. “Jamie is hotter than most of the fires we put out.”

Something crashes down just outside the room. It sounds like one of the pieces of equipment, and the noise is followed by a gasp and the sound of hastily retreating footsteps. I get up and walk outside to pick it up, looking around. I see a flash of red hair vanishing around the corner.

My heart goes cold, the same feeling I get when I know I’ve messed up at a scene and caused harm.

What if Jamie heard us? Will she go to Renard? Have us written up for inappropriate behavior?

Ethan and Adam appear behind me, and the three of exchange worried looks.

I don’t know if Jamie heard or not, and I’m not sure if asking her is the best strategy.

“What now?” Adam asks quietly.

I’m usually the one with all the answers, but this time, I honestly don’t know.

JAMIE

I hurry around the corner, cursing myself. Why did I have to knock over that stupid equipment? Why did I even stop in the first place? I was just walking past, but I heard my name and I couldn't resist.

Before I could hear anything else, though, I knocked over a pile of something and it was loud. I have no idea what it actually was – and I did the only thing that made sense. I ran before my eavesdropping could be discovered.

Now that I'm back in the control room, I try calming my rapidly beating heart. The last thing I need is to get caught spying on my co-workers during my very first week. Great way to make a good first impression, Jamie.

“Jamie, how's it going?”

I jump violently and spin around to face the door.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.” Renard takes a small step back, his smile faltering.

“No, I'm fine. Sorry, I guess I'm just not used to this place yet. Please, come in.”

Was he one of the guys in the rec room when I passed? Did he see me fleeing the scene? Am I about to get a talking-to or a warning?

Renard thankfully interrupts my mental spiral. “How is it going? I know it’s only your second day, but I thought I’d check in. I heard there was a bit of a mishap yesterday?”

A small, vindictive part of me wants to do my best to get Thomas into trouble, but I remember what Ethan said. In all likelihood, it was an honest mistake, and besides, that kind of attempt would probably reflect just as badly on me as it would on him.

I shrug. “It was just a small misunderstanding. It’s all cleared up now. Truthfully, I like the work so far. I mean, it’s a lot of pressure, but it’s nice, knowing that I’m sending help to people who need it.”

“That’s what I like to hear. You let me know if anything changes, yeah? We can’t have our people burning out.”

“I will, Renard. Thanks.”

“Have you seen your guys in action yet?”

“In action?”

“We take most of the new operatives for at least one ride along, so that they can see what they’re truly contributing to. If that’s something you want, anyway.”

“I’d love that!” It’s one thing knowing that a phone call I put through made a real difference in people’s lives. Seeing it is another thing altogether.

“Great. I’ll update Thomas. When the next call comes in, after you put it through, you hurry off to the fire truck. If you’re there when the guys are ready to go, they’ll take you along.”

I wonder what Thomas will say when Renard breaks the news that I’m to be tagging along on their next call. Will he argue? I’d like to see that, and not just because I’d love to see Thomas lose an argument to his boss. He’s sexy when he’s angry, I can’t deny that much.

We don’t get any calls for the rest of the day. There are some calls to the station, but they are routed to other teams. I’m not sure what formula is used to decide which dispatcher

gets which call, but I'm pleased when the next day, my line crackles to life.

"Emergency services, calling fire station twenty-two, come in, please."

"Fire station twenty-two responding." At least I know the script now, courtesy of Ethan. Apparently, it's another thing Thomas should have explained to me but failed to do.

"House fire at fifty-two Yaxen street."

"Understood. Dispatching first responders now. Station twenty-two out."

"Emergency services out."

I put the call through to Thomas' radio. So far, I haven't had to use The Lever of Doom again, but I have my eye on it. I've memorized the notes I wrote on it, and it won't get the better of me again.

"Thomas here."

"Thomas, you're up. House fire at fifty-two Yaxen street."

"Understood, thanks, Jamie."

There isn't a script for talking to the guys I work directly with, and the one for emergency services is easy enough. As soon as my end of the line clicks dead, I'm up and running, determined to make it to the fire truck in time.

Sure enough, I skid into the room a full ten seconds before the guys and pause to catch my breath.

Thomas scowls when he sees me, but doesn't question my presence, which means Renard must have briefed him.

"Well? Are you getting in or not?" He gestures impatiently and I hurry to get into the truck beside Adam and Ethan.

Thomas turns the sirens on and we screech out of the station.

Adam turns to me with a severe look. "Right, when we get there, you're to stay well back, you understand? We don't need you getting in the way and getting hurt."

“I understand, Adam. I have no intention of getting in the way of you doing your job. I’m just curious to see how it all works. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“We’d better not.”

I choose not to respond, demonstrating by my silence how unobtrusive I can be. I glance at Ethan, hoping for a smile or a nod, but he’s busy fiddling with some of his gear and doesn’t notice the look.

When we come to a stop, the guys are all business. They hoist their gear on and clomp out of the truck. I follow at a distance, coming to a halt with the other bystanders on the sidewalk.

I watch, transfixed, as Adam, Ethan and Thomas rush into the burning building without hesitation. I can’t see what’s happening in there, but there is smoke billowing out of two of the windows. I can hear someone screaming inside and edge forward a bit.

Thomas appears out of the smoke, half-carrying a young woman. He helps her to the waiting ambulance before rushing back into the building. Adam and Ethan come out next, both helping residents evacuate the building. One of them is unconscious, his head flopping around to the side as Adam carries him over his shoulder.

I watch as Adam carefully lays the unconscious man on a stretcher before going back in.

The building is starting to make concerning grunting and groaning noises, I’m afraid of what will happen if it collapses while the guys are still inside it.

As if reading my mind, they all run out at top speed. Thomas is shouting instructions, beckoning wildly. They are barely clear when the building behind them collapses violently, sending sparks, smoke and dust everywhere.

I expect that to be the end of it, but no, they are already going in with the hoses. The fire has burned up so much already that it doesn’t take much to burn through.

Soon, there is nothing left of the fire but smoke. If it were me, I'd be ready to drop by now, but Thomas, Ethan and Adam are already sorting through the rubble. I don't know how anyone could have survived that, but if they did, the guys seem set on finding them.

Cameras are clicking madly, but I don't care for recording the moment. I'm sure that every second of it is going to be branded into my memory.

Thomas calls out and Ethan comes over to help him. Together, they lift a heavy beam off a young man and carefully clear a safe path for the paramedics to come and stabilize his spine before loading him onto a stretcher.

They manage to pull another three people out of the carnage. Unfortunately, two of them are declared dead on the scene, but another is rushed to the hospital. She doesn't look good to me, but I remind myself that it isn't my area of expertise and that it could well be worse than it looks.

After what feels like an eternity, Thomas signals Ethan and Adam, and the three of them head toward the truck.

“Jamie? Are you coming?”

I force my head to turn and look at Ethan. “Yeah. I'm coming.”

It's difficult to get my feet to move, and I stumble slightly. Ethan reaches out a gloved hand and steadies me. “Are you alright? That was a pretty hectic call for your first time out watching.”

“Is it always like that?”

“Nah, this one was a tough one. Usually, it's just come in, put out a flaming oven and get out. I think the problem here was that it wasn't reported in time. That's often the case when the fire gets out of control. Everyone assumes that someone else has already called 911.”

That's not a problem I'd thought of, and immediately vow to myself never to be one of those people.

I'm quiet in the car. Thomas, Ethan and Adam are talking calmly as though nothing life-changing just happened. They discuss their gear and the specifics of what they did during the fire, analyzing what they can do better next time.

If I wasn't in awe of them before, I am now. They're not only good at what they do, but they're clearly dedicated to their jobs. The bravery and commitment it must take to run into a burning building, then have a rational discussion about doing so again right afterward... it's inspiring to see.

When we get back to the station, Ethan gives me a kind smile. "Go take a break, Jamie. You've earned it."

Then he starts taking off his firefighting suit.

My mouth goes dry. He's covered in sweat underneath – understandably. He's been running around and doing heavy lifting in close proximity to a fire. Of course, he's going to be sweaty. It shouldn't catch me off guard.

It's not the sweat that takes me off guard, exactly. It's the way his clothing clings to his skin, the way his hair sticks to his forehead as he pushes it back, the way his muscles gleam under the light...

Beside him, Adam and Thomas start doing exactly the same thing. I know I'm staring, but I can't seem to bring myself to stop.

Then I remember what I just witnessed.

Guys like them would never be interested in someone like me. Who am I, really? Just some dispatcher. I'm not brave like they are. I took this job because I need the money not because I'm truly passionate about what I do. Sure, it's satisfying to know that I'm helping people, but I'm not committed enough to put my life on the line for that.

My mind flashes back to Mike, to the endless fights we had toward the end.

Useless bitch. Ugly, disgusting whore. Worthless, pathetic, stupid.

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to think of Charlotte. I pull her face into my mind, remembering her assure me that I am none of those things. I believe her... for the most part.

Still, after seeing them in action, I realize that guys as hot, brave and competent as Thomas, Adam and Ethan would never see anything in me.

My face burns as I remember how close I was to kiss Ethan on my first day here. And I'd even fooled myself into thinking he wanted me too. Maybe I am as stupid as Mike always said I was.

“Jamie? Are you alright?”

I shake myself slightly, forcing my gaze to meet Ethan's. “I'm fine. Thank you for taking me, Ethan. It was... illuminating.”

When he hears what a hard call it was, Renard gives me the rest of the day off, which I gratefully take. I go home and run myself a hot bubble bath. I'm in need of some pampering right now.

I'm just getting out when a noise coming from outside the apartment nearly has me slipping and cracking my head against the bathtub.

It sounds like someone is climbing up the fire escape.

No one has any good reason to climb up the fire escape, not now when there is no fire or any other kind of emergency.

Panic starts to set in as my mind turns to Mike. I remember the letters, the threats, the sudden appearances... the police had only granted me a restraining order when one witness came forward and corroborated that they saw Mike try to choke me.

I wrap a towel around myself and creep through to the living room.

The fire escape outside rattles.

ADAM

I barely look up as Ethan's phone rings. We're relaxing after the tough call and I'm fully invested in devouring the cheeseburger in front of me.

The tone of his voice, however, gets my attention.

"What? Ok, I'm on my way. Send me a pin of your address."

Ethan hangs up and dashes out of the room. The cheeseburger falls to the floor as I hurry after him. Thomas is still in the shower – he tends to take longer showers, though he denies it – leaving Ethan and me alone in the rec room.

"Ethan, what's up?"

"It's Jamie."

"Jamie?"

"I left my number in her locker, just in case she needed to contact one of us. She just called in a panic – she thinks someone might be breaking into her apartment."

"So call 911! They can get police there faster than you can be at her place."

"She lives just around the corner. I'll take the truck. The sirens should scare any potential home invaders away."

I growl under my breath as I follow him. This is so against the rules, but I'm not letting Ethan walk into a potentially dangerous situation alone.

Ethan throws himself into the driver's seat and I take the passenger. He puts the sirens on and chucks his phone at me. "Hold this."

I put the phone on loud as Google rattles off directions. Ethan was right; Jamie is close.

We pull up at her apartment building and run up the stairs.

"Jamie! Jamie, it's Ethan and Adam! Open up!"

A moment later, the door opens, revealing Jamie in just a towel. I push past her, my eyes roving over the apartment. I check the windows and the back door. Nothing seems out of place.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Ethan putting his hands on Jamie's shoulders. "What happened, Jamie? Did you see anyone? Hear anything?"

"I heard something." She sounds more shaken than I've ever heard her, even after that hectic call we had earlier today. "Someone coming up the fire escape."

I gesture for Ethan to stay where he is. "I'll check it out."

Ethan leads Jamie to the couch while I go to look at the fire escape. It's empty and doesn't look disturbed in any way. I return in time to see Jamie slipping into a gown. Ethan is chivalrously looking away, and I quickly do the same thing.

"Whoever it was, they're gone now. Do you want to call the police?"

Jamie hesitates, then shakes her head. "I was probably just imagining things. I'm sorry I freaked out. I didn't mean to call you both out here."

Maybe I should be annoyed for the unnecessary call out, and the trouble we will no doubt get into for it, but I'm not. Jamie looks on the verge of tears and her hands are shaking slightly. Whatever happened has her severely distressed. She

may not have made the best first impression on the job, but I'm not heartless.

I grab a blanket and put it around her shoulders before going to the kitchen. There's a coffee maker there. I squint at it, wondering what all the different buttons do.

Fuck if I know.

I google the brand and download some quick instructions. I can hear Ethan talking quietly to Jamie in the other room. I can't make out his words, but I know that tone of voice. It's the same voice he uses to comfort shaken fire victims and their family members.

It probably takes longer than it should, but I eventually get the coffee machine to spit out a decent-looking mug of coffee. I take it to Jamie and hand it to her.

"Oh, thanks, Adam."

She takes a sip and doesn't gag, so I'm counting that as a success.

"I'm sorry," Jamie repeats. "You don't need to stay here with me."

No way am I leaving her in this state. I'll need to find a way to convince her to let us stay, at least until she's stopped shaking. "Well, we're here now, so you may as well entertain us. Tell us something about you. I already know that you have a coffee machine that seems to run on a mixture of science and black magic."

Jamie chuckles. "Yeah, I'm surprised you figured out how to use that thing. The first time I tried, it was a disaster. Boiling milk all over the floors and counters – it's a miracle I didn't get badly burned. Took forever to clean up."

"Good thing I speak the language of the ancient coffee gods."

Ethan snorts. "More like you speak the language of Google. Which isn't difficult, considering how many languages Google speaks."

I grin. "Yeah, maybe."

Jamie looks to be reviving over her cup of coffee. “Thanks for coming out like you did, really. I appreciate it.”

“Any time,” Ethan says easily. “We’re a family at station twenty-two. We take care of each other.”

“Care to tell us what had you so scared?” I have a suspicion that there’s more to it than a rattling fire escape, and Jamie’s suddenly closed-off expression confirms it.

“I just got scared. It was silly.”

She doesn’t want to tell us. That’s fair enough. She barely knows us, after all. I’m surprised she didn’t tell Thomas. On second thoughts, no, I’m not surprised. She and Thomas don’t exactly get along. Ethan has been kind to her.

I realize that I’ve been letting Thomas’ negative opinion of Jamie shape my thoughts around her and that has to stop. I need to judge her on her own, not filtered through Thomas’ views.

Maybe getting to know her is in order. “We sometimes like to go out for drinks after work, Jamie. Maybe you should join us on Friday. We can get to know each other a little better. We’re going to be working together, after all.”

Jamie hesitates. “I don’t know... will Thomas be ok with that?”

“Thomas is a big boy. He can deal.” Ethan frowns. “I don’t know what your history with him is, but he’s not an idiot. He knows that he needs to learn to work with you. If you can bury the hatchet, then I’m sure he can as well.”

“I... alright, then. I’d like to join you.”

“Great.” I realize that I’m actually looking forward to it. Perhaps it’s just that this little experience has brought us closer, but I’m looking forward to getting to know Jamie a bit better. I wonder what her secrets are and if she’ll ever be comfortable enough to share them with us.

As I watch Jamie sip on her coffee, I find myself wanting to be someone who she trusts.

* * *

“CHEERS!” Ethan, Jamie and I all smile at each other as we clink our glasses. Thomas reluctantly clinks his glass with ours, his expression sour. It turns out that Ethan and I underestimated his ability to look past his feelings for Jamie and share a friendly drink with her.

However, he was outvoted two-to-one, so here he is.

Ethan leans in a little. “So, Jamie, tell us about your first week. How has it been working for station twenty-two?”

“Honestly? It’s been intense. I never expected to get this exhausted just sitting at a desk all day... but I’m actually loving it.”

I grin at her. “We’re getting you hooked. Once you start saving lives, it’s an itch you need to scratch.”

Jamie blushes. “I’m hardly saving lives. Not like you guys are.”

“That’s not true.” Thomas takes a sip of his drink before continuing. “You’re part of the emergency response process, which means that any lives saved have you to thank as well as us. We couldn’t do what we do without all the support staff at the station. Everyone from the dispatchers to the cleaning crew is helping us save people and you all deserve recognition.”

It’s clear that Jamie is surprised by Thomas’ compliment, but he’s right. Jamie may not be running into burning buildings, but she’s doing something I certainly couldn’t do. There’s no way you’d get me to sit at a fucking desk and take high-pressure phone calls, no matter how many lives it saved.

“Thanks, Thomas. I guess I never thought of it like that.”

“It’ll change you, working this job, but those changes will likely be for the better.”

Jamie nods slowly. “What’s the best thing about the job for you guys? More than helping people, I mean.”

I know the answer to that one easily. “For me, it’s seeing the looks of relief on their loved ones’ faces as the victims are pulled out of burning buildings. There’s nothing quite like it.”

“I like the rush I get,” Ethan puts in. “Knowing that I have the power of life and death. The fire may be determined to take those lives, but I can save them, and that’s an incredible high.”

“What about you, Thomas?”

“Me? I suppose I like the same things as Ethan and Adam... but I get the best feeling knowing I’m pushing myself to be stronger, better, faster. That way, I can save more people during the next call. Seeing what I can do now compared to ten years ago... well, a lot of people are alive who wouldn’t be if I hadn’t worked to be better.”

“You’re all so dedicated. It’s inspiring to see.”

“What about you, Jamie? What got you into this line of work?”

“Well, I’ve always worked well on phones, as well as held up decently under pressure. I used to work for a security company. I was the person in the camera room, calling security to the sources of different disturbances. That company went under, though, and I had to find new work. I figured an emergency dispatcher would be a good fit.”

We chat about work for a bit, discussing our various experiences. Ethan, Thomas and I share some of our more ridiculous calls, and we’re all laughing our asses off.

Jamie has plenty of stories to share as well, having worked for a security company. Apparently, people get up to the weirdest – and sometimes kinkiest – things on security cameras. Jamie swears that she even has copies of the tapes for some of them.

The conversation moves naturally from work to our personal lives. “Well, Ethan, Thomas and I all live in the same apartment building – next door to each other, actually.”

“How in the world did you manage that?”

“Well, we used to live together in a bigger house, but that spurred a bunch of rumors that we’re gay, which destroyed our prospects with women, so we decided that it would be better to live separately. We wanted to stay close, though, so we looked for ages until we found a place that had three vacancies.”

“I did wonder if you were gay at first,” Jamie muses. “You three *are* very close... but I’m surprised that anyone who knew you believed those rumors. I’ve only known you a week, and it’s clear on closer inspection that you’re just really good friends.”

“Not everyone sees it that way.” Thomas rolls his eyes. “They see three guys living together and they make assumptions, assumptions that are difficult to dislodge once they have been made.”

“Like I’d ever date Adam,” Ethan mutters, the corners of his lips twitching.

“Hey!” I shove him lightly. “For your information, I’d make an excellent gay boyfriend.”

“Then go do that... with someone else.”

“Too bad I’m straight.”

“Yeah, the gay guys of the world are weeping from the loss.” Thomas grins and dodges the balled-up napkin I flick at him.

Jamie chuckles. “Yeah, you’re not really doing much to prevent people from having misconceptions. Perhaps you should be less... you in public.”

I wave a hand. “Ah, we’re not that invested. Really, the only reason we cared about people thinking we’re gay was that anyone we tried to date thought we just wanted a beard.”

“Don’t you still care about that?”

Ethan sighs as he answers for all of us. “Dating is difficult in our line of work. It’s hard to love someone who runs into burning buildings for a living. Knowing that you could lose them so easily... well, it messes with you. I don’t really blame any of the women I’ve seen for leaving.”

“I suppose I can see the difficulty, but that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t try. You guys are heroes. You deserve to fall in love and have your own families – if that’s what you want, I mean.”

“It’s not that I don’t want that, exactly. I just don’t feel like it’ll ever happen for me.”

“Don’t say that, Ethan. The right woman is waiting out there for you, I know it.”

I see the way Ethan is watching Jamie. He clearly hasn’t missed that Jamie is wearing a low-cut dress that hugs her waist before flaring out at the bottom, swirling around her long legs, enhancing her delectable calves.

He’s looking at her like he can’t decide whether he wants to fuck her or marry her. It’s a dangerous look. I don’t want to see my friend get hurt.

After spending the evening with Jamie, it’s not that I don’t understand. Honestly, I like her and I would like to keep her as a friend, but she can never be anything more than that.

I close my eyes briefly as I think back to Christine. She was fifteen years younger than me, just like Jamie is. I should have known that an age gap like that would never work. It was inevitable, really, that she would leave me for a younger man.

Whether it was inevitable that she cheated on me to do so is another question, one I don’t have answer to, and I don’t intend to find out with Jamie.

We’re just paying the bill when Ethan asks Jamie the question I’ve been waiting all night for him to ask.

“So, Jamie, I was wondering, would you like to come out to lunch with me sometime?”

Thomas chokes on the last sip of his drink. Evidently, he was too wrapped up in his feelings about Jamie to pick up Ethan’s obvious feelings.

I have to admit I was kind of hoping he wouldn’t work up the courage to ask her out. Kind of a stupid hope to have of someone who runs into fires for a living.

We all turn as one to Jamie to see what she'll decide.

JAMIE

I dress particularly carefully on Wednesday. Not that I don't usually try to dress well for work, but today is different.

Today is my date – or not date – with Ethan. He never really specified what it was.

He just asked me out to lunch, and I said yes because I wanted to spend more time with him.

It had seemed simple at the time. Now, however, I'm beginning to realize that we should have clarified exactly what this is.

A date?

A meeting between friends?

Between colleagues?

Something else?

I should have made my position clear. I'd love a friendship date, but anything more than that, I simply can't do.

I toy with the idea of texting Ethan and asking him exactly what he meant when he asked me to lunch but then decide that would be a little weird. I'll just have to suck it up and live with the uncertainty. I'm sure it'll become clear soon enough. Hopefully.

It's probably not a date. It's not like Ethan would be interested in me in that way anyway. He surely only wants to be friends.

I get to work, but I don't see Ethan, Thomas or Adam. But that's not unusual. They're probably in the rec room.

Most days, I pop my head in to say hello, but today, I find my stomach too filled with nerves to do anything like that. I go straight to my desk and put on my headset, hoping that no calls come in and interfere with my lunch maybe-date.

My wish is answered, because lunch time comes, and though calls have come through to a few other dispatchers, none have come to me. I go to the rec room to look for Ethan, only to find him on the floor, with Adam and Thomas crouched down on either side of him.

"Um... is everything ok?"

"It's fine." Ethan sounds exasperated. "I just fell and knocked my head, that's all."

"You fell?" Ethan isn't exactly prone to tripping – none of them are. They wouldn't be very good at their jobs if they were.

"There was water on the floor. I think Ian must have spilled while washing up and didn't cleaned up after himself, again. I'm going to kill that guy."

"Until we've gotten you checked out, you're not killing anyone."

"I'm *fine*, Thomas. I've got things to do. Jamie and I are going out for lunch."

Thomas folds his arms. "No, you're not. You're going to the hospital to get checked for a concussion."

"Hell no, I'm not. Let's go, Jamie."

Ethan struggles to his feet. He has to struggle because both Thomas and Adam are trying to hold him back.

"We're not letting you walk out of here with a possible concussion," Adam grits out. "If you won't go to the hospital,

you're staying right here where we can keep an eye on you."

"I'm going out with Jamie. She can keep an eye on me. I'm sure she'll call an ambulance if I pass out or something."

"Does Jamie know the symptoms of a concussion? Has she had the extensive first aid training we've had? Well – have you?" Thomas shoots at me.

"No."

"Then if you're going out, we're coming with you."

"Agreed." Adam gives Ethan a look that dares him to argue.

Ethan ignores the look. "I promised Jamie –"

"I don't mind," I say quickly, breaking up the fight before it can get any further. "They can come along."

It's true – I really don't mind. I loved hanging out with all three of them last week and I'm eager to do it again.

"Are you sure? I can tell these guys to get lost if it's going to ruin things for you."

"It won't ruin anything," I promise. "It'll be fun. Besides, I don't want you developing symptoms of a concussion that I might miss."

Adam and Thomas both give Ethan smug looks and he sighs. "Fine. But I'm going to murder Ian when he gets back from his next call.

We go to a nearby diner and order lunch. I sit next to Adam, opposite Ethan and Thomas.

It's a small booth, and I can feel Adam's thigh pressed up against me. Ethan's foot brushes mine in the space under the table and I don't pull away. Thomas' eyes are intent as he looks at me, as though he's trying to figure something out. I'm starting to get very warm, despite the fact that it's a cold winter's day.

"How did that call go yesterday? You only got back after I left for the night."

Ethan rolls his eyes. “Another oven. This burned up the whole kitchen. No one was home, but the puppy had to be taken to the vet for smoke inhalation. The paramedics gave him some oxygen from one of the masks while they waited for the vet to arrive.”

“Aw, that’s adorable. I wish I’d seen that.”

“No, you don’t,” Thomas says shortly.

I raise an eyebrow.

“Seeing a puppy struggle to breathe and get in enough oxygen is heartbreaking,” Adam explains. “It’s lucky the paramedics were there with the oxygen.”

“Yeah, it was really nice of them to help out there.”

“Against regulations, but I can’t think of many who wouldn’t. I’d love a puppy,” Ethan adds. “I just wouldn’t have time. I work such long hours, and a puppy needs someone at home to train it, love it, let it out, that sort thing.”

“You could adopt an adult dog. They don’t need nearly as much training.” It’s something I’ve considered, but I wanted to wait until my financial position is stable enough to be sure I can afford to care for a pet.

“Yeah, but I’d still be leaving it alone for most of the day. I don’t think it would be fair to the animal, especially since I live in an apartment. Maybe if we were all living together in a house with a yard and one of us home a lot of the time...”

“You miss it, don’t you? Living together?”

Ethan nods. “Living alone can get lonely, even when your best friends are just next door.”

“We’ve considered moving back in together, now that it’s been established our prospects with women are practically nonexistent. Thomas and I are on board, but Ethan is holding out hope for a miracle in the romance department.”

I wonder if Ethan thinks I’m going to be his miracle. I certainly hope not. Whether this is a date or not, I’m certainly not ready for anything serious. After Mike... well, let’s just say that I’m off the market, permanently. I’m not risking

another guy getting abusive and obsessive. One crazy stalker is enough for a lifetime, thank you very much.

“What about you? You also live alone, right?”

I bring my mind back to the present to focus on Adam’s question. “Yeah, I do.”

“Well? Do you like it?”

“In some ways,” I say carefully. I’m happy not to be living with Mike anymore, but I’d feel a lot more comfortable with a roommate. I get scared a lot, when I hear weird noises and want someone to check them out and ensure that it’s not Mike sneaking around the restraining order.

The problem is, I don’t trust anyone else enough to live with them. I’m worried any guy would turn crazy like Mike did, and a woman would probably be in just as much danger from Mike as I am.

“I sense a story there.”

I don’t want to lie to Ethan, but I’m not ready to tell the whole truth, yet, either. “I lived with someone before. It...it wasn’t a good experience.”

There are a few moments of silence as the guys wait to see if I’ll say more, but I don’t. They all look curious, but they are considerate enough not to push me to talk. Not even Thomas knows about Mike, because I didn’t even tell my dad about him.

Mike had me so convinced that I was the crazy one that for a long time, I didn’t say anything to anyone. By the time I realized that I wasn’t the one with the problem, I was too ashamed to admit to having been foolish enough not to have realized how off the rails Mike truly is.

Only Charlotte knows the full truth and I have her sworn to secrecy.

Thomas breaks the short silence. “When you want to share, we’re here, Jamie.”

“Yeah, we are.” Ethan reaches across the table and brushes his hand lightly across mine. Adam does the same with my

other hand.

I realize, to my surprise, that I actually feel comfortable with them. It's strange, because I haven't felt comfortable with any man since Mike, and now, I'm with three of them and I'm perfectly at ease.

I suppose it makes sense.

Ethan and Adam have been in my apartment when I was half-naked, and they didn't try to take advantage of me. They were kind and comforting, and I have a feeling that despite our history, if Thomas had been there, he would have been much the same.

A small part of me wishes that they *had* tried to take advantage of me, but I know they wouldn't be interested in me in that way. They're too good for me.

Thomas and Adam didn't make the best impression on my first day, but after seeing them work, I realize that their reaction was because they care so much about their jobs, and I really can't be angry with them for that.

"What are you thinking? You suddenly look sad."

I look up at Adam in surprise. He certainly seems to have learned my expressions in a very short time. "I'm fine."

He gives me a piercing look that makes me feel like he can see me from the inside out, but of course, that's impossible.

Perhaps Thomas senses that I'm uncomfortable, because he changes the subject. "Well, we've spent all this time getting to know you, but we have yet to touch on the most important question."

I tense.

"Does pineapple belong on pizza?"

The tension breaks and I laugh. "Of course, pineapple belongs on pizza! That's the best part."

Ethan lets out a woot, while Thomas and Adam give me disgusted looks.

"I like pineapple on burgers, too."

Now even Ethan looks disgusted, and I can't stop laughing.

We move to discussing weird food tastes, which has us all laughing it up for a while. The conversation flows easily from there into common likes and dislikes. While we're all rather different, the four of us share a love of reading, though we tend to read in different genres.

Ethan and Adam are very excited to find out that I like horror movies. Thomas has always known this, but it hasn't really been relevant to him before. It's not like the two of us would have sat down and watched a movie together.

Now that we work with each other, things might be different. I find I really like the idea of watching something scary with the three guys, maybe all bundled up on the couch together in blankets – the best way to watch horror movies.

I jump up when I look at the time. “We have to go! Our lunch hour was up twenty minutes ago!”

Ethan sighs and gets up as well. “I suppose we had better get moving.”

“I can't believe I lost track of time! How much trouble are we going to be in?”

“Don't worry about it. There are plenty of other teams covering things. We'll just log that we took a longer lunch today and take a slightly shorter one tomorrow. Renard won't mind.”

This seems a very lax attitude toward people whose job it is to save lives. “I would have thought the rules would be more rigid.”

Thomas shrugs. “They usually are, but Renard has been practically begging us to take time off for... well, I'm not sure how long now. Trust me, he knows we're hard workers. He's not going to kick up a stink about one lunch.”

“Yeah, but he doesn't know that I'm a hard worker yet.”

Adam winks at me. “Don't worry, we won't tell. Renard barely looks at those logs anyway. Just log the time and take

less tomorrow. I bet he won't even notice it."

Ethan insists on paying, and the three of us leave. I'm still berating myself inside for losing track of time.

I open my mouth to continue the discussion, but before I can say another word, I catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of my eye.

I spin around, staring intently at the shop window, my hands suddenly clenched at my sides. Surely, I must have been mistaken. It's just someone who looks like him.

What if it isn't?

Memories of Mike's hands on my throat rear up to the surface, making my stomach roil and my head spin.

If he gets hold of me again, I'm afraid that he won't stop at scaring me. The next time, I won't walk away.

ETHAN

“Jamie?” I turn to see why she has fallen behind and do a double take.

The look of molten terror on her face has my heart freezing in my chest. I spin around, expecting to see a mad axe murderer coming for us at the very least, but there’s no one.

I turn back to her to find her face pale and her breathing shallow.

“Jamie?” I approach her cautiously, worried she might bolt at any moment. Beside me, Adam and Thomas move to either side of Jamie, their heads swiveling in every direction, looking for any hint of danger or anything that could have caused this sudden change of demeanor.

She doesn’t seem to hear me. I put my hands on her shoulders and give them a light squeeze. “Jamie, are you there? It’s Ethan. Come back to me.”

She blinks a few times before her eyes focus on me. “I – I’m sorry,” Jamie mumbles. “We should go back to work.”

“Don’t worry about work right now. Let’s get you sitting down.”

“No! I don’t want to sit down; I want to get out of here.”

“Ok, ok,” I relent. “I’m not taking you back to work, though, not in this state. Let me take you home.”

“Fine! Just get me out of here.”

It’s a mark of what a state she’s in that she simply agrees to skip out on the rest of the work day. I haven’t known her very long, but I know her well enough to realize that she’s conscientious and wouldn’t leave work for no good reason.

“I’ll tell Renard you’re not feeling well and you’re taking a sick day, and that Ethan took you home,” Adam murmurs. “Come on, Thomas.”

“We should go with her. Look at her.”

“We can’t all go,” Adam argues. “The team will already be two members down. Ethan has this.”

“Ethan, I want to go, now!”

Jamie looks on the verge of bolting and I quickly put an arm around her waist, leading her back toward the station. Thomas and Adam can sort out the details. I just want to make sure Jamie is ok.

We get to my car in the station parking lot and I open the door for her. Jamie gets in, jumping violently at the noise when I close the door behind her.

I try not to glower, worried it will scare her. I’m not an idiot. Jamie is afraid, and there has to be reason for it. First the fire escape incident, and now this. Someone has hurt her, I’m sure of it. If I ever get hold of them, I’m going to make them regret the day they were born.

I get into the car and set off. I remember the route to Jamie’s house and have us there in no time. She doesn’t get out of the car until I come around and open the door for her. When she does get out, she looks around carefully, examining every shadow.

“I’m not going to let anyone hurt you, Jamie.”

Jamie takes a deep breath and nods. Letting us into the apartment takes a few minutes, given how her hands are shaking, but she eventually manages it.

“You sit down. I’m going to check the apartment, to make sure no one is here.”

I doubt anyone would have been able to break in without leaving any sign, but Jamie's look of relief is enough to tell me that I'm making the right call. If searching the house will give her peace of mind, then that's what I'll do.

Despite not thinking I'll find anyone, I check thoroughly, searching every possible spot someone could be hiding.

"We're good," I tell Jamie as I walk back into the living room. She looks slightly better now, but still paler than I'd like. "How about I make us some coffee?"

"Let me do it. That coffee maker has a temper and it only likes me."

"It seemed to like Adam alright."

"Which is a small miracle. I don't want to test it on anyone else."

I shrug. Maybe Jamie will feel better if she's doing something with her hands.

I follow her though to the kitchen, where she starts bustling around the coffee maker.

I'm not paying much attention to the actual machine; I'm more interested in watching Jamie. In hindsight, perhaps I shouldn't have let her near heated electronic appliances so close after the incident, but hindsight is always twenty-twenty.

Jamie suddenly cries out, jerking her hand back as hot water spills onto the floor.

I'm up at once, pulling her away. The machine spits out all the water it has to spit and goes silent.

"I see what you mean about the temper," I murmur as I lift Jamie's hand in mine. It's already going bright red. "Do you have an ice pack?"

"Yeah, in the freezer."

I quickly go to the freezer and dig one out. I wrap it in a dish towel before pressing it to Jamie's burned hand. I lead her back to the living room and sit her down.

"First aid kit?" I ask softly.

“In the bathroom.”

I get the first aid kit and hurry back to the living room.

I raise an eyebrow as I look through it. “This thing is well-stocked.”

“I like to be prepared.”

“I can see that. Did you know that this is the best brand of burn dressing on the market, or is it just a coincidence that you got these ones?”

“No, I looked for those ones specifically. I do my research.”

“Well, it’ll pay off now. We’ll ice it for ten more minutes before dressing it but let me put some burn gel on under the ice pack for now.”

“I suppose you’re a good person to burn my hand in front of, if I have to burn it at all.”

“I do know how to deal with burns,” I agree as I take the tube of burn gel and lift the ice pack off Jamie’s hand. She winces slightly as I spread the gel over the burn as gently as I can.

“Sorry. The stinging should ease soon.”

I put the ice pack back, holding it on for her. I could probably attach it with one of the straps she has here, but I like holding her hand.

“Here, why don’t you take some painkillers?”

“I’m ok. It doesn’t hurt that bad.”

“It doesn’t hurt that badly now, while you still have adrenaline pumping through your veins. Trust me, it’ll hurt more later, and you’ll be wishing you had taken the painkillers.”

“I suppose it can’t hurt.”

Jamie struggles for a moment to get the ibuprofen out of the bottle with one hand.

“Here, let me.” I use my free hand to hold the bottle, leaving her free to take the lid off with her free hand. She fishes a pill out and swallows it dry, coughing a few times, but managing to keep it down.

We’re silent for a few minutes as I feel the ice pack slowly start to soften under my fingers, which are going numb, but I don’t let go. It’ll be time to apply the burn dressing soon enough.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“I told you, my coffee maker has a temper.”

“No, I mean before that. What got you so scared?”

Jamie shakes her head. “It was stupid.”

“It’s not stupid if it makes you feel that afraid.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fair enough.” I try to lighten the topic. “You know, I think your coffee maker heard me talking about wanting to use it. I think it may have suspected you were going to cheat on it.”

Jamie chuckles. “Maybe. It’s certainly set me straight for now.”

“Let’s get that dressing on.”

Jamie winces as I remove the ice and unwrap the burn dressing. I apply it as gently as possible to her hand. The burn isn’t serious enough to require seeing a doctor, but it’s a painful one and I’m definitely glad that Jamie has the necessary first aid supplies here.

“Thank you for taking care of me, Ethan.”

“Any time, Jamie.”

We’re sitting so close I can feel the heat of her skin, and as I look up into her eyes, I’m struck once more by how beautiful she is. I want her, but I’m not going to take advantage of her when she’s afraid. I’ll just have to be a big boy and keep it on my pants, at least for now.

“Well, our first date didn’t exactly go as planned, but I’m eager to have a do-over if you are.”

Jamie looks honestly surprised. “Date?”

“Yes. Our lunch date.”

“But – but I thought – I mean...”

“You thought what?”

“I didn’t think you’d be interested in me that way. I’m not... I’m not good enough for you.”

What the hell? What in the world would have her thinking that?

“Jamie, where is this coming from? Why would you think you’re not good enough for me?”

“It’s just – you’re so brave and handsome and passionate. I’m not attractive or intelligent or –”

“I’m going to stop you right there. I don’t know who fed you that bullshit, but they’re full of it, Jamie.” Probably the same person who hurt her, and it just makes me want to get my hands on them even more than before.

Jamie shrugs, but I can tell she doesn’t believe me.

Well, perhaps I should show her.

Maybe it’s wrong, given what happened earlier, but the idea that I may leave here with Jamie believing she’s unattractive and stupid is not something I’m willing to live with. I doubt she’d be amiable to taking an online IQ test – which I’m sure she’d ace – but my attraction to her is something that will be beyond easy to prove.

I put one hand on her face and lean in, watching her eyes, giving her a chance to back away. She holds my gaze with wide eyes, eyes filled with desire, and doesn’t pull back.

So, I close the distance between us and kiss her. Jamie makes a small noise of surprise before melting into the kiss. Her lips are soft and sweet against mine, and they set my body on fire.

I press my tongue forward, questing into Jamie's soft mouth and she opens for me. I plunder her mouth, taking her breath away as our tongues twining in the most delicious dance.

"Wait. Ethan, stop," Jamie mumbles, pulling back a little.

I pull back as well, trying to look into her eyes, but she won't meet my gaze. "Was that not ok?"

I'm already questioning my decision to kiss her. Maybe trying to prove to her how truly stunning she is was a bad idea. Now I've made her uncomfortable and –

"You don't have to kiss me just because you feel sorry for me."

Wait, what?

I stare at her for a moment, trying to comprehend her words. "Because I feel sorry for you?" I repeat dumbly. Perhaps it would be easier for me to follow her train of thinking if most of my brain's blood supply wasn't currently filling my cock.

"It's not your job to make me feel better about myself, though it's very kind of you to try."

What she's saying clicks into place.

"Jamie, that's not it at all. You're... you're the most beautiful woman I've ever met. I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you. Here." I take her unburned hand and pull it down, resting it on my hard cock throbbing in my pants. "Does this feel like I'm not attracted to you?"

Her eyes widen as she looks at me. "You... you really want me?"

"Let me show you how much."

Jamie hesitates for one further moment before nodding.

"You'd better tell me if you want to stop, because unless I hear the word from you, I am not stopping until I've kissed every inch of your body and had you screaming in pleasure on

my cock before you come so hard you turn yourself inside out.”

Jamie moans in response and leans in for another kiss. This time, she doesn't pull away, wrapping an arm around my neck and holding on for dear life as I kiss her senseless.

My cock is an aching bar of iron in my pants, but I ignore it for now, more interested in touching Jamie.

I push her back into the couch and crawl between her legs. I can't resist pressing my hard cock against her crotch, rubbing up against her. She feels so good that I worry I might explode in my pants, so I pull back ever so slightly.

I take the hem of Jamie's shirt and she sits up slightly to allow me to pull it over her head, exposing her beautiful breast popping out of the top of her bra. I make quick work of the bra, reaching around behind her to unfasten it and pulling first one arm and then the other through the straps.

Jamie's breasts bounce free, and on dear god, those are the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen. My mouth is magnetically drawn toward her nipples. Nothing except the word no would have stopped me in this moment. The house could collapse on us right now and I'd keep going for Jamie's nipples like a guided missile.

She gasps as I pull one nipple into my mouth and start sucking gently on it. It hardens instantly under the flicking of my tongue, becoming peaked and textured in my mouth. I smile around the nipple and nibble it lightly.

“Oh!”

I lift my head. “Too much?”

“Fuck no – do that again, harder!”

Grinning, I take Jamie's other nipple into my mouth, nipping at the sensitive flesh a little harder this time. Jamie cries out and writhes under me. Her hand reaches down under the waistband of her pants and I can see that she's fingering herself.

The sight drives me wild with desire.

“Don’t come yet,” I grit out.

Jamie nods frantically as she grabs my hair and pulls my head back down to her nipples.

I bite and suck, drinking up the noises Jamie is making. My pants are painfully tight around my cock and I can’t stand it anymore. I shuck the pants off and pull Jamie’s off as well, revealing her hand working her clit furiously.

I shove it aside, quickly replacing it with my own. I swipe my fingers down to Jamie’s pussy, collecting up some of her slick wetness and bringing it up to her clit before continuing where she left off.

I rub up and down with increasing speed.

“Oh yes. Fuck yes, Ethan, yes! Oh, I’m going to come!”

I pull my hand back, causing Jamie to moan in dismay.

“What did I say? You’re going to come on my cock. Do you want that?”

“Yes,” Jamie cries, her eyes wild and desperate, mirroring my own feelings. “Yes, I want your cock, Ethan! I want it right now!”

I take my hard cock in hand and give it two firm strokes. The sight of Jamie naked and begging for my cock is nearly enough to have me spilling just from those few touches, but I want to be inside her when I come more than I want immediate gratification.

“How do you want me, Jamie?”

“I don’t care! Just as long as I get you NOW!”

I’m certainly not arguing with that.

The couch isn’t the best place to do this, but there’s no way I’m taking the time to move to the bedroom. I put one of Jamie’s legs up on the side of the couch and the other with her foot resting on the ground, leaving her pussy spread open before me.

I guide my cock inside her, finding her soaking wet. I’m bigger than most guys, but I slide easily into her. I pause,

giving her a moment to adjust to my size.

“Move, Ethan! Please.”

I start thrusting, going slow at first, but my burning desire quickly gets away with me. I begin pounding into her pussy relentlessly. She wraps her bottom leg around my waist, pulling me in deeper with every thrust. Her short, choppy cries of pleasure spur me on.

“Touch yourself,” I growl. “Come for me, Jamie.”

Her hand flies to her clit. She’s barely touched it before she’s coming, her back arching as she screams and her pussy clenches wildly around my throbbing cock.

The pressure around my cock is too much and sends me over the edge as well. I spill into her, stilling as the strength of my release takes my breath away.

I pause there for a few moments, allowing us both to catch our breath before pulling out.

I collapse heavily on the couch next to Jamie. We’re both panting hard and covered in a light sheen of sweat. It only makes her look more beautiful.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” Jamie pants.

“You’d better believe it, because there’s a lot more where that came from, if you want it.”

“Oh, I want it.”

“Then come out with me. On a date that we both agree is a date.”

I expect Jamie to agree readily, but instead, she bites her lip and won’t quite meet my gaze.

“Jamie?”

“I’m sorry, Ethan, but I can’t.”

Oh.

I had thought that the thing about the date was just a misunderstanding. I hadn’t realized that she hadn’t wanted it to be a date.

Hurt washes through me. Could she not at least have told me she's not interested in me before sleeping with me? I probably would have done it anyway, but it would have been nice to know what I was getting myself in for.

"I understand."

I get up and start gathering my clothes.

"Ethan, wait."

"No, I think I should go."

"No – please, don't leave like this. I don't want things to be bad between us. I'm sorry, ok? I just – I can't."

"You don't need to explain yourself to me, Jamie. You never need to justify why you don't want to date someone. I'll see you at work, ok?"

"No, Ethan –"

I pull the last of my clothes on and head for the door. I can't bring myself to look back at her, but I catch a glimpse of her anguished face in a reflection from the window opposite her apartment as I walk away.

JAMIE

I've fucked up now and I know it. Ethan didn't do anything, but I could easily see how hurt and confused he was.

I feel like the worst person ever. Ethan is such a good guy. I should be over the moon that he wants to date me. I wanted to accept, I really did, but when I think of dating him, all I can think of is Mike. I thought Mike was a good guy too at first and look how that turned out.

I can't risk it. As much as I ache to accept his offer, I'm not going to put myself out there like that again. I already have one crazy stalker. I can't afford to have another one, let alone have that person be someone I have to work with.

I hate that I hurt Ethan, but what else was I supposed to do? Say yes when it's not what I really want? Dating him against my will wouldn't be fair to either of us.

I watch out of the window as Ethan gets into his car and leaves. He's probably going back to work. Well, what else would he do? I turned him down. It's not like he has a date to plan.

I'm thoroughly miserable as I go back to the coffee maker and eye it warily, wondering if it'll deign to give me coffee.

My hand throbs, but not as much as it would have done without Ethan's tender care.

I decide to forget about the coffee and spend the rest of the day in bed. I can read and try to forget my troubles for the day. Tomorrow is going to be hard enough, facing Ethan. The least I can do is spend what time I have left before that inevitable confrontation relaxing.

I always knew things would be hard with Ethan, but I didn't count on it being equally difficult with Thomas and Adam.

I pass Adam as I'm coming from the locker rooms and give him a friendly smile. "Hi, Adam."

Adam turns to glare at me. "Jamie."

Then he turns on his heel and stalks away.

What...?

Oh. Ethan must have told him. Of course, he did. Adam and Thomas are his best friends. He tells them everything. And now, Adam and Thomas are rightfully mad at me. No matter how good I think my reasons are, I still hurt Ethan, and I'm just going to have to deal with the consequences of that.

I'm on my way to my station when I pass Ethan. I'd been hoping to have more time to gather myself before having to face him, but I guess that's not going to happen.

"Hi, Ethan," I say in a small voice.

He gives me a very forced smile. "Hello, Jamie."

His voice is overly cheerful and sounds horribly fake. Maybe someone who didn't know him wouldn't notice, but I do.

"Ethan, look, I'm really sorry about –

"Can't talk now, Jamie, sorry. Got to run, you know how it is."

He turns and jogs away. I frown at his back. This job sometimes requires urgency, but right now, the only urgency

seems to be Ethan's desire to get away from me. It's not like we've received calls about any fires.

I go to my station thoroughly disheartened. Things were going so well, and then I had to go and mess it up. I should have known that if I allowed my desire for Ethan to get away with me, he'd ask me out afterward. That's what I get for thinking with my pussy and not my head.

Now, who knows if it will ever be the same? Have I just made permanent enemies of my three closest colleagues?

I trudge to my station with little enthusiasm. I don't know how to fix this. Maybe I should just tell them the truth... but I don't want to talk about Mike. I'm still ashamed of how long he kept me in that awful relationship.

What does it say about me that I would stay with someone like that? I don't want anyone knowing. Charlotte knows and that's bad enough. She's my best friend. She's not going to judge me.

Ethan, Adam and Thomas are so strong. They would never allow themselves to be used and abused like that. They won't understand.

Still, I need to try to talk to Ethan. I can at least explain that I turned him down because of my own issues and not because of anything to do with him.

I cringe at the thought. *It's not you, it's me.* Classic excuse, but it's true.

I spend the first few hours of the day psyching myself up to go and talk to Ethan. Fortunately, no calls come through in that time. When lunch comes around, I go to find the guys where they usually are, in the rec room.

"Ethan, can I talk to you? Please?"

Ethan sighs. "I really don't think there's anything to talk about, Jamie."

"Yes, there is! I don't want this to ruin things between us."

"Nothing is ruined. You don't want to date me. That's completely fine. We can just be colleagues."

Just colleagues. I had thought we were becoming friends, but I guess that's off the table now.

What can I say? He's not obligated to be friends with me if he doesn't want to be.

I can't even accuse him of treating me badly because I turned him down, because he's not. His manner is stiff, but entirely polite. It's Thomas and Adm who are glaring at me as though I kicked their puppy.

This is pointless. I'm just going to make things worse. I turn and leave without another word.

No one calls me back.

I'm halfway down the corridor when I hear footsteps coming up behind me. I turn, hoping to see Ethan, coming to forgive me, but instead, it's Thomas.

He looks like an angry thundercloud coming toward me. I gulp and brace myself, unsure of what's going to happen next.

THOMAS

I know it's not entirely rational to be angry with Jamie. I'm sure she had her own reasons for turning Ethan down. It wouldn't be fair of me to victimize her for not wanting to date my best friend.

Such rational reasons, however, quickly evaporate in the face of Ethan's disappointment. He tries to hide it, but I know him too well.

Jamie hurt him. Whether she meant to or not, she did hurt him, and I can't forgive that.

I stride up to her, using all of my self-restraint to prevent myself from shouting. Jamie turns to face me, hope briefly gleaming in her eyes before it dims when she sees that I'm not Ethan.

I know she wants to make things right with him, but if she wanted things to be right with him, then she shouldn't have slept with him with no intention of following through.

Ethan isn't someone who usually does casual sex. I'm not surprised he slept with Jamie, because honestly, he's a straight guy with eyes. Of course, he was going to sleep with her, given the chance. However, sex means something to him and now he's hurt.

Anger pounds through my veins as I pull myself up to my full height while facing Jamie. “Let’s get one thing straight,” I snarl. “If you ever do anything to hurt anyone on my team again – and I don’t care whether you’re trying to hurt them or not you will not like my response. I will make sure of that. Your time here will be over, you understand? Renard may not have listened to me about hiring you, but if I tell him things aren’t working out, he’ll heed my advice. You’d best watch your step around my friends, Jamie.”

“Thomas, I swear, I never meant to hurt –”

“I don’t want to hear it. Just stay away from us, Jamie. You need to be in contact with us via radio, but there’s no reason for us ever to interact beyond that, got it?”

“Got it.” Jamie looks like she might cry, and I turn away before I can witness that. I already feel bad for snapping at her, but I’m going to protect my friends above all else. Ethan frowns at me as I return. I know he didn’t want me to give Jamie a hard time, but honestly, if it was me, he would have done the same thing. We look out for each other. It’s what we do.

I glance over my shoulder to see Jamie’s ass swaying as she walks back to her station. Perhaps I shouldn’t be thinking this, given how she has just hurt my friend, but she does have a particularly great ass.

As unhappy as I am with how she treated Ethan, it’s difficult not to wish that I was there too. The thought of sleeping with Jamie is more than appealing.

Ethan and I could have shared her. Would Jamie mind being shared? I know she’s into Ethan, but she and I haven’t always gotten along. She might not want anything to do with me.

I’m not entirely surprised that the idea of sharing Jamie with Ethan doesn’t make me jealous. I’m glad that my friend got the woman he wanted. I just wish I’d gotten to taste her as well.

Of course, perhaps it's better that I didn't. Given how upset Ethan is after his experience with her, maybe I dodged a bullet.

My mind is still on Jamie as I stalk back to the rec room.

"What did you do?" Ethan snaps.

"Nothing you wouldn't have done if our positions were reversed." I hold Ethan's gaze, refusing to be the one who looks away first.

He eventually sighs and cuts his eyes to the floor. "I suppose that if our positions were reversed, I would have done much the same. Still, you shouldn't be too hard on her. It's not her fault she doesn't want to date me."

"It is her fault she decided to sleep with you before revealing that."

"I would have done it anyway."

"That's irrelevant. She still should have been upfront about her intentions."

"I know, but regardless of who should have done what, we still need to work together. Starting fights with her isn't going to help anything."

"I wasn't starting a fight. I was just making sure our boundaries are clear going forward."

"Our boundaries being?"

"She stays the hell away from my friends."

Ethan rolls his eyes. "Don't you think you're being a little over-protective?"

"I think that –"

I break off in mid-sentence as my radio crackles to life. "Thomas?"

"I'm here, Jamie." I try to keep my voice as light and friendly as possible, though by Ethan's grimace I don't think I'm doing a very good job of it.

“There’s a fire at a huge office building downtown. Seventy Clover Road. It’s bad – I can even see the smoke from here.”

I glance out of the window to see that she’s right.

“Got it, Jamie. We’re heading out now.”

I put my radio on my belt and head for the truck at a jog. Ethan and Adam are right behind me. All around us, other teams are gathering. For a fire this big, we’ll need multiple teams working together to bring it under control.

We all pile into the fire truck and I put the sirens on before pulling out of the station.

When we get to the building, it’s a disaster. I’m no investigator, but for a fire to have gotten this big this fast, I have to suspect arson. That, however, is not the problem right now. The problem is that the building looks ready to collapse, and I can hear the screams from here. There must be hundreds of people trapped inside.

Adam, Ethan and I rush in together. We work best as a team and we always stick together when we can. We need to get as many people as possible out of here before that building collapses.

I easily lose myself in the work. One person is much the same as another. I drag them out one at a time, helping Ethan and Adam where I can.

I don’t know how long I’ve been in the building when my radio beeps loudly.

It’s Renard. “This place is going down – everyone out, now!”

I turn and start heading out. One thing you learn as a firefighter – when your captain tells you to get out of a building, you get out. That’s how you become an old firefighter and not a dead firefighter.

I’m nearly out when I hear a high, thin scream. My feet stop where they are, rooted to the floor as if by glue.

“Help! Please, someone help my baby!”

Beside me, Ethan and Adam have also hesitated.

“Thomas, where are you?” Renard barks over the radio. “Everyone else is out already and this place is going down NOW!”

The woman screams again, her desperate voice tearing at my heart.

Sometimes, you’ve got to make the decision you can live with, even if that decision means you might not be around to live with it later.

“You two go. I’ll be quick.”

“No way.” Adam gestures to the huge beam between us and the trapped woman. “You can’t move that thing on your own. Besides, it’ll be quicker with all three of us.”

There’s no time to argue. I grab the middle of the beam and Ethan and Adam take either side. Renard is shouting at us over the radio, but I ignore him.

We manage to move the beam and leap over a small wall of flames. I can feel the heat, but my suit protects me from burns.

I can just see a crib through a thick wall of flame. The woman on the other side of it is desperately trying to dart around, no doubt to snatch her child from the flames.

Adam grabs her around the waist, just in time to prevent her from throwing herself into the fire. “Stay back! We’ve got this.”

“Ethan, the rug.” I point to the rectangular rug on the floor and Ethan nods. He grabs it and throws it over the flames, creating a small gap for me.

I don’t hesitate. I run over the it and through the gap before it closes. I reach into the crib and grab the baby before hurling myself back over the rug, just as the flames close in again.

The mother reaches for her child, but she is barely standing herself, hanging off Adam’s grip on her waist.

“Let’s get you out of here. I’ll hold onto your little one for now. Don’t worry, he’ll be safe with me.”

Ethan gestures to the door. “Come on, let’s get out of here before –”

I don’t get to hear the end of his sentence, because we have barely a second’s warning before the building around us groans and shakes violently.

Then the world collapses in on us.

I think I must have been knocked out, because I am dragged out of blackness by the sound of a baby screaming. Well, at least the baby is alive and well to scream. I look around. As my eyes adjust, I see rubble everywhere and light shining through cracks above.

I do a quick inventory of my body. I seem to be mostly ok – a miracle in itself – but my leg is trapped under a huge block of concrete. I try to shift it, but the thing is bigger than I am. I’m still holding the screaming baby in one arm. It’s too dark to do an examination and figure out if there are any injuries.

“Ethan? Adam?”

“Here!” I close my eyes for a moment, smiling despite everything.

“It’s good to hear your voice, Ethan. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I think my arm is broken, but it could be a lot worse. Adam is here too. He’s unconscious – took a knock to the head. I don’t see any other injuries, though.”

Head injuries can be serious, but there’s nothing we can do about that right now. We need to get out of here before we can get any medical attention.

“What about the woman we were helping?”

“I can’t see her. She must have gotten flung away in the collapse. The baby?”

“Still with me, apparently unhurt.”

“That’s good. Can you try to get to us?”

“Unfortunately, not. My leg is trapped, and this block is way too big for me to lift on my own. You’ll have to try to come to me.”

“Got it. I’ll try to dig a path through this rubble.”

There’s silence for a while except the sound of shifting bits of debris.

“Ah, fuck!”

“What’s –?”

The end of my sentence is drowned out by the sound of more pieces of building falling.

“Ethan!”

I throw my shoulder at the concrete holding me down, but it won’t budge.

“Ethan, are you there!”

“I’m h-here!” Ethan coughs after a moment. “I don’t think I can get to you, though. This place is too unstable. Everything is going to come crashing down if I keep trying to create a path without the proper equipment to stabilize it.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait to be dug out, then.” I look for my radio, but it seems to have come loose from my belt. After a few moments I see it – three feet out of reach. Great. That’s just great.

“Ethan, do you have your radio?”

“It got smashed by the debris, but I think Adam’s is still fine. Let me check.”

I wait with anxiously and I’m not disappointed. I can just hear Renard’s voice coming from the other side of the radio.

“Adam? Adam, are you there?”

“Renard, it’s Ethan. Thomas, Adam and I are trapped but alive. We were buried with a woman and an infant. The infant is alive with Thomas. We’re not sure where the woman is. Adam is unconscious, Thomas is trapped and my arm is broken,” Ethan reels off.

“What was your position right before the building collapsed?”

“We were on the first floor, in the eastern corridor, near the end.”

“Got it. We’re coming for you, Ethan. Just hang in there.”

“Will do, boss. I’ll see you soon.”

The radio goes silent.

I lay back on the floor, closing my eyes against the relentless dust. Help is on the way. At least they seem to have put out the fire. Now, it’s just a matter of digging us out.

The waiting is a killer. I had too much adrenaline in my system to notice the pain in my leg at first, but as it starts wearing off, I start to realize that having a huge block of concrete on your leg is not comfortable at all.

I try to take deep breaths and focus on something else, but it’s no use given the raging inferno of pain that’s roaring through my crushed leg.

“Ethan! Buddy talk to me. I need a distraction.”

“You and me both. Um, let’s see... well, I think it’s a bit pointless of them to dig us out, because as soon as he gets his hands on us, Renard is going to kill us.”

“Yeah, he probably will.” I can practically hear him now, ranting about us disobeying direct orders and endangering ourselves in the process.

He won’t like our excuses either. I can try to explain that we were trying to save a trapped woman, but to Renard, the rules are there to protect people, and making exceptions is a dangerously slippery slope.

“Maybe Adam will be lucky and remain unconscious long enough to miss the reprimand.”

“Oh, I’m sure that Renard will be happy to repeat the himself – at length – when Adam wakes up.”

“Remember that time when we were all in training, I accidentally attached the wrong hose to the wrong port?”

“How can I forget? Water everywhere, and Renard’s best shoes ruined. He was not impressed.”

“No, he was not.”

Ethan and I pass the time reminiscing, sticking strictly to happy memories. Our situation is grim enough without adding anything else depressing.

No matter which way you slice it, this sucks. We have no idea how badly Adam is hurt, or how long it’ll take them to dig us out. And there’s no guarantee that even with the right equipment, this whole place might not collapse even further as the rescue team gets closer. We could still be crushed at any moment.

So, Ethan and I do our best to focus on pleasant things and not freak out about the things we can’t control.

After what feels like an eternity, something shifts to my left. I blink as bright light makes its way into the small cavern, I’m in. A minute later, the gap widens, and Renard sticks his head in.

“Thomas! Come on, let’s get you out of here.”

Jay and Luke follow Renard in and the three of them lift the concrete off me.

I cry out in pain as the blood starts flowing back into my leg. “FUCK! That *hurts!*”

“I know, I know. Come on, let’s get you out. The paramedics will have some good painkillers for you.”

“They’d better,” I mutter, letting Renard and Luke each pull one of my arms over their shoulders. I hand the wailing baby over to Luke, who holds the bundle in one hand. Fabian, Rex and Darren remain with Jay to dig Adam and Ethan out.

Luke and Renard practically drag me out. I’m of little help, what with every nerve ending of my leg on fire with pain.

The paramedics are there as soon as we exit. I’m more than happy to let them do their job. There is a needle in my arm, and shortly afterward, the pain slowly dissipates. It’s still

there, but it's more of a dull throbbing than a sharp, breath-stealing knife of agony.

"No, let me through! Thomas!"

I've barely turned to look toward the sound of the voice before Jamie barrels into my stretcher. She throws her arms around me, clutching me so tightly I half wonder if she's planning to carry me off.

"You're ok," she murmurs, and I'm surprised to feel wetness on my neck. Is she crying?

"I was so worried. I heard on the radio that you guys were in the building when it collapsed, and when I got here, no one could tell me for sure whether they'd even be able to get you out alive..."

I'm touched that she seems to care so much. All of my disgruntlement toward her seems to melt away in the face of her distress. I put an arm around her, holding her close.

"I'm alright. I'm tough. It'll take more than one building to take me down."

Behind me, I can hear Renard snort, but he thankfully decides to save the lecture – for now.

"What about Adam and Ethan?"

"They're being dug out as we speak. They're a bit banged up, but I think they're going to be ok."

Jamie opens her mouth to say something else, but she is diverted by the sight of Ethan limping out, his arm held at an awkward angle.

The paramedics descend on him, quickly putting his arm into a sling.

"Ethan!" Jamie rushes toward him, grabbing him in a side hug, making sure to embrace his good side and not jostle his arm, but holding him just as tightly as she held me. "Are you ok?"

"My arm hurts, but other than that, I'm fine. It's more Adam I'm –"

Ethan shuts up as I make a quick cutting gesture with my hand, but it's too late. Jamie pales and sways on the spot. "What's wrong with Adam?" she demands.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Ethan says quickly. One of the paramedics slowly approaches Jamie with an oxygen mask, clearly ready should she start having a panic attack. Which doesn't look like it's entirely unlikely at this point. "He just hit his head is all. The doctors will have him up and about in no time."

"HE'S UNCONSCIOUS?"

"Jamie, he'll be –"

Jamie isn't listening to me, because she spots Adam being carried out.

"ADAM!"

She runs to him, only to be intercepted by the rescue team. They hold her back as the paramedics strap Adam onto a stretcher, only allowing her near once he is firmly tied down with his neck in a stabilization collar.

Jamie snatches up his hand. "I'm going to the hospital with him."

"Of course. Don't worry, ma'am, we'll take good care of your husband."

"He's not my – you know what? It doesn't matter. Let's just go."

Ethan and I are also both taken to the hospital, where we get treatment for our injuries. Fortunately, it seems that neither of us needs surgery.

Jamie flutters between us and Thomas, interrogating the doctors about our treatment and making sure we have sufficient water and are warm enough.

The doctors and nurses quickly start to get frustrated with her, but Jamie doesn't seem to notice. I think it's sweet.

She convinces one of the nurses to move Ethan and me into the same room together, and the three of us wait anxiously

for news about Adam.

Finally, after nearly an hour, the doctor taking care of Adam comes in.

I know even before he opens his mouth that something is wrong. Doctors don't look like that when they're delivering good news.

Jamie sees the look as well and jumps off the edge of Ethan's bed, rushing up to the doctor.

“Where is Adam? Is he ok? Please, tell me that he's ok!”

JAMIE

I jerk awake when my phone starts ringing. I groan, my hand going to the back of my neck, which is aching fiercely. That's not surprising, given that I've been sleeping in a hard-backed hospital chair with my head pillowed on the edge of Adam's hospital bed.

The doctor's words ring in my head. *We don't know when – or if – he's going to wake up.*

He has to wake up. He's... he just has to.

My phone is still ringing. I moan as the sound pierces my aching head.

I hit the answer button without looking at the screen. "Hello?" My voice is groggy even to my own ears. I've barely slept over the past two days. I only recently passed out here out of sheer exhaustion.

"Jamie! I was beginning to wonder if I should call the police. Are you ok? I've been trying to get hold of you for almost two days now."

"I'm sorry, Charlotte. I'm at the hospital."

"WHAT?"

"Not for me," I say quickly. "It's... it's Adam. He's been hurt." I bite back a sob. "It's bad, Charlotte. They say he might

have brain damage. There's no telling what he'll be like when he wakes up, if he even does wake up."

"How long has it been since you've been home? Or even eaten or taken a shower?" Charlotte asks shrewdly.

"Um... I'm not sure?"

"Right, I'm coming to get you."

"No, I can't leave him!"

"We can get one of the nurses to call you if he wakes up while you're gone," Charlotte says firmly. "I'm not letting you neglect yourself just because one of your colleagues is hurt. He's a firefighter, Jamie. It's bound to happen at some point."

I open my mouth to tell her that she's wrong, that Adam is more than a colleague, but close it again. What can I say, really? That Adam and I are friends? It's too complicated for me to figure out right now, so I don't even try.

I look carefully at Adam's face, but he doesn't look any different than he did when I fell asleep. He's way too pale and too still.

I'm still staring at him when Charlotte arrives. "Jamie?"

I don't turn to face her. "Charlotte, this is Adam."

"I'm sure I'll have time for proper introductions once he's awake. For now, I'm taking you home for some food and a shower."

"I don't want to go home," I whine. "I want to stay here."

"Oh yeah? Where are his friends? His fellow firefighters?"

"They... went home," I admit. "They're going to come back during visiting hours."

"Then you can do the same."

"What if he wakes up when I'm gone? I don't want him to wake up alone."

"He won't be alone – he's got the whole hospital staff here. Now come on. I'm not accepting any excuses."

It'll probably be easier to go along with Charlotte than argue with her. When she gets something into her head, trying to deny is like hitting your head against a wall.

“Fine, but I’m coming right back afterward.”

“Sure you are – once you get some decent sleep.”

I grumble under my breath, but I can’t deny that the thought of curling up in a real bed does sound deeply inviting.

When we get to Charlotte’s house, she sits me down on the couch and then bustles around making tea and heating up soup.

She wraps me in a blanket and hands me the warm soup before sitting down opposite me.

“So... Adam. You must care about him a lot, huh?”

“About all of them,” I admit. “I know I haven’t been working with them that long, but there’s something about them... they’re so brave and dedicated. It’s such a privilege to be able to work with them.”

“Even Thomas?”

“Even Thomas. He’s not like I thought before. Sure, he can be an ass, but underneath all that he has a good heart. I don’t think he could be as good at his job if he didn’t.”

“Really.”

“Yeah. Do you know why the building collapsed on them? They had been ordered out. They knew the building was coming down, but they had to save just one more person. They all could have died, but they took that risk to save her. She and her baby are fine, just a bit shaken up.”

“It sounds like they’ve certainly made quite an impression on you.”

“They have! Did I tell you about the ride-along I did?”

I’m in the middle of describing how well the guys maintain their gear when I catch Charlotte’s expression. “Why are you laughing?”

“You do realize that you’ve been talking about your guys for a solid half hour, right? If I’d known I was going to be coming to a meeting of the Thomas, Adam and Ethan fan club, I’d have made badges.”

I can feel my face turning bright red. “I can’t help it that the people I work with are awesome.”

“No, I suppose you can’t. I must say, you paint a good picture. It’s no wonder you’re interested in them.”

“I’m not interested them!”

Charlotte snorts. “Please. You can’t shut up about them. You’re starstruck, girl. The question is, who are you going to choose?”

It’s a question I’ve thought of before, and not one I have an answer to. It’s irrelevant, though. “They wouldn’t be interested in me that way anyway.”

“If this is more of those insecurities Mike left you with, you should tell him to go shove it. If they have any sense, they’ll be just as infatuated with you as you seem to be with them.”

I shrug, not willing to argue the point.

“Now the real question is, if you had to choose, who would you choose?”

Charlotte’s eyes are gleaming with curiosity and I suppose it can’t hurt to indulge her.

In the extremely unlikely case that all three guys were interested in me, who would I pick?

Even in the pretend scenario, I can’t decide. They’re all so different and yet already seem so essential in my life.

“I don’t know.”

It’s a strange feeling, wondering who I’m the most interested in. I’ve had crushes before, but those have always been on one person at a time. I’ve never been interested in three guys at once. Is that even possible? Are my emotions just messing with me?

“Come on, Jamie, give me something here!”

“I’m trying, but I honestly don’t know.”

“Well, you’ve been sitting by Adam’s bedside for what, two days? Doesn’t that tell you anything?”

“Not really. If it was Thomas or Ethan, I would have sat with them too.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Forgive me if entertaining you isn’t my top priority right now.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know you’re worried. How about you hop in the shower and get some rest. When you wake up I’ll drive you back to the hospital.”

That does sound like a good plan, no matter how much I resisted it at first.

“Thanks, Charlotte.”

I grab my empty mug and take it to the kitchen. I’m just putting it down in the sink when something catches my eye.

“Charlotte, come in here a moment.”

“What’s up?”

I point to the wiring behind the kettle. “That’s a mess; it’s a fire waiting to happen. I don’t know who did that wiring, but it needs to be redone pronto. At least a quarter of all house fires are thanks to faulty wiring.”

“Well, look who’s getting all knowledgeable. I’ll try to have my landlord get an electrician in, but he’s super stingy. Unless I can prove someone is literally dying on his property, he’s not particularly interested in changing things for the better.”

“Well, if he doesn’t make this change, his nice shiny building is going to go up in flames.”

Charlotte chuckles. “I’ll be sure to tell him that.”

I’m surprised to find that my eyelids are drooping. Maybe Charlotte is right about getting some sleep. “I think I’m going

to take that shower and have a nap.”

“Admit it, I was right.”

“You... might have been right,” I mumble. “Thanks, Charlotte.”

“Any time.”

I shower quickly and crawl into the bed in Charlotte’s guest room. I’m asleep the moment my head hits the pillow.

Again, the ringing of my phone startles me awake. I’m tempted to ignore it, but it could be about Adam.

I glance at the screen to see Ethan’s name flashing across it.

I hit the answer button so hard that the phone goes flying and I scramble after it.

I snatch it up from under the dresser and press it to my ear.

“Jamie? Are you there?”

“I’m here, Ethan. Is everything ok? Is it Adam?”

“It is. He’s awake.”

If I wasn’t already on the floor, I would have collapsed in relief. “Is he alright? His brain function?”

“We don’t know yet. Thomas just got the call saying he’s awake. We’re heading there now.”

“I’m on my way.”

“Great. See you soon, Jamie.”

As I dash to grab my things, one thought rolls over and over in my head. Adam’s body may be awake, but if his brain is damaged, will the Adam we know will be gone forever?

ETHAN

Thomas is already at the hospital when I arrive. I rush up to his side just as the doctor approaches.

“Good, you’re here. I usually wouldn’t talk to you, as you’re not family, but Adam put in a stipulation with his health insurance that he wants you two to make any decisions regarding his medical care, should he not be able to make those decisions for himself.”

Those words bring a lump to my throat. I never knew Adam did that. I’m honored by the trust he has placed in me.

“How is he doing?” Thomas asks.

“He seems to be doing very well for this stage. He’s still a little confused, but that’s normal for a head injury. If things keep going as they are now, I’m confident that he’ll make a full recovery.”

A full recovery. Those are probably the most beautiful words I’ve ever heard, and that includes the phrase ‘I brought cookies’.

“Can we see him?” I need to see Adam for myself before I believe that he’s truly ok.

“Of course. He’s been asking for you. We should –”

“Thomas! Ethan!”

Jamie nearly collides with one of the nurses as she hurtles through the waiting room. “Is he –?”

“He’s going to be fine,” I tell Jamie, wrapping one arm around her.

She moans softly and sinks into my side. “Thank god. Is he taking visitors?”

“I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you. Come on. Ethan and I were just going to see him now.”

The three of us hurry to Adam’s room to find him propped up in bed. He still looks awful, but his eyes brighten when he sees us.

“Jamie! Thomas, Ethan. I was wondering why you weren’t huddled around my hospital bed.”

“Hey, we stayed for almost twenty-four hours, give us some credit. We were on our way back when we got the call.”

“Ethan, relax, I’m just messing with you, buddy. I know you didn’t abandon me.”

The three of us take seats around Adam’s bed.

“How are you feeling?” Jamie asks hesitantly.

“Like there’s a band of drunken dwarves having a party inside my head, but I suppose that’s normal, given my injury. I’m sure I’ll be fine with some time and some good painkillers.”

“Yeah, you will. I’m so glad you’re ok, Adam.”

I watch as Jamie reaches forward and takes Adam’s hand. He squeezes it, smiling warmly at her.

My heart clenches with how much I want her – and sex is only a part of what I want from her. I want to make Jamie mine in every way. I want to take her out on romantic dates and show the world that she chose me.

Of course, I shouldn’t be thinking like that. I’ve already asked Jamie out on a date and she’s already said no. I don’t want to disrespect her choice by bugging her to repeat her answer.

Besides, she seems more interested in Adam than she is in me, if recent events are anything to go by.

If she and Adam started going out, I would be happy for him, but I can't deny that I would be disappointed not to be included.

“We owe you an apology, Jamie.”

I give Thomas an encouraging nod. The two of us have discussed it and decided that he should be the one to give the apology. He is the one who is most at fault, after all.

Jamie doesn't say anything. She just looks at Thomas with a guarded expression and he continues.

“I treated you badly after you turned Ethan down for that date, and I shouldn't have. You had every right to turn him down, and I wouldn't want you dating someone you don't actually want to be with just because you are afraid of saying no. I'm sorry, Jamie. I will do better in future. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Thank you for saying that, Thomas. Honestly, don't really blame you. You were protecting your friend. I love how loyal you are and how much you care about each other.”

“Even so, I should have been better. I will be better in the future.”

“So will I, Jamie. I may not have said anything to you, but I was off and awkward with you when you didn't deserve it.”

Adam speaks up from his bed. “We were wrong, Jamie. I guess that nearly dying puts a lot of things in perspective, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so. How about we just start over?”

That was a lot easier than I expected. Jamie would have every right to give us a hard time, but here she is, forgiving us as easily as if our behavior was nothing.

Well, I'm certainly not complaining. “I'd love to start over. Though it may be a while before we're all on active duty again.”

I gesture between my arm, which is in a sling, Thomas' crutches and Adam's heavily bandaged head.

Jamie chuckles. "Yeah, I guess so. Maybe... maybe while you're recovering, we could all hang out sometime?"

"That would be awesome." I resist the urge to leap into the air and whoop. Jamie may not want to date me, but at least she still wants to be friends with me. That's definitely something. If I can't have Jamie as a partner, I'd love to have her as a friend.

Even though we're all in a hospital and my arm will be in a cast for the foreseeable future, I'm suddenly feeling hopeful.

* * *

TWO MONTHS later

"I'm fine! Look!" I flap my arm around wildly in Renard's face.

"I don't know, Ethan. It's only been eight weeks."

"My doctor says that the bone has been completely healed for a full two weeks already. I've been going to physical therapy four times a week and doing the exercises they give me every day. What more do you want?"

"I want to be certain that the firefighters I'm sending into burning buildings are fully fit for duty."

"Thomas and Adam are back." I can hear how whiny I sound, but I can't help it. It's been eight weeks and I want to come back to work. Not only do I miss the work, but I miss Thomas, Adam and Jamie. Seeing them in the evenings just isn't the same as working with them all day every day.

"Do you have a doctor's letter saying you're fit for duty?"

"Of course, I do." I wouldn't have bothered to come to Renard without one. I hand it over and he reads it with pursed lips.

“Very well. I will allow you back on active duty, but if you get so much as a twinge of pain from that arm, you’re to let me know at once.”

“Will do, boss.” Anything to be back.”

I stop by Jamie’s station before going to the rec room. “Jamie, guess what?”

“He said yes?”

“He said yes! He wasn’t happy about it, but I wore him down.”

Jamie gets up and pulls me into a hug. “That’s great, Ethan! It’ll be amazing to have you back.”

“I’ve got to go tell Thomas and Adam, but I’ll see you at lunch?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then. It really is good to have you back, Ethan.”

“It’s good to be back.”

I’m not given long to savor the moment, because Thomas, Adam and I have barely finished celebrating our return when Jamie calls telling us there’s a fire at a nearby bar.

“Right back into it, huh? Are you ready for this?”

I roll my eyes at Thomas. “Please. I was born ready for this. Let’s do it.”

It’s a rather easy call. Some drunk guy forgot that cigarette butts have to be put out before they can be safely thrown in the trash. The fire was small, and the guy is thrown out of the bar with instructions not to come back.

When we return, Jamie is waiting anxiously by the door for us. She tries not to show it, but I can tell she was worried about us. This is the first call that we’ve all been on together since that building collapsed on us.

Over the past eight weeks, Thomas, Adam and I have gotten close with Jamie. The more I spend time with her, the more I like her.

I just can't stop thinking about being inside her. The way she felt. The way she turned me on. How amazing it felt to be close to her.

Jamie, however, has not brought up the issue of dating again, and I have taken my cues from her. As much as I want to take her out on a date, if she changes her mind, it'll be up to her to say something about that. The last thing I want is to pressure her and ruin the friendship we have created.

Thomas, Adam and I head to the showers. I finish first and I'm on my way to the rec room when a muffled thud has me pausing. I don't know what it is about that noise, but something puts me on edge.

There's no harm in going to investigate.

I open the fire station door and stick my head out. There's a guy out in the driveway, who jumps violently when he sees me.

"Hi. Can I help you?"

Something about him puts my hackles up, but I try to be polite, reminding myself that I don't know this guy and have no reason to be prejudiced against him.

"No. I'm just looking around."

Ok, this is definitely shift.

"If there isn't anything you need, then perhaps you should move along, buddy."

"Does Jamie work here?" he asks suddenly.

Now I'm definitely suspicious. "I'm sorry, but it's against our policy to give out the names of people working for us."

"It's a simple enough question. I don't see why you can't just give me a yes or no."

"Whether you see it or not, that is the policy."

It's a policy I've just made up on the spot, but dodgy guy doesn't need to know that. No way am I confirming to him that Jamie works here until I know more about him.

“Look, buddy –”

“No, you look. You need to move along. Now, are you going to leave, or do I need to call the rest of my team to help me remove you?”

He glares at me and spins on his heel.

“Don’t let me catch you hanging around here again!” I call at his retreating back.”

He gives me the finger as he walks away. I roll my eyes. Some people are fucking idiots.

I go inside and head straight to Jamie’s station.

“Oh, hey Ethan. Thomas is still using up all the hot water, I assume?”

“Yeah, you know him. I wanted to check something with you. There was a guy asking about you.”

Jamie tenses, but her voice remains light. “Oh yes? When?”

“Just now. I sent him away, but he was asking if you worked here.”

“What was his name?”

Now that she asks, I realize I should have thought to get a name. “I’m not sure. He was short and well-built, with dark hair styled in spikes and a couple of piercings.”

I could have added to the description, but I think it’s better to stop when Jamie goes the color of old flour.

“Jamie? What’s the matter?”

She doesn’t respond, but she doesn’t need to. Things are clicking together in my head.

This must be the guy Jamie is so scared of – the one who hurt her.

I wish I hadn’t sent him away. I wish I’d gotten hold of his head and slammed it into the nearest wall.

“I won’t let him near you,” I growl. “He’ll never hurt you again.”

“What? How did you –?”

“It’s not difficult to put the pieces together, Jamie. I don’t know what he did to you, but you can be sure, he’s not doing so again.”

“You can’t promise that. No one can.”

“I’m not letting him hurt you,” I repeat fiercely. “I didn’t even confirm that you work here. For all he knows, he had the wrong place.”

“He’ll find out eventually. He always finds out.”

“Maybe you should get a restraining order –”

Jamie laughs humorlessly. “I have one. Do you think the police do anything about violations? Unless someone has been attacked, they’re not particularly interested.”

I clench my hands into fists. I can’t believe the police won’t do anything to protect Jamie.

Well, if they’re not going to do it, then I’ll see to her protection myself.

“I’ve got to go. Do you need anything before I do? I can sit with you a bit, if you’d like.”

“No, you go ahead, Ethan. Thanks for not telling him I’m here. That’s was the best thing you could do.”

It’s not the best I can do and I’m going to prove it. I squeeze Jamie’s shoulder before hurrying to the rec room. Thomas is thankfully out of the shower and just sitting down.

“We have a problem.” I pull out a chair to sit down between him and Adam.

“What’s wrong?” Thomas puts down the newspaper he had begun to pick up.

“Some weird guy came by the station just now, while you were still in the shower. He wanted to know if Jamie worked here. I didn’t give anything away and told him to get lost, but when I told Jamie about it... well, by her reaction, I think he’s the guy who hurt her.”

Neither Thomas nor Adam shows any surprise. I guess they figured out much the same thing as I did.

“What is his name? Where does he live?”

I can't quite meet Adam's eyes. “I didn't find out. I'm sorry. It didn't click about who he was until later, when I was speaking to Jamie. I thought he was just some weirdo.”

“We should find out more from Jamie.”

“It's not a bad idea, Ethan, but I don't think it's going to work. She didn't even want us to know about him, and she's certainly not opening up about the situation any time soon. That doesn't mean we can't help, though.”

“By finding this guy and ripping his head off?” Thomas cracks his knuckles.

“Don't think the idea hasn't occurred to me, but I was thinking we do something slightly more legal than that.”

Thomas folds his arms. “I'm listening.”

I lay out my plan, and Thomas and Adam approve, as I knew they would. Now, we just need to get Jamie on board, but somehow, I don't think she'll be a hard sell.

We arrange to come over to her house on Saturday and spend the next few days planning, buying everything we'll need and doing the necessary research.

When Saturday comes, Jamie greets us with a smile and a freshly baked pie.

“That looks delicious.” I give the warm pie a longing look. “However, we have work to do, so how about you put that in the fridge for now?”

“You have work to do?”

Adam gestures to the bulging bag he's carrying, which Jamie has been eyeing curiously. “I hope you don't mind, Jamie, but after what happened on Wednesday, we thought it would be best to take some initiative.”

“What do you mean?”

Thomas sighs. “You know what we mean, Jamie. We’ve all figured out that you’ve been hurt before, and that the guy who hurt you was the one at the fire station. All we want is to make you feel safe.”

“I’m all for feeling safe. What do you have in mind?”

“This.” Adam plonks the bag on the table. “We’ve got stuff for a security system here. It has emergency signals that go to the police, but you can also set up custom ones that can be linked to our phones. There are portable remotes, too, so you’ll be able to hit the panic button from anywhere.”

“We wanted to get security cameras and an electric fence, but the landlord of your building wouldn’t approve it,” Thomas adds with a grimace.

“We did, however, get you a pepper spray and sign you up for self-defense classes.” That last part had been my idea. I’m sure Jamie will feel safer when she knows she can defend herself properly.

“But – but this is too much! This stuff must have cost a fortune, and you’ve put so much effort into it...”

“Don’t worry about the cost. We all shared it, and it’s worth it to us to make sure you’re safe,” Thomas says firmly.

“And as for the effort, that’s what you do for friends,” Adam adds. “We want you to feel safe, Jamie.”

Jamie blinks back tears as she smiles at us. “Thank you. This means so much to me. I know I haven’t even told you the full story –”

“You don’t have to do that until you’re ready to – if you’re ever ready to. You never owe anyone an explanation of your trauma, Jamie.”

“Thanks, Ethan. I guess we should set this stuff up.”

“Yeah. We’ve done some research on how to do that and I think we should be able to manage it without too much difficulty.”

As it turns out, we have not in fact done enough research.

“Shut it off, shut it off!” Jamie yells, her hands pressed over her ears.

“I can’t!” I frantically ram the ‘off’ button with my thumb, but nothing is happening. Neighbors are shouting angrily at the noise and Adam and Thomas are furiously tearing through the instruction manual, trying to find a solution to this madness.

I grab a screwdriver and unscrew the whole thing from the wall, shutting the fucking thing off.

Jamie is the first to speak. “Well... at least we know the alarm works.”

“Yeah, except it thinks *we’re* the intruders,” Adam groans. “I think we need to get a professional in to do this.”

Jamie chuckles. “I didn’t want to be the first one to suggest it. I appreciate your attempts, I really do... but I think my landlord might have an aneurysm if you keep trying.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh all you want,” I mutter, the corners of my mouth twitching. “I didn’t see you doing a better job of it.”

“Because if I had been the one to buy the thing, I would have called a professional in to set it up for me.”

Adam rolls his eyes. “Yes, you have more sense than the three of us combined. Why does that not surprise me?”

We spend the rest of the morning enjoying the pie Jamie made while we wait for the alarm professional to arrive.

He has it set up and working within ten minutes, much to disbelief. I’m still not sure he wasn’t making sacrifices in the bathroom to get the devil’s help with that stupid thing.

But if it keeps Jamie safe, I’ll gladly take her good-natured ribbing about my inability to set up a simple alarm.

Jamie is just serving coffee when Adam suddenly doubles over, crying out, his hands on his head.

“Adam!” Jamie rushes over to him. “What’s wrong?”

“Just a headache,” Adam grits out. “It’ll go away.”

Thomas and I exchange a worried look. Headaches don't typically come on so suddenly. Is Adam still suffering from lasting effects from his head injury? The doctor gave him the all clear but warned that there could still be complications down the line.

Adam's knees collapse and Thomas just catches him before he hits the floor.

JAMIE

Adam finally emerges from the doctor's room. Ethan, Thomas and I jump up all at once.

“What happened?”

“What did the doctor say?”

“Are you alright?”

Adam holds up his hands against the barrage of questions. “I'm fine. They're running some scans, but the doctor thinks it might be a pain spike caused by lasting trauma to my head.”

“Lasting trauma?” I don't like the sound of that. Adam can't afford to be suddenly debilitated by pain when he's on the job.

“Don't worry, it'll heal in time, it just may take several more months. He's given me pills in the meantime to stop it from happening again. That should keep Renard happy.”

I let out a slow breath. As scary as that was, at least it doesn't sound catastrophic. I was imaging all sorts of world-ending scenarios in my head.

“Can the doctor guarantee that it won't happen again?” Thomas asks shrewdly.

“No,” Adam admits. “The pills make it very unlikely, though – no more likely than the chance of any one of us

getting a sudden cramp or muscle spasm as we try to lift a burning beam – and this is unlikely to be triggered by physical exertion.”

“Well, I hope Renard will be happy with that,” Ethan mutters.

I hope so too. Adam adores his job and was so excited to get back to it. I’d hate for him to have to go back on sick leave just as the team is getting back together.

“I’ll drive you home,” Thomas says in a tone that allows for no argument.

Adam shrugs. “If you insist. I swear, I am fine, though.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I hug Adam tightly before leaving.

I start to head home but hesitate.

I don’t want to head that way just yet. Between the rogue alarm and Adam’s health scare, it’s been a stressful day and I want to treat myself.

I don’t often get time to read, but there are usually downtime periods at work when I’m just scrolling mindlessly through social media on my phone.

Perhaps a good book is just what I need. I smile to myself, liking the idea.

Instead of going straight home, I make a stop at the local library. I browse through the romance section, looking for something that catches my interest.

One book in particular grabs my attention. There’s a woman on the cover, as well as three guys. They are all entwined in an embrace. I read the book description and grin. Yes, this is exactly what I want. This woman has to choose between three guys she really likes.

That’s exactly what I feel like I’m faced with now.

The last few weeks I’ve started thinking differently about the guys. While before I was sure that Ethan, Thomas and

Adam would never be interested in me, now I'm feeling like there might be a chance at a relationship.

Their steadfast friendship is one thing, but I've been noticing other things.

The way their eyes linger on me. The way they're so protective of me, even in situations when I don't really need protection. How they seem to enjoy taking me out and doing different activities with me.

Perhaps I'm imaging things, but if I was to ask one of them out on a date, I highly suspect they would say yes. It's a good feeling, knowing – or at least suspecting – that I have three hot, caring, wonderful guys interested in me.

I'm still wary of dating anyone, but the thought has been lingering on the edges of my mind lately. However, I haven't acted on it. If I do decide that I want to date one of the guys, how in the world would I choose? I want all of them, but of course, I can't have that.

I check the book out and go home, running myself a hot bath.

Charlotte jokes that I live too dangerously by reading in the bath, but I maintain that I have never dropped a book in the water, or even sustained a small amount of water damage.

I start reading and I'm quickly drawn into the story. I usually go to bed early, but tonight, I stay up reading until the early hours of the morning. The more I read, the more intrigued I become.

The book isn't going at all like I expected. The heroine isn't choosing one guy like I expect. She's choosing all three.

I've never heard of a situation in which three guys share one woman before, but in the book, it seems to work perfectly. Of course, the book is a work of fiction and there's no telling if such a thing would really work in reality.

One passage in particular sticks with me.

WHEN ASKED TO CHOOSE, I chose love. I'll always choose love, and for me, love looks like me and my guys curled up together on the couch, laughing at a sitcom or feeding each other pizza. I need each one of them, and I know that they need me as well.

Most people thought we were crazy, that it could never work, but when your heart is as open as theirs are, sharing someone you love doesn't mean getting less. It just means there is more love for everyone.

IT MAKES me wonder about Ethan, Thomas and Adam. Would they be willing to share me? Maybe it's a crazy thought, but the three of them are so close and they share so much. Is it that much of a reach to think that they might be open to sharing a romantic partner?

Of course, even if they are totally on board with it, that doesn't fix my dilemma. Am I ready to give another relationship a try? The last one was a complete disaster and I'm not sure I want to risk going through that again.

It's already bad enough I'm jumping at every shadow, terrified that it might be Mike. The last thing I need is another guy to worry about, let alone three.

But then, what if dating all three of them is an advantage in that department? After all, what are the chances of all of them turning out to be psychos? If one of them starts going crazy on me, the other two will protect me, I have no doubt of that.

I give up on my dilemma and head to bed with confused thoughts swirling around my mind.

IN MY DREAM, Thomas, Adam and Ethan are in the rec room. It's my lunch break and I wander in with a sandwich, thinking of having lunch with them.

I find them all huddled around a laptop.

"Hey. What are you guys up to?"

They all jump violently, and Adam slams the laptop shut. “Nothing.”

I raise an eyebrow. “A secret, huh?”

They all go red.

“No.” Ethan refuses to meet my gaze.

I shrug and come to sit down next to him. That’s when I notice the prominent bulge in his pants. I can’t help glancing at Thomas and Adam, to find them in similar states.

Things start to click together in my head. “Were you guys watching porn?”

“No,” they all say at once, sounding like guilty school boys caught doing something they shouldn’t be.

“I’m not judging.” I grin wickedly at them. “It’s just a shame to see you so uncomfortable. Maybe I can help?”

“Help?” Thomas’ voice is slightly higher than usual.

“Let me show you.”

I slide onto his lap, straddling him. Thomas groans as I grind myself down onto his hard cock. I like the feeling of being on top of him. His cock feels huge even through his pants and I wonder what it would feel like inside me.

“A-aah, fuck! Oh god yes, Jamie, yes!”

Thomas starts thrusting his hips up to meet me, grabbing my waist and moving me with him.

Beside us, Adam groans and takes his cock out of his pants. Ethan quickly follows suit and the two of them begin stroking their cocks as I keep rolling my hips, grinding into Thomas.

“Jamie – oh, fuck, Jamie, I’m gonna – JAMIE!”

Thomas’s hands are like vices on my waist as he bucks up into me, his whole body convulsing as he comes. I feel a wetness between my legs as his come leaks through his pants and I grin, loving that I made him lose control like that.

I turn to Adam and Ethan, who are still both working themselves furiously.

Ethan is closer, so I smoothly go down to my knees in front of him, pushing his hand away and replacing it with my mouth.

He tastes delicious, and I moan around his cock as his salty precome hits my tongue. Ethan immediately loses control and starts thrusting into my mouth. He's just as big as Thomas and I struggle to take in his whole length, but I manage to fight my gag reflex and swallow him up to the base.

My efforts are rewarded when less than a minute later, Ethan groans loudly and comes down my throat. I choke a little as I scramble to swallow but manage to recover fairly quickly.

Ethan goes limp in his chair, panting.

Adam's strokes on his cock have slowed to a crawl and I look at him curiously. "Do you need some help over there?"

"I want to fuck you." Adam's voice is rough and filled with raw need. It sends a shiver of desire through me. I'm already wet from my playtime with Ethan and Thomas. Seeing them come apart at my touch is such a turn on that I'm perhaps hornier in this moment than I've ever been before.

"Yes, please."

"Come, sit on my lap."

"No, wait." Ethan pulls himself into a more upright position. "Get on your hands and knees, Jamie. I have an idea. Adam, get behind her."

Adam shrugs and takes out his cock, positioning himself behind me. I pull my pants off and spread my legs, already quivering in anticipation of his cock.

I watch curiously as Ethan slides himself under me. It becomes apparent a moment later what he intends to do. He uses one hand to spread my folds before flicking his tongue across my clit. I cry out, jerking my hips toward him. At the same time, Adam slowly presses into me. The double

stimulation is almost too much, but so good that I can't imagine asking for it to stop.

Thomas also gets into the floor, approaching me from the side, and slides one hand under my shirt. His fingers slip into my bra and find my nipple, squeezing and rubbing until it's a hard nib under his attention.

"Oh! Oh, yes please, yes!"

I've never had this kind of triple stimulation before, and it's having me hurtling toward the edge of orgasm faster than ever before.

I hardly ever got to come with Mike. I usually take at least twenty minutes of stimulation to come, and he was always done in about ten. He wasn't particularly interested in helping me out once he had achieved his pleasure.

I'd usually finish myself off, but it's not the same as having someone else do it for you. Now, it's been barely two minutes and already I can feel my thighs tightening and heat spreading through my abdomen, a sure sign I'm about to come.

"Faster, please!"

Thomas, Adam and Ethan all pick up their pace, rubbing, licking and thrusting at lightning speeds. It's all too much. I feel like I'm going to explode from it.

I scream as I come, harder than I've ever come in my life. I can feel myself squirting, something I've read about but never done before, as I convulse on Adam's cock.

It takes all of my effort not to collapse limply onto Ethan's face. Thomas must see my dilemma and takes my hips rolling me to the side, so that I'm half on his chest. His strong muscular chest comforts me, and I decide to stay here for a while.

I WAKE WITH A START, covered in sweat and my clit throbbing angrily.

What the hell was that?

It was the hottest dream I've ever had, that's what. Still, even after reading that book, my dream leaves me confused.

Would Ethan, Adam and Thomas really be okay sharing me like that? Would it make one of them jealous or angry to see me having sex with the others?

There are a lot of questions and I don't have answers to any of them. Unfortunately, the only way I'm going to get any of the answers is to ask the guys myself, and I don't want to freak them out.

And asking for a foursome would definitely freak most people out. They may be open to the idea of dating, but that's different than dating me *together*.

I'm still unbearably turned on from my dream and take the opportunity to get myself off. Just like in the dream, it happens quicker than it's ever happened before. The thought of the guys all pleasuring me at once has me moaning and coming on my fingers in no time.

I've barely finished coming down off my high when my phone rings, making me jump. I see Adam's number and smile as I answer. "Hi, Adam."

"Hey, Jamie. I was wondering if you'd like to come over?"

"I'd love to," I say at once. I'm so excited to see Adam that it takes me a moment to click that there's something wrong in his voice. "Is everything alright?"

"It's fine. I just have a headache. I could use some company."

His would-be casual tone doesn't fool me. It could be just a headache, but with Adam's recent head trauma, any headache is cause for worry.

My hand is suddenly clutching the phone so hard it makes an ominous cracking noise before I quickly loosen my grip. "I'm on my way."

I'm already imagining the worst. Adam in chronic pain. Adam no longer able to do the work he loves. Adam falling into a deep depression because of it.

I know I shouldn't think the worst, but the worst follows me as I hurry to my car and start the short drive to Adam's place.

THOMAS

I'm doing my best not to pace. Using up all of my energy before a potential call would not be smart. I could be called out at any moment and I need to be prepared.

However, I can't help worrying. It's just Ethan and me on the team today. Adam is off sick and Jamie has taken the day off to be with him.

I'm glad Jamie is there to take his mind off things. Adam tries not to show it, but I know he's scared. The medication was supposed to stop the headaches.

This one doesn't seem as severe or as sudden as the last one, but it's still enough to keep him from fully concentrating, which means he can't work while it's going on.

The doctors seem confident that this problem will resolve in time, but how much time? Adam needs to work. He's getting paid for the time off – he was injured in the line of duty, after all – but it's not about the money.

This job isn't just a job for him, for any of us.

Firefighting is my life. I don't know who I'd be without it, and I know that Adam feels the same. If we're not using our abilities to help people, then what are we really doing?

I'm pulled out of my dismal thoughts by the sound of my radio.

“Thomas, come in, please.”

“Yes, Ivette, I’m here.” It should be Jamie’s voice. Ivette is a perfectly capable substitute, but I’m so used to hearing Jamie that Ivette just sounds wrong.

“Fire at a conference center, eighteen Twelfth Avenue.”

“Got it, Ivette, thanks.”

Number eighteen, Twelfth Avenue... that sounds familiar, but I can’t think why. I don’t have time to try to figure it out now.

Ethan and I both get up and jog to the truck. We’ll see how the fire is doing and whether we need to call for backup or not. Hopefully it’ll be small, and we won’t need to use extra resources on sending a second team. The fact that it was routed to us when we’re one man and one dispatcher down implies that it is a small fire.

Someone probably left their oven on again. I roll my eyes at the thought.

As we get closer to the address, things become more and more eerily familiar.

“Do you recognize this place?” Ethan mutters.

“I was actually just thinking the same thing. Maybe we’ve done a call here before?”

As we pull up in the driveway, however, everything becomes horribly clear.

I remember where I recognize this place from.

A few weeks ago, we dropped Jamie off at her friend Charlotte’s apartment. It would be such bad luck for Charlotte’s apartment to be the one that’s on fire in a large building of apartments, but sure enough, there it is. The third window on the left, fourth floor.

Well, that’s just great.

I turn to Ethan. “Charlotte.”

His eyes go wide. That's clearly all the reminder he needs. He pulls his mask on and hurries into the building. I'm hot on his heels as we clomp up the stairs and kick the door down. Smoke engulfs us at once.

The fire is licking the walls of the kitchen, but Charlotte doesn't seem to be in there. I let Ethan work on putting out the fire while I go to search the house just in case. Maybe we'll get lucky and she was out when the fire caught.

No, there she is – on the bedroom floor, passed out. Probably from smoke inhalation. I pick her up and position her over my shoulder before carrying her out. A glance back shows that Ethan has the fire out. It seems to be centered around a mess of wires. Faulty wiring, then, rather than a mess-up with the oven.

The building is filled with smoke, and Ethan starts overseeing the evacuation of the other residents while I carry Charlotte outside to the waiting ambulance. I watch as they immediately put her on oxygen and several monitoring machines.

Her oxygen levels are crap, but at least her heartbeat is strong. Her oxygen will improve the longer they have her on the mask.

“Did you want to ride with her?”

I realize that I've been standing staring at Charlotte for nearly a minute.

“No, that's ok. I just need to make a phone call.”

I watch the ambulance drive away before reluctantly dialing Jamie's number. I know she has to be told, but I don't relish being the one to bring her news that I know will upset her.

Jamie answers after a couple of rings. “Hi, Thomas! Aren't you working right now?”

“Yeah, I am. Jamie, is Adam with you?”

“Yes. He's doing alright. The headache seems to be easing and he's in much better spirits now.”

“That’s good to know. Can you put the phone on speaker so that Adam can listen in as well?” I think it’ll be best if Adam hears about Charlotte at the same time as Jamie does. He’s in a much better position to help get her calmed down, as she’s bound to panic when she hears her best friend was almost the victim to a fire.

“Alright, you’re on speaker. What’s up?”

“Please try not to panic. You should first know that she’s alive and the last I saw, she was stable... but Charlotte is in the hospital.”

“*What?*”

“Her apartment caught on fire. Ethan took care of the flames while I got her out. She was unconscious due to smoke inhalation; last I checked the paramedics had her on oxygen.”

“I need to see her. I’m on my way.”

“Of course. Ethan and I will meet you there.”

“Thanks, Thomas.”

I expected her to argue that we’re working, but I’m glad she doesn’t. She clearly needs emotional support right now, and I want to be there for her.

I drive to the hospital, arriving to find Jamie’s car already in the parking lot. I get to the waiting room in time to see Jamie harassing one of the nurses.

“No, I’m not family, but she’s my best friend! I need to know what’s going on with her. Please, we may not be biologically related, but she’s like my sister.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but if you’re not family then I can’t –”

“Excuse me. My name is Thomas. I’m the firefighter who pulled Charlotte out of that burning building. I’d appreciate any update on how she’s doing.”

Though they’re not really supposed to, the doctors and nurses often bend the rules when it comes to informing the first responders how the people they saved are doing.

They all know how hard it is to lose someone you were desperately trying to save, and not knowing is almost worse than knowing for sure that you lost them.

“I... well, I suppose it can't hurt. She's in stable condition. She has some smoke inhalation damage to her lungs, but it shouldn't be anything lasting. She'll need to be on oxygen for a day or so, but barring any complications, she should be just fine.”

Jamie lets out a sob and flings her arms around me. Ethan has just arrived and quickly joins us, wrapping his arms around Jamie from the other side. The three of us stand there for a few moments before Jamie moves to break free of the hug.

“I have to see her.”

I level the nurse with a stern look. “I'm sure that can be arranged.”

The nurse sighs. “I'm sure it can. Follow me, please. If anyone asks, just tell them you're Charlotte's sister.”

“I'll do that.”

When we get to her room, one of the nurses is busy cleaning Charlotte up. She gives us a friendly smile as we walk in.

“Well, look who has visitors already. I'll leave you for now and finish up with cleaning her later.”

“Thank you.” Jamie sits down by Charlotte's bed and takes her limp hand.

“I told her to get that wiring fixed. I'm sure she asked her landlord, but the cheap bastard probably didn't want to pay for the electrician.”

“Well, now he has to pay a hell of a lot more to fix his crappy building. I find the thought extremely satisfying. I have no patience for people who put money above others' lives.”

“Where is Adam?” Ethan glances around, and for the first time, I notice that Adam isn't here.

“He wanted to come, but he got a headache just before we left. I think it must have been related to stress or something. Anyway, I convinced him to stay and told him I’ll call with updates. When he heard that you would be here for me, he agreed.”

That’s good. The last thing we need to worry about right now is Adam driving with a killer headache.

Jamie suddenly gasps as Charlotte’s eyes flutter. She coughs a few times and tries to remove the plastic mask from her face. Jamie quickly covers the mask with her hand.

“Don’t do that, Charlotte. You were in a fire and you’re in the hospital. The mask is oxygen, and it’s helping you breathe.”

Charlotte’s eyes go wide, and she coughs again. “The – the apartment?”

“Safe,” I promise her. “Most of the damage was to the walls in the kitchen. Your possessions will be safe enough, though they will smell a bit smoky for a while. The house might need to undergo some repairs, but the fault is clearly with your landlord, which means he’ll have to reimburse you for the cost of any temporary accommodation while he gets the place fixed up.”

“Good luck getting him to pay,” Charlotte mutters.

“You can stay with me,” I say at once. “As long as you need.”

“Thanks, Jamie. I appreciate that.”

“I’m just so relieved you’re ok.”

“Yeah, me too. I remember suddenly waking up from my nap and there was smoke everywhere. I read something about smoke being less intense at ground level, so I immediately got onto the floor. I think I was trying to crawl to the door, but I don’t remember much after that. I guess I passed out.’

“That was very smart,” Ethan praises. “It probably saved your life, getting onto the floor like that.”

Charlotte shrugs. “I think final credit goes to you two. I only see two of you here, though. I’ve heard all about Thomas, Ethan and Adam. Who’s missing?”

I like the idea of Jamie telling Charlotte all about us. “I’m Thomas and this is Ethan. Adam is off sick today. He’s going to be furious with himself for missing such an important call.”

“But it’s not his fault! I mean, I took today off as well, and I had even less reason than him. I wasn’t even sick.”

“Trust me, I know Adam. Reasonable or not, he’s going to be beating himself up about this. He’ll likely try to find some way to apologize, and I suggest you accept, to help him appease his own guilt if nothing else.”

“Ethan is right. To be fair, if it was me, I’d also feel bad for it, but then, I’m not the one with a head injury keeping me from work for now.”

“I’ll make sure to accept his apology, but I’m not going to pretend that apology is necessary. I’m going to tell him that it’s not his fault, repeatedly, if that’s what it takes.”

I chuckle. “Well, good luck with that. You know how Adam is once he makes up his mind about something.

“Yeah, I do.” There’s a soft smile on Jamie’s face. I might be jealous had I not seen that exact look directed at Ethan and me both a couple of times now.

Charlotte is watching the four of us with a strange expression on her face. I can’t quite read it, but even so, it feels like she’s already seen too much.

“We should leave you to rest,” Jamie says reluctantly. “I’ll be back during visiting hours. Let me know if you – Charlotte? Charlotte!”

Charlotte suddenly clutches at her chest and starts gasping for breath. A moment later, her eyes flutter shut, and her heart monitor starts going wild. Her arms fall to her side as the monitor screams.

Jamie leaps to her feet. “Help! Someone help us – we need a doctor in here NOW!”

ADAM

I pull Jamie to the side as doctors rush into the room. Jamie is crying out Charlotte's name and reaching for her, but as much as I want to let her be with her friend, we need to give the doctors space to work.

They start pushing medication into her IV and working quickly to revive her.

Whatever they are doing, it seems to work, because a minute later, Charlotte's heartrate returns to normal, and her breathing seems to ease.

"What happened?" Jamie demands as the doctor steps back.

"Small crises like this aren't entirely uncommon for smoke inhalation. That's why we wanted to keep her for observation. Her lungs need to heal, and she still doesn't have the capacity to take in a normal amount of oxygen. Try not to worry about it too much. We see a lot of smoke inhalation victims, and Charlotte's case isn't nearly as bad as many that come through here."

"She's going to be ok, though, right?"

"This is a slight hiccup, but I still believe she will make a full recovery. Just to be safe, we may need to keep her a few

extra days, but I don't think this will impact her healing too drastically.”

We all seem to let out a breath of relief at the same time. I know Jamie would be devastated if anything happened to Charlotte.

I should have been there to help Thomas and Ethan. If I had been there, maybe we would have gotten to Charlotte sooner and she could have avoided the smoke inhalation she's currently struggling with.

Jamie moves forward and takes Charlotte's hand again.

“It may be a few hours before she wakes up,” the doctor warns. “Just to let you know.”

“Thanks. I think I'll just sit with her for now. It doesn't matter if she's awake or not.”

Thomas, Ethan and I decide to take shifts so that one of us can be with Jamie at all times. I fully expect to have to drag her home to eat and shower. I heard that this was what Charlotte had to do when Jamie was waiting by my bedside, and the least I can do is return the favor.

Thomas and Ethan have to get back to work, but I stay with Jamie and Charlotte.

“Jamie, I'm sorry I wasn't there.”

Jamie gives me a smile. “Thomas warned me you'd say that. Honestly, Adam, you have nothing to be sorry about. You were ill. Of course, I wouldn't have expected you to be at work under those circumstances.

She's alive and she's going to be ok that's the main thing.”

“At least let me make it up to you.”

“You don't have to – but if you do want to do something, I'm happy to hear what you have in mind.”

I didn't have anything in mind yet, but I think quickly, and it doesn't take long to come up with something.

“There's a street festival happening at the moment downtown. Let me take you? I've been wanting to go, and I

can't think of anyone I'd rather take."

Something I can't quite read flickers across Jamie's face, but it's gone before I have a chance to analyze it.

She smiles, the strange expression vanishing as quickly as it had come. "I'd love to go with you, Adam. You just tell me when and where."

"Let's sort out a date once we know more about Charlotte's condition. I know that you want to be here for her and that comes first."

"Thanks, Adam. I'm hoping the doctors will be able to give us more concrete information soon."

Thankfully, it seems that the doctors were indeed right about Charlotte making a full recovery. She improves rapidly over the next day, and the day after, they take her off oxygen. When she handles that well, they agree to release her, on the condition that she should come back immediately if she has trouble breathing or starts coughing uncontrollably.

I'm on duty when she's released. I was glad not to be the one to have to drag Jamie home for food, sleep and a shower. That fell under Thomas' shift, and while Jamie complained, she thankfully doesn't seem to be holding a grudge.

We take Charlotte home and get her settled in Jamie's apartment.

"Are we still on for that street festival?" Jamie asks.

"Of course. I figured you'd want to rest first, though."

"I am wiped – I was thinking of taking a nap. Maybe we could go tonight, though? I've been looking forward to it for days now."

"Tonight, sounds perfect."

I've also been looking forward to it for days. I keep telling myself, it's NOT a date. We're just friends and I don't want a repeat of the last time I assumed too much.

Of course, I know that Jamie would never cheat on me, but that doesn't mean she wouldn't leave to find someone closer to

her own age.

We're all older than her, Thomas by almost fifteen years.

The three of us all came to firefighting at different times in our lives. We trained together and formed a close bond, despite our age differences.

I go home while Jamie has her nap and get ready for the festival, dressing particularly carefully for my definitely-not-a-date with Jamie.

When I go to pick her up, she opens the door moments after I ring the bell, dressed in dark blue jeans and a black top that show off her amazing breasts.

I try to swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. I never really get used to just how appealing Jamie is, and when she's distressed like this it takes everything I got not to push her back in the apartment, closed the door and have my way with her.

I snap out of my little sexy daydream as Jamie brushes by me ever so innocently as she closes the door to her apartment.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Ready and waiting."

Jamie nods happily and takes my arm. I lead her to the car and open the door for her. It isn't far to the street festival. When we get there, we are quickly immersed in bright colors and loud sounds.

I buy Jamie and myself some cotton candy and we try our hand at a ring tossing game.

"No, I can do it!"

"Jamie, you've tried fifteen times already – but I believe in you!" I add quickly when she glares at me. "I'm sure the next time will be the time you get it."

Seven tries later, Jamie slumps in defeat. "I really wanted that dragon," she admits, pointing to the stuffed red and gold dragon that's set out as one of the prizes for the game. "Charlotte loves dragons and I think it'll really raise her

spirits. She's not happy about being locked out of her apartment while everything is repaired, and I get it."

Oh. Now I understand why she was so determined.

"I will get the dragon for you."

I mentally calculate how much cash I have on me and wonder how much it'll take to bribe the store owner for the dragon. That's a last resort, of course. I like the idea of impressing Jamie with my skills and winning the dragon.

The ring tossing game uses hand-eye coordination, which is something all firefighters have to be good at. This is going to be a walk in the park. After all, how hard can it be?

Ten turns later, I have to acknowledge that this game is harder than it looks.

"I'm getting the hang of it!" I protest as Jamie doubles over laughing when my ring hits a passerby on the ear.

"Sure, you are."

Another ten turns later, I lose patience. I pull out two hundred dollar bills and wave them at the store owner. "I want that dragon."

His eyes go wide as he sees the cash. "It's yours."

He hands over the dragon and I hand over the cash. Much easier."

"You didn't have to do that."

"But I wanted to."

"Thank you." Jamie hugs the dragon to her chest, her entire face lit up with happiness. "Charlotte will love it. I'm sure she'll get a kick out of hearing about our heroic attempts to acquire it for her, too."

"Please make me sound less stupid than I actually looked."

"Always."

We wander around for a while before deciding to go on the Ferris wheel. Jamie and I sit close to each other and pull the

bar down over our laps. Our arms are pressed together and I'm very aware of her sweet warmth right next to me.

I tell myself not to think about it. In such close quarters, Jamie is bound to notice if I get hard, and that'll be embarrassing, to say the least. Not to mention that I don't want to give her the wrong idea.

“Adam? Are you alright? You're not afraid of heights, are you?”

I snort. “I'm a firefighter, Jamie. I spent half my life climbing up ladders to put out apartment fire buildings. No, I'm not afraid of heights?”

She grins at me. “You never know. It could be a fear you suppress every day to do your job.”

“I'm not that brave.”

“Don't say that. You're one of the bravest men I know. You're amazing, Adam.” Jamie reaches over and takes my hand, sending a twinge of excitement straight to my cock. It takes all I got not to get a hard on right then and there.

“Thanks, Jamie. I couldn't do what I do without you.”

Jamie shrugs. “A lot of people could do my job. Not many could do what you do.”

“I think you're underestimating yourself. What you do is stressful, high-pressure work. We've been through a number of dispatchers who break under the pressure and quit after only a week or two. Others simply aren't good at it. They make mistakes, and mistakes cost lives.”

“I made a mistake on my first day, remember?”

“Yes, but honestly, that was more Thomas' fault than yours. I'm sorry we gave you a hard time about it.”

“I think you've more than made up for it.”

The Ferris wheel comes to a halt and we get out. Jamie is still holding my hand and I make no move to pull away.

Our hands slip apart as we decide to go try the bumper cars, which turns out to be one of the most hilarious

experiences I've ever had.

Jamie is terrible. Honestly, some of the children here are more skilled than her.

"How do you drive an actual car?" I demand as we leave.

"I had lessons in driving an actual car. Extensive lessons. Let's just say it took me a while to learn."

"I don't know how you survived," I mutter.

"Well, I did total at least two of the training cars, not to mention multiple dents and scratches. I was kicked out of two driving schools. Good thing they have insurance for that kind of thing."

I shake my head. Every time I learn something new about Jamie, it makes me like her more. If only she was ten years older... or I was ten years younger.

"Hey, beautiful. Have you been eating cotton candy? Because you look so sweet."

I turn to glare at the offending man. He's clearly drunk and staring slack-jawed at Jamie. It's not that I don't understand his fascination, but I don't appreciate him deciding not to keep it to himself.

"She's with me," I say shortly.

"Who's to say she can't change her mind? I bet I could think of a few things I can do that you can't."

"I doubt that," I say coldly. "Move along. Now."

"Well I –"

If it was just talk, I could probably have walked away, but then the man takes a step closer to Jamie and my protective instincts kick in. I shove him hard in the chest, making him stagger back a step.

"I *said*, move on."

It's taking all of my willpower not to punch him in the face, but I'm not going to cause a scene unless I need to. I really want to, though.

The man mutters something under his breath and slopes off. I turn to Jamie. "Are you alright?"

She nods, seemingly more composed than I'd have thought. "I'm fine."

I would have thought she'd be in a state, but then, that doesn't make sense, does it? She's clearly not afraid of men in general. She's afraid of one specific man, and she was able to see easily that this was harmless.

Still, I'd like to get her out of here, just in case.

"Let me take you home?"

"Yeah. Maybe that's for the best."

I hadn't realized before just how protective I am of Jamie. She could probably have dealt with that herself, but the thought of an unknown guy hitting on her just makes me so mad that I almost wish he'd tried to cause a scene, then I would have had an excuse to beat him to a pulp.

I've always protected women, of course, but I usually reserve that for when they are actually in danger. I don't know what this heightened paranoia about Jamie's safety means. Or maybe it's jealousy of her having another partner?

Of course, that wouldn't make sense at all. I've already decided that I'm not going to date her. I have no hold on her and she's free to date whoever she likes.

I don't think I'd be jealous if it was Ethan or Thomas, but a random guy? The thought rubs me the wrong way.

I put a possessive arm around Jamie's waist and lead her away from the festival.

We've just gotten to my car when I loud, angry cry has me spinning around.

The drunk man is back, holding the head of a broken bottle. He's running straight for Jamie, bottle raised.

JAMIE

I spin around as I hear the shout – more like a battle cry, really, if a drunken one.

I see the jagged bottle edges heading right for my face, but there isn't time to dodge. My legs tense as they start to propel me to the side, but I know I'll be way too late.

Time seems to slow. I see the bottle heading straight for my face. I scream at my body to move faster, but my muscles won't obey.

There simply isn't enough time to move out of the way.

There's no time to avoid getting my face cut into pieces.

The next thing I know, there is a loud thump and several cries.

It all happens so fast that it takes me a moment to figure out what just has happened. Then I see Adam on the ground on top of the guy.

He moved faster than I ever could, ramming into the guy and knocking him to the ground right before the bottle slashed into my face.

Adam is punching him repeatedly, slamming his fist into the guy's face.

It's not that I object, really, but I don't want to see Adam go to prison for manslaughter, and that's what this will become if he doesn't stop.

Adam seems intent on beating a hole right through this guy's brain.

"Adam! Adam, stop!"

He either doesn't hear me or he's not listening. I step up behind him and grab his arm mid-swing. He doesn't seem to realize that I have him and keeps pushing forward, landing his fist on my attacker's face.

I'm still holding onto his arm and he pulls me off balance, falling forward, straight for my prone attacker. Fortunately, Adam snaps out of his bloodlust in time to grab my waist, pulling me back and setting me on my feet.

"Adam, let's go, let's just go!" I grab his arm, trying to pull him away before he can decide to continue beating the guy.

Of course, Adam is a firefighter and about a thousand times stronger than me. I'm not capable of pulling him anywhere unless he wants to go there. He hesitates, his eyes blazing as he looks down at the guy on the ground.

"He was going to hurt you," Adam growls, fire in his eyes.

"I know, but I'm fine. Please, Adam, just take me home."

"We should go to the police," Adam says slowly. "We can't just let him walk off and attack other women."

As much as I just want to leave, Adam is right. "We'll take him to the police, then. We'll give our statements, and then we can go."

Adam sighs and grabs the guy by the scruff of his neck, pulling him to his feet. "You're coming with us. There's a police station down the block. We'll let them deal with you."

The guy just moans incoherently as Adam drags him along.

I worry that the police will question the state that he's in – after all, Adam did go a bit overboard, but their reaction is not

at all what I expect. When he sees Adam hauling my attacker into the station, he bursts out laughing.

“Pinkie finally got what he deserved, huh?”

“Pinkie?” Adam tosses him forward, sending him sprawling across the floor.

“Pinkie is his street name. I’m glad to see he finally picked on the wrong person. Self-defense, I’m guessing?”

“That’s right.” Adam’s voice leaves no room for argument. “I’ll take your statements, then.”

All in all, the whole process is a lot smoother than I thought it would be. Apparently, Pinkie is a known troublemaker and the officer has no problem believing that he attacked me with a broken bottle.

All in all, it takes less than an hour. When we’re done, Adam puts an arm around my waist and leads me out of the police station without looking back.

We get home and he sits me down on the couch, wrapping me so tightly in a blanket that I can barely move my arms, but I don’t mind. I watch as he goes through to the kitchen and returns a minute later with hot chocolate.

Charlotte is already asleep; I can hear her snoring in the other room.

“Stay,” Adam says sternly as I try to extract my arm from the blanket cocoon to reach for the hot chocolate. He holds it up to my mouth and I drink. He’s giving me very small sips, pausing between each one.

I lean back and relax. I haven’t had anyone serve me anything since I was a child. Adam is attentive, wiping up every stray drop of hot chocolate. When the mug is done, he puts an arm around me, pulling me into his side. I take a deep breath, finding his scent soothing. We’ve never been this close before and I like it more than I should.

“Well, you sure know how to comfort a girl.”

“It comes with the job,” Adam murmurs. “I’m just glad that you’re not physically hurt. How are you feeling?”

“Much better now.” It’s true. I was really shaken at first, but Adam’s calm manner and his gentle care combined have soothed me and I’m feeling almost back to normal. It won’t surprise me if I have nightmares, but I’m not going to worry about that right now.

“So much for making it up to you. I meant to give you a fun night, and instead some crazy shit happens.”

I chuckle. “Well, leading up to that, the night more than made up for it.”

Adam makes a skeptical noise.

“It’s true! I had a great time, and Charlotte is going to love her dragon. And seeing you defend me... well, it was kind of hot. Terrifying, but hot.”

Adam’s arms tighten around me and I wonder what he’s thinking. I certainly know what I’m thinking, and it’s not P.G. rated. I wonder what the night would have been like if Ethan and Thomas had been there too.

I kind of wish they were. I love hanging out with all three of them, but I can’t deny that I still had a great time with Adam. Besides, if they were all there, I doubt I’d have been able to pull them off Pinkie. They could well be facing murder charges at this point.

I turn to look up at Adam and realize we are so close. I’m only inches from his sexy lips. I can’t help myself and I lean in and kiss them.

They are soft and warm and exactly what I need right now. I press further into the kiss and his lips move gently with mine.

I turn slowly around so that I’m straddling him, struggling out of the blanket and wrapping my arms around his neck.

Adam’s tongue presses into my mouth and I open for him, clutching at his strong shoulders as his tongue dances in my mouth, possessing every corner of it. I love every second of this moment.

“Wait. Jamie, we shouldn’t.”

I pull back, fighting down disappointment. “I understand, Adam.”

I don't, really. I can tell he's attracted to me – his hard cock under me makes that much very clear. However, I don't want to pressure him. If he doesn't want to have sex with me, he doesn't want to have sex with me, and he doesn't need to explain himself.

“Do you want me to move? Adam?”

Adam is staring at me with eyes pooled wide with lust. His cock beneath me is straining against his pants and his lips are parted slightly.

With a moan of surrender, Adam dives back into the kiss, even more fervently than before. My head spins as I kiss him until I have to break away for some air. Adam keeps kissing my neck and I grind myself down on his hard cock. He groans, grabbing my hips and guiding my movements.

Unbidden, a scene from the book I'm reading pops into my mind. The heroine was on the couch, being comforted, much like I was, except unlike in my situation, she had all three of her guys with her.

I remember how they all kissed her at once and touched her from every direction. I imagine Ethan, Adam and Thomas doing that to me and moan urgently, grinding myself harder down onto Adam's cock, getting some much-needed pressure on my clit through my clothes.

The thought of Adam, Ethan and Thomas pleasuring me all at once, just like my dream, has my clit throbbing and my panties soaking wet.

I tear at Adam's clothes, desperate to get to his skin. As his shirt comes off, I start pressing kisses to his chest, moving my way down lower, sliding my body back so that I can reach his cock.

Adam sees what I'm doing and fumbles with his pants, letting his cock spring free.

Oh my. His cock is huge. It's not as long as Ethan's, but the girth of it... I wonder what that would feel like inside me.

I don't hesitate and start licking and sucking his huge rode. I struggle to get the sheer width of his cock into my mouth, but Adam seems to enjoy it, nonetheless. 'Enjoy it' is probably an understatement. He pants harshly and clutches the sides of the couch, his hips canting upward, tilting his cock further into my mouth.

"Yes, just like that, Jamie," he murmurs. "Oh, fuck, your *mouth*... Yes, yes! Oh shit, shit, stop!"

I pull off, looking up at Adam. "Are you alright?"

"More than alright. I just don't want to come yet. I want to be inside you for that. Are you okay with that?"

"Oh yes, I'm more than okay with that."

"But first... lie back."

I lie back at once. I'm not sure what Adam has planned, but I'm certainly more than eager to find out.

Adam pulls my pants and panties down in one go and guides one of my feet onto the floor, so that my pussy is spread open for him.

"Do you want my tongue on you, Jamie? I bet you taste delicious. I want to lap up your juices and lick your clit until you come. Do you want that?"

"Yes! Oh, fuck yes, please, Adam!"

He doesn't need to be told twice. He gives me one long lick, from my asshole to my clit. He pauses to look up at me, checking my reaction. Whatever he sees on my face must encourage him, because he leans back down and does it again.

I squeal as his tongue flicks over my clit, so good and yet just not enough.

Adam licks my pussy once more before moving up to focus solely on my clit. Now, I'm the one clutching at the sides of the couch and tilting my hips forward into his mouth. His tongue sends shockwaves of pleasure through my whole body, emanating from my clit and tingling all the way through to my fingertips.

“Adam, I’m going to come!”

Adam hums in acknowledgement, and that hum sends delicious vibrations through my clit. It’s all too much. I grab his hair, mashing his face down on my clit and thrusting desperately onto his tongue. Adam allows me to guide him and seconds later, I’m coming hard, crying out as my orgasm goes on and on until I’m completely out of breath.

When it finally ends, I go limp on the couch. Adam doesn’t give me long to recover. He’s already guiding his cock into my pussy, pulling my lax legs over his shoulders.

“Was that good, Jamie?”

“Mhmm.” I give him a silly grin. “Take me, Adam. I want you to feel good, too.”

“Oh, I will, but not before I make you come again.”

“I don’t know if I can. That orgasm... it was really something.”

“How often have you come twice back to back?”

“Not often,” I admit.

“Well, I’ve made women come twice a number of times, and one thing is for sure, if you can get to that second orgasm, it’s fucking intense.

I shiver at the thought. “Let’s give it a shot, then.”

Adam starts thrusting in and out of me at an agonizingly slow pace. At first, it feels merely pleasant, but it’s not long before my body starts to catch up to what’s happening.

“Oh. Oh yes. Oh, fuck yes. Yes, Adam!”

He takes my left foot and moves it down to the couch, leaving my right on his shoulder. “I want you to touch yourself, Jamie.”

I realize that he’s put me in the perfect position to rub my clit. I wish I’d thought of this when I was with Mike. It would have made my life a lot easier.

I start rubbing myself, moaning as Adam's thick cock fills my pussy over and over again. I manage to get my fingers in time with his thrusts, and it's possibly the best thing I've ever felt.

"Are you close, Jamie?" Adam asks through gritted teeth. I honestly don't know how he's holding out for so long, but I'm certainly not complaining.

"Yes! So close, Adam!"

"Then come for me, Jamie. Come for me right now."

His commands send me over the edge, and I come with a scream, arching on Adam's cock, my fingers fast and furious on my clit.

Adam finally lets go and explodes inside me, his expression is utter ecstasy.

"Jamie! What's wrong? I'm here."

Charlotte comes hurtling through in her pajamas, only to skid to a halt when she sees Adam on top of me.

"Oh, shit."

Oh no, I realize that I screamed, and poor Charlotte probably thought I was being murdered.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte," I say, fully aware that Adam's softening cock is still inside my wet pussy. "We should have used the bedroom."

"I – uh – I think I'll just go back to bed."

"That may be best. I'm sorry. I'll use the bedroom next time, I swear."

Charlotte gives me a thumbs up over her shoulder as she makes a hasty retreat.

I close my eyes, groaning. "I want to die."

Adam chuckles. "Come on, it wasn't that bad. It could be worse."

"How could it be worse? Charlotte is practically my sister!"

“Well, it could be your mother.”

I make a horrified face at him. “You’re not helping!”

“Sorry. I’m just saying, let’s think of what we have going for us here. At least it’s your place and you’re unlikely to get kicked out for having sex in the living room.”

I know he’s trying to comfort me, but the urge to sink into a hole in the ground and never return is still strong.

Adam pulls out and presses a kiss to my forehead before walking to the bathroom. He returns with a wash cloth and gently cleans me up.

“I should go,” Adam says. I can hear the reluctance in his voice and wonder if I can convince him otherwise.

“Why don’t you stay tonight?”

“I can’t,” he says at once.

“Why not?”

Adam rubs the back of his neck, not quite looking at me. “Look, Jamie, there’s something I have to tell you.”

Well, that doesn’t sound good.

ETHAN

“**W**hat happened to you? You look terrible.”

Adam makes a face at me. “Thanks. I’m fine.”

“No, seriously, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” Adam snaps.

“Ok, ok.” I raise my hands in surrender. It’s not like Adam to be in a mood, but I suppose everyone has their days.

Thomas watches the interaction impassively, but I can tell that he’s also confused. “How was your date with Jamie?” he asks in a neutral tone.

“It wasn’t a date!”

“Alright, no need to bite my head off. I know you two aren’t dating. I just meant to ask, how was the festival.”

“Fine,” Adam says mulishly.

Thomas and I exchange a perplexed look. I’m beginning to wonder if I should just go and talk to Jamie when Adam blurts out,

“Jamie was attacked.”

“WHAT?”

Thomas and I are both on our feet at the same time as we shout in unison, and now it’s Adam holding his hands up in a

pacifying gesture. “Don’t panic. She wasn’t hurt. I beat the guy until he wasn’t moving anymore. She was a bit shaken, but I got her calmed down.”

“And you didn’t think to call us?” Thomas demands.

Adam goes slightly red. “Honestly, I should have. I was just so focused on taking care of Jamie that I didn’t really think of anything else.”

We could have helped take care of her, but I suppose I can understand Adam’s preoccupation.

“I’m going to go talk to her.”

“Me too,” Thomas adds.

“Wait. Before you do, there’s something... something else happened.”

“There’s more?”

Adam seems to brace himself. “Jamie and I had sex.”

I must admit, I’m surprised by that. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d be interested in her.”

“I’m... don’t kill me, ok?”

I fold my arms. “What did you do, Adam?”

“I didn’t mean to sleep with her. We were on the couch together and she kissed me and it just kind of happened. I lost control. I shouldn’t have done it. Not that it wasn’t incredible, because it was, but... well, it wasn’t fair of me.”

“And why is that?” Thomas’ voice is hard. I think we both know where this is heading, but we want to hear Adam say it.

“I told her afterward that I need what happened between us to be just sex. I don’t want to date her.”

The urge to hit Adam is so strong that I have to turn around, to look at something other than his very hittable face.

“How did Jamie react?” Thomas asks tersely.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t quite read her. Can a person be disappointed and relieved at the same time?”

It seems an unlikely combination of emotions to me, but then, I wasn't there.

I turn to face Adam again, clenching my hands into fists in an effort not to place them around his stupid throat. "Jamie deserves better than meaningless sex, Adam."

"I know, ok? I know I fucked up. She was just so beautiful and soft and... you're right. I have no real excuse. It won't happen again."

"That won't undo what's already done, Adam!" Thomas usually has fairly good control of his temper, but there's a vein pulsing in his forehead and his hands are clenched tighter than mine are.

"I don't know what else to say! I can't take it back, Thomas."

"Did you apologize to her?"

"Of course, I did, Ethan! Profusely. I don't know what else I can do."

Thomas takes an angry step toward him. "You should have _"

"Hey, guys. Is everything alright in here?"

We all spin around to face the doorway. Jamie is standing there, looking hesitantly on our argument.

I take a deep breath, not wanting to snap at her. "Everything is fine, Jamie."

"Oh yeah? Because it sounds like you were fighting over me."

None of us bother to deny it. If Jamie heard the argument, there's really no point in denying it.

Jamie gets a teasing glint in her eye. "You know, if you're going to fight over me, then perhaps you should just share me."

Thomas, Adam and I stare at her, dumbfounded. Is that a joke, or is she being serious? Surely, it's a joke. She is smiling,

but people don't just say things like that without any meaning behind them. Do they? I don't know.

“Think about it.”

Jamie walks off, leaving us staring off behind her.

I turn to Adam and Thomas. “Do you think she meant that?”

“I have no idea.” Thomas looks rather like he's just been hit over the head.

“I'm going to find out.”

“Ethan, that may not be the best idea –”

“You do not get to talk to me about good ideas, Adam, not today.”

I don't wait for Adam's response. I follow Jamie out and head to her station. Sure enough, there she is, reading a book. Some author called Hannah Davie, though the book title is hidden by her hand.

“Hey. What are you reading?”

Jamie jumps and shoves the book into her bag. “Nothing.”

That seems a strange reaction, but I'm not here to talk about the book. Now that I'm here, I'm suddenly wondering if this was a good idea after all. What do I do? Just come out and ask her?

There are two possible scenarios. In the first scenario, she really meant what she said, and when I ask her, she'll confirm it.

That's all fine and good, but in the second scenario, she was just kidding around, and asking her probably won't go well.

Most women don't want to be shared by three guys. It's simply not a lifestyle that works for everyone. What if I scare her off? What if she's freaked out by the idea and doesn't even want to be friends anymore?

No, it's too risky to ask her. I scramble to come up with something to say. Fortunately, it's not that hard to think of something relevant.

"I just wanted to check if you're ok. Adam told Thomas and me about the attack last night."

"I'm doing alright. I mean, it was scary and horrible, but Adam made sure I wasn't hurt, and he took, good care of me afterward."

"That's good to hear. If something like that ever happens again, though, I want you to call us – all of us. Thomas, Adam and me. We can all take care of you."

Jamie's smile seems to light up the whole room. "Thanks, Ethan. I appreciate that."

I want to make an excuse to keep talking to her, but Thomas, Adam and I have gotten caught in here once too often. We're not technically banned from the dispatch rooms, but we're not supposed to hang out in here either.

Renard won't be happy if he hears we're spending more of our time in the wrong part of the building. When a call comes in, we need to be able to respond quickly, which means being in one of the designated areas of the station.

"I should get back. I'll see you at lunch, Jamie?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then."

I wander back to the rec room, where Thomas and Adam are anxiously waiting for news.

Thomas stands when he sees me. "Well? Did she mean it?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Why not?" Adam demands.

"Why do you want to know? You don't want to date her anyway!"

"I – I still want to know, ok?"

I don't understand Adam sometimes, but I suppose I don't have to. Even when someone is one of your best friends, they

sometimes do something that utterly confounds you.

“I just worry that asking her will be too much. What if she was just joking? I don’t want to put our history on her and make her feel pressured into anything.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Thomas sighs. “If she did mean it, well... I guess we’ll find out sooner or later. We’ll just have to be patient.”

“I can be patient.” For Jamie, I can be patient for a long time. Sometimes, I feel like I’d wait forever for that woman.

Thomas and Adam get into a discussion about our last call, but I’m distracted. I fiddle on my phone and open up google. I search Hannah Davie and nearly choke at what I find.

“What’s wrong with you?” Adam slaps me on the back.

“It’s – it’s nothing, really. Just this book Jamie was reading. I asked her what she was reading, and she tried to hide it from me, but I saw the author’s name. I just looked her up, and it looks like she’s an author who writes exclusively reverse harem.”

Thomas raises an eyebrow. “Well, that’s certainly evidences that she was serious.”

“Yeah. Of course, reading it doesn’t mean it’s something she’d be into personally. I read about a lot of things I wouldn’t want to try myself.”

“Yeah, but she must be at least open-minded enough to enjoy a book about it. She clearly doesn’t find the idea so repulsive that she refuses to read a novel about it.”

Thomas has a good point. And I can feel a slight grin coming on. Maybe Jamie would be open to the idea after all. Even if she is ok with the idea in theory, though, there is still one glaring problem.

“Jamie doesn’t want to date me. If she doesn’t want to date me, I doubt she’d be ok dating all three of us, if I’m part of that equation.”

“And I don’t want to date her,” Adam adds unconvincingly.

Thomas sighs. “I suppose it would never work. It’s not like Melissa.”

As always, the memory of Melissa is bittersweet.

Melissa was a paramedic who worked with us. The four of us hit it off right away.

Thomas, Adam and I were already fast friends, and that friendship was sorely tested during our relationship with Melissa.

For a long time, we thought that we had to fight over her. It was Melissa who pointed out that all the jealousy and bickering was unnecessary when we could simply share.

For a few amazing months, life was fucking awesome. The four of us were together. We planned on buying a big house and maybe starting a family one day.

That all ended with one drunk patient wielding a knife. He’s in jail now, and good riddance. However, all the punishment in the world can’t bring Melissa back to us.

We moved on. We had no choice. We went our separate ways romantically and we haven’t shared a woman since. I hadn’t even considered the idea until I met Jamie. She’s so different from Melissa, and yet somehow still perfect for all three of us.

We are all quiet for a while, lost in our mutual thoughts of Melissa.

“Do you think she’d approve?” Thomas asks eventually.

I smile. “You know she would. She only ever wanted us to be happy. She was selfless like that. If she was here, she’d tell us to go for what we want, and if what we want is aligned, so much the better.”

“That’s true.” Adam sighs. “I just don’t think it’s going to work. Jamie is so much younger than us – she’s bound to leave us for someone closer to her own age.”

“Don’t let your experience with Christine ruin a potentially good thing with Jamie. She’s not Christine. She wouldn’t cheat.”

“I know that – but then, I knew Christine wouldn’t cheat, either. Sometimes, you don’t really know a person until it’s too late. By the time they show their true colors, you’ve already gone and gotten your fucking heart broken.”

“Do you really believe she’s capable of that?” Thomas frowns at Adam, managing to keep most of the anger out of his voice, but threads of it leak through.

“No,” Adam admits. “I’m still not willing to take the risk, though. I got my heart broken once. I’m not getting it broken again.”

I can’t say I blame him, honestly. He was really messed up after Christine cheated on him. Still, I wish he would try to find someone else, even if it’s not Jamie.

Adam hasn’t dated anyone since Christine.

We’re all pulled out of our thoughts by Jamie’s voice coming in over Thomas’ radio. “Thomas, Ethan, Adam, come in.”

Thomas answers it at once. “We’re here, Jamie. What’s up?”

“Building fire downtown. The central plaza building on Regent Street.”

There’s something off in Jamie’s voice and I want to ask what’s up, but we don’t have time. Once a call has come in, we can’t waste our time bullshitting.

“Got it, Jamie, we’re on our way.”

Thomas, Adam and I all get into our gear and set off. Other firefighters from the station join us on the way. That’s a sure sign it’s a big fire. We all pile into the truck and Thomas pulls us out of the driveway.

When we get to Central Plaza, I suddenly see what was wrong in Jamie’s voice.

That’s not just a building fire.

It’s a disaster zone.

The place looks ready to topple at any given moment. If it wasn't for years of training and experience, I'd probably balk before even setting foot inside.

But there's no time for hesitation. With Thomas and Adam beside me, I grab my hose and rush into the building.

The walls creak ominously around me, threatening to collapse at any moment.

THOMAS

The smoke is blinding, and the heat is overwhelming, but I'm used to it.

However, there is one thing I'm not used to.

I'm not used to having someone waiting for me to come back. I remember Jamie's tearful terror as Ethan, Adam and I were pulled out of the last burning building that collapsed on us. I don't want to put her through that again. I may not have a choice, though. This isn't just my job; it's my life.

We start pulling people out of the building and carrying them through to the ambulances. It all becomes a blur after a while. My muscles ache and my chest burns from drawing in painful breaths. I push through it all, determined to get as many people out as possible.

I split off from Ethan and Adam to follow the weak sounds of a man crying out. I can just see an arm waving.

It's waving from behind a huge burning beam that looks like it might collapse at any moment.

That's when it happens.

I hesitate.

All I can think of is Jamie and how distraught she'll be if I'm killed by a flaming beam. I should be rushing straight in, but I pause for a moment, torn.

The hesitation is only for a second, but it's that second that makes all the difference.

I start forward, but it's too late. The beam collapses, going right through the floor and sending the man crashing down to the level below. I can hear him screaming briefly as he lands right in the midst of a huge blaze of flames.

I tense my legs, ready to leap down, to pull him out at all costs, but something is holding me back, pulling me away. I realize it's Ethan.

"No, Thomas!" he shouts. "He's gone! Come on, we have to get out of here!"

Did Renard already order the evacuation? I must have missed it in the noise of the collapsing beam.

I struggle feebly, unable to put my full muscle into it in my fucked-up state of distress.

Ethan yanks on my arm impatiently. "Hurry up, Thomas!"

My brain finally catches up with my feet and I start to follow Ethan out, casting glances back in the direction of the charred corpse behind me.

As soon as we get out of the building, I rip my mask off and stagger a few feet away from Ethan. I fall to my knees and throw up violently on the ground.

"Paramedic!"

Ethan kneels next to me. "You okay, man? Just hang in there."

"Don't need... should take care of others... I'm fine..."

I can barely get the words out between violent heaves. Paramedics rush up to me and start trying to take my blood pressure and monitor my breathing, but I wave them away. I don't need them to tell me what's wrong.

I'm sick with myself, quite literally. A man is dead because of me. Not because I did my best and failed to save him, but because I hesitated to save him. What kind of shit person does that make me? Being a firefighter is all I ever

wanted, and here I am, letting people die all because of a woman.

I finally heave up everything in my stomach and firmly send the paramedics away. “I’m fine. I just felt sick for a second. Really, you should see to the people who are really hurt.”

They accept this – there is no shortage of people who really do need their help, but Ethan is eyeing me suspiciously. “What’s wrong?”

I shrug. “I guess some of the smoke got under my mask or something. I’m fine now.”

“You’re fucking lying. Something is wrong. What happened back there? Why were you about to make a suicidal leap into that burning room?”

“I wasn’t.”

“Yes, you were! I literally had to drag you away.”

Adam comes over as he hears the raised voices. “What’s wrong?”

“I think we need to be worried about Thomas. He nearly did something really stupid and now he won’t tell me why.”

Adam levels me with a stern gaze. “Out with it. You know it’ll just get worse until you get it off your chest.”

That much, I do know. Long experience has taught me that bottling up bad experiences on the job only gives them the opportunity to eat me alive.

However, I don’t think I can talk about this one. The thought of admitting my behavior has me feeling nauseous all over again.

How will I ever be able to look Ethan or Adam in the eye again? How am I supposed to face Jamie?

Can I even continue being a firefighter after this? What if it happens again? How can people rely on me if –

“Come on.” Adam grabs my arm and pulls me to my feet. He takes me around the back of one of the fire trucks and sits

me down on the ground.

“Talk to us. What’s going on?”

“I... I can’t.”

“Bullshit,” Ethan says impatiently. “You can’t say anything so bad that it’s going to change our opinion of you.”

“Yeah? Want to take a bet on that?”

“I’d bet my life on it.” Ethan looks serious now, but I bet he’ll be changing his tune when he hears what I have to say.

“Come on, Thomas, stop making this more painful than it has to be. You know how this will end. You’ll suffer in silence for a few days – a few weeks if you’re really stubborn – before you can’t stand it anymore. Eventually, you’ll cave. We’ll all talk about it, and you’ll feel better. Best get to that part now.”

I suppose they aren’t going to be talked out of this.

“I let someone die,” I snap.

“You mean that man who fell?”

“He didn’t fall – I as good as pushed him!”

“We all know that’s not true,” Adam says calmly. “Just take a deep breath and tell us what really happened.”

I force myself to inhale a ragged breath, grimacing as the scene flashes before my closed eyes. “I saw him. He was behind a burning beam. I could have gotten to him in time, if I hadn’t hesitated... but I did.”

There is a moment’s pause before Ethan speaks. “Why?”

“I was scared,” I admit bitterly. “Scared of how upset Jamie would be if something fucking happened to me. My hesitation was just long enough to cost a man his life.”

There is another long silence. This time, it is Adam who breaks it. “You fucked up.”

“No shit.”

“Let me finish. You fucked up, but we’ve all fucked up before. One mistake doesn’t change who you are. How many times have you told me that?”

“This wasn’t a mistake! It was my choice not to dive for him immediately. I could have gotten him out in time...”

“Or you could have been on that side of the room when the beam collapsed and you’d both be dead right now.”

Ethan has a point, but I don’t want to hear it right now.

“It’s my fault he’s dead.”

“It’s the fire’s fault he’s dead. Whoever is responsible for the fire is ultimately responsible for his death. Had you saved him, you would have taken the credit for saving his life, but it doesn’t work in reverse. Failing to save someone doesn’t mean you killed them.”

“Don’t you turn my own words back on me, Adam!”

“I’m just trying to help.” Adam’s voice remains infuriatingly calm and I hate it. I want at him to scream at me, to tell me just how despicable I really am. I want to be punished for what I did. I certainly deserve it.

“Let’s get out of here. You’ll feel better after a hot shower and something to eat.”

I stare at Ethan, amazed he can think of anything as normal as food and showering. Of course, he’s not the one who is now basically a murderer. He gets to eat. I don’t.

“Yeah, let’s go,” I say dully. I know that Ethan and Adam won’t tolerate my guilt spiral. They’ll do everything they can to pull me out of it, and I don’t want them wasting their time with me. Best just to hide what I’m feeling.

Adam drives the truck back and coaxes me into the shower. I eventually cave. The hot water does feel good, but neither of them manages to convince me to eat anything. What right do I have to eat when the man I killed will never eat again?

We’re given the rest of the day off, but I don’t leave the station. It’s not that I want to go out on another call, but rather, I don’t want to go home. As much as I’m trying to avoid their help, it’s better with Ethan and Adam here.

I'll have to be alone sooner or later, but I know that when I am alone, the memories and the guilt will be even more unbearable than it is now.

Ethan and Adam stay as well, despite my assurances that I'm fine and they can leave. My stomach starts grumbling, but the thought of food makes me feel ill.

I'm just considering whether it might not be better to go home after all rather than sit here and deal with Ethan's and Adam's pestering – to talk, eat, drink, and a number of other small things – when Jamie walks in.

“Hey, sorry I didn't come and check in on you immediately. Renard wanted to see all the dispatchers. Nothing bad – he was just congratulating us on doing a good job. How was the call?”

Ethan and Adam exchange a dark look.

“Fine,” I say shortly.

“What's wrong? Did something happen?”

It's bad enough that Ethan and Adam know me well enough to pick up instantly when something is off. Does Jamie really have to know me that well too?

“Nothing happened,” I say through gritted teeth. I can't help thinking if she wasn't around to distract us, none of this would have happened. But I know deep down it's not her fault, I'm just so filled with shame and self-hatred that there aren't any negative emotions left to spare for Jamie.

Jamie turns to Adam and Ethan. “What's wrong with him?”

Adam hesitates. “That's for Thomas to tell you.”

I can't blame him for being loyal to his friend.

“Thomas?”

I refuse to look at Jamie. Should I even continue my friendship with her? Any vague thoughts I've had about dating her are definitely completely out. Today has proved that much.

But I'm not dating her now, and I still fucked up monumentally because of my connection to her.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Jamie nods. "Alright. I'll be here when you're ready."

Jamie is good like that. She doesn't push people to do something they're uncomfortable with. Instead of leaving, though, she sits down next to me and takes my hand, idly playing with my fingers.

I clench my other hand at my side. It feels nice, and I don't deserve nice things. I want her to stop, but at the same time, I don't.

There is silence, and I can tell that Jamie, Ethan and Adam are all watching me worriedly. Great. This is just great.

Eventually, I can't stand it anymore. "Jamie, can I talk to you, please? Alone?"

"Of course." By the relief in her voice, she probably thinks that I'm finally going to confide in her. Little does she know that I'm going to do the exact opposite.

I lead Jamie into an empty office and gesture to a chair. She sits, but I can't because I'm too nervous.

I brace myself. What I'm about to do will be irreversible, but I don't have a choice.

The words lodge in my throat like stones. Jamie is looking at me expectantly and I open my mouth to say the hardest words I've ever said.

JAMIE

“We can’t do this anymore, Jamie.”

“What?” I don’t know what I expected, but this wasn’t it.

“I can’t hang around you anymore. This friendship isn’t good for me.”

I stare at Thomas in disbelief. “I don’t understand. Where is this coming from?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does, Thomas. Tell me why. You owe me that much, at least.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to hear it.”

“Actually, I do.”

“Fine, but remember, you asked for it.” Thomas turns his back to me, speaking to the wall.

“On the call today, I had a chance to save a man, but I hesitated. Do you know why I hesitated, Jamie? Because of you. Because I didn’t want to hurt you, and I knew my death would do exactly that.”

My breath catches in my throat. It all makes sense now. This is what Thomas is so anguished over. The guilt must be destroying him. I want to be angry that he’s laying that man’s

death on me, but looking at his torn expression, I can't find any anger in me. All I can feel is compassion for his pain.

“Thomas... you made a mistake, but you can't let that define you. You can only move on.”

“What do you think I'm trying to do! I need to move on without you, Jamie. It's the only way I can make sure the people who are relying on me are safe. I know I'm responsible for my own actions. I'm not blaming you – but I can't trust myself to act the way I should if I'm with you.”

Hurt rises in my chest. “What about me, Thomas?”

Thomas sighs, his tone softening. “You'll have Adam and Ethan. You'll be fine.”

“I don't just need Adam and Ethan. I need all of you.”

She sounds like Melissa. The thought goes through me like a knife. I can't be drawing parallels between Melissa and Jamie right now, not if I want to make it through this without fucking falling apart completely.

“You'll have to make do with just Adam and Ethan. I'm so sorry, Jamie, but I can't be friends with you anymore. Please respect my decision.”

I open my mouth and close it again. I want to argue, to fight for us, but how can I when Thomas believes that this is the only way to save lives? Besides, he's right. It's his decision. It's a stupid decision, but it's his all the same.

“Fine.” I'm fighting back tears and I just want to get out of here before I can't control them anymore. “If that's what you want, then I'll respect it.”

I can't get out of there fast enough. I want to go to Adam and Ethan. They're the ones I want to talk right now after my fight with Thomas. Is it even a fight? A breakup?

Regardless of what it is, I need my guys. I wonder when I started thinking of them as mine, but soon even that thought is beyond me.

Most likely Thomas will head straight to his best friends, which means I'm on my own. I'll just have to sit in my own

misery in the dispatch room. The thought of it sucks, but I am at work, and I'm on my own.

I've just gotten through the first box of tissues when the door opens.

"Jamie?" Ethan says softly. "Can I come in?"

I turn and get up, wrapping my arms around him, shaking as I cry.

"I'm so sorry," Ethan murmurs, stroking my hair. "Thomas is an idiot. He just admitted what he did. Adam is trying to turn him around now."

"He's not going to come around." My voice is thick with tears. "He doesn't want me anymore."

"That's not true. Trust me, I've known Thomas a lot longer than you have. He still wants you. He just doesn't think he deserves you. Thomas can get like this sometimes."

"He can?"

"Yeah. It doesn't happen often, but it's not unheard of when he fails to save someone he thought he should have been able to help. He always gets out of his funk eventually. I'm sorry you were hurt in the process this time. I'd understand if you don't want to take him back when he comes back to himself."

Well, at least it sounds like all isn't lost. As hurt as I am now, I know that if Thomas apologizes and comes to me, I'll take him back. I care about him too much to do otherwise.

I can't even imagine what it must feel like to have the guilt of someone's life on your heart. I imagine it would do funny things to a person.

"I won't hold it against him," I say slowly.

Ethan gives me a relieved smile. "Thanks, Jamie. You're more understanding than any of us deserves. Let me at least try to make up for Thomas' behavior. Let me take you out to lunch."

“You don’t need to make up for his behavior. He’s an adult and responsible for his own decisions.”

“Let me take you out to lunch anyway.”

That’s an easy one. Lunch with Ethan sounds like just what I need. I usually eat in the station with the guys during lunch break, but I can’t deny that the idea of going out somewhere is nice. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

“Adam and I are going to take Thomas home and try to force some food into him, a task that will surely take both of us. Let’s do it tomorrow?”

“That works for me. Good luck with Thomas.”

“Thanks. We’ll need it.”

I watch Ethan leave, and I can feel a slight relief washing over me.

I’m still upset about and worried for Thomas, but at least I know that this isn’t entirely out of the blue. If he’s had patches like this before, there’s a good chance he’ll come out of it just fine. I only hope that when he does, our friendship will be able to survive whatever happens between now and then.

* * *

“YOU LOOK EXHAUSTED.”

Ethan nods wearily. “I was up half the night with Thomas. Nightmares.”

“You stayed with him?”

“Yeah. I did last night and Adam going to stay there tonight. We made the call yesterday when we realized just how fucked up losing that guy in the fire has made him. Not that he appreciates it – he tried his hardest to kick us out, but fortunately, we’re just as stubborn as he is.”

“That is fortunate. You’re both good friends, Ethan. Thomas is lucky to have you.”

“We’re all lucky to have each other, really... and we’re lucky to have you too, Jamie, even if Thomas doesn’t realize it right now.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I mumble. “You guys are all so... and I’m just me.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, but you’re underselling yourself. You may not be a firefighter, but that doesn’t matter to us. It doesn’t mean you’re not smart or brave or good.”

A smile pulls at the corners of my lips. “Thanks, Ethan. So, did you manage to get Thomas to eat?”

Ethan rolls his eyes. “We practically had to force feed him, but yes. Anyway, enough about that shit. How are you doing?”

“I’m alright.” I may have bawled my eyes out like spoiled brat not getting what she wants, but Ethan doesn’t need to know that.”

I think he realizes I don’t really want to talk about it and changes the subject.

“Did you hear anything more from that person you were trying to order a handbag from?”

Now, it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “She’s saying it has been delayed by customs, but honestly, I don’t know anymore...”

The subject of the handbag order that has gone missing somewhere around the border lightens the mood nicely. Despite how infuriating it is, Ethan manages to get me laughing about it.

He always seems to be able to do that, even when I’m miserable. It’s hard to be upset around him. He’s always so happy.

Thomas is more serious and the two of us end up having deep talks. Adam is a bit of a mix between the two of them. He usually has a rather serious demeanor, but he has a quick, dry wit that he’s not afraid to use when the situation calls for it.

Ethan and I get involved in a competition for who can eat the most cherry pie. We both have a huge sweet tooth, which Adam, who far prefers savory treats, doesn't understand at all. Ethan wins, but only by a little, and it leaves both of us laughing and clutching our stomachs, for more reasons than one.

“Stop making me laugh! I'm going to be sick!”

“If you vomit, you forfeit the competition!”

“What competition? You've already won! If you vomit, *you* forfeit the competition!” I poke Ethan lightly in the stomach and he groans.

“You don't play fair.”

We're getting annoyed looks from the other patrons, but I don't care. I'm having too much fun.

As Ethan pays the bill, waving away my offer to split it, I can't help eyeing him from under my lashes. He's hot as hell.

I can't stop wondering what it would be like to date him – to date all of them. Ever since I let that joke slip, it's been on my mind. What if I could get over my issues around dating and finally let myself fall for someone? For three someone's?

I have to admit that I've felt a lot safer recently. Ever since they installed that security system in my apartment, I haven't been jumping at every shadow, and the self-defense classes have done wonders for my self-confidence.

I don't know enough to go up against Mike just yet, but the mere fact that I'm doing something about it is encouraging.

It's an unusual arrangement, but thanks to the book I'm reading and the research I've done, I know that it's not unheard of or impossible. The question is, would they want it?

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

Too late, I realize that I've gone silent, walking on autopilot as we head back to the station.

I hesitate. I could ask Ethan now, but I'm scared. I've already lost Thomas' friendship, and who knows if I'll ever

get that back? Ethan seems certain I will, but he can't guarantee anything. I know how seriously Thomas takes saving lives, and if he thinks I'm getting in the way of that... well, I might never get him back.

"Nothing."

"Yeah, and nothing is wrong with Thomas."

Crap. He knows me too well. "Nothing I want to talk about."

Ethan makes a face at me. "Not you too."

"I'm fine, I swear. It's just... something private."

"Fair enough. You'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I say at once. I know that much for certain. Thomas, Ethan and Adam have become my confidants just as much as Charlotte is, maybe even more so. I couldn't imagine them not being the first people I go to if something was truly wrong.

That's the good thing about having three of them. If the issue I have is with one of them, the other two will still be there for me.

As we head back into the station, Ethan suddenly stiffens and puts himself subtly in front of me. I peer around him and roll my eyes. As if I need protecting from Thomas, of all people.

I expect Thomas to walk past without stopping us, but instead, he stops dead and stares at me. "I need to talk to you, Jamie."

Oh, fuck. I don't want to do this. The last time we did it, it didn't go well at all, and I'm worried that another similar conversation will only make things worse. However, Thomas is looking expectantly at me and I can't deny him.

"Alright."

"You'd better not hurt her," Ethan growls.

"I won't. I promise."

Ethan holds Thomas' gaze for a few moments before nodding, evidently trusting his word.

Thomas leads me to the same empty office we went to yesterday. This time, instead of remaining standing, he falls into a chair, his head in his hands.

This doesn't look good, whatever it is. I sit down opposite him, my every muscle tensed as I wait for the blow to fall.

ADAM

I'm not listening at the door. I'm not. That would be immature and wrong. No, I'm just... passing by. Slowly. Beside me, Ethan is also passing by slowly.

"I'm so sorry, Jamie."

Ethan and I exchange a glance. That's not what either of us was expecting to hear.

"I'm going to need a bit more than that, Thomas. Is this a 'I'm so sorry and I'd like to start over' or a 'I'm so sorry I hurt you but this is the way it needs to be'?"

"The former. I never should have cut you out. I was up most of the night with nightmares. I expected them to be about the man I failed to save, but they weren't. They were all about losing you. It made me realize something."

"And what's that, Thomas?"

"I thought that losing that man yesterday was the worst thing that could possibly happen to me, but it wasn't. Losing you is the worst thing that could happen to me, and I'm making it happen all by myself. I'm not going to do that to myself. I may not deserve you, but I need you. I can't help it. I need you, Jamie. Please, can we start over?"

I wait with bated breath. Jamie would have every right to say no. It wasn't decent of Thomas to just pull the rug from

under her like he did. I wouldn't blame her for wanting to keep her distance from now on.

"Thomas, I am willing to start over with you, but there are a few conditions."

"Anything, Jamie."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course, I do. I'll do anything I can to make this up to you."

"I didn't say anything about making it up to me. I'm more interested in you making it up to yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"We can start over. I can get past the incident yesterday, but you need to as well. You need to pull yourself out of this guilt spiral you're in. You need to start taking proper care of yourself without Adam and Ethan forcing you to. You have to stop blaming yourself for what happened. Basically, you need to grow up"

"How can I stop blaming myself?" Thomas asks bitterly. "It was my fault. Even you can't deny that."

"I don't deny that you could have created a better outcome if you'd acted differently," Jamie says calmly. "However, even people trained in crisis situations can't always act on an entirely rational basis. You let your emotions get away with you. It must happen to all firefighters at some point, right?"

"Yeah, but I should be better than that."

"Oh, really. Is that what you'd tell Ethan or Adam if your places were reversed? That they should be better than this?"

There's a long pause. "No."

"You do realize you're being hypocritical, right?"

There's another silence, and I can imagine Thomas glaring at her. Jamie seems undeterred.

"Those are my terms. Take them or leave them."

“Are you seriously trying to manipulate me into forgiving myself? That’s not fair, Jamie!”

“Call it what you like. Ethan and Adam may humor you, but I’m not playing this game with you, Thomas. You messed up and you need to move on. That’s the truth of it and I’m not going to let you wallow if I have anything to say about it. I’ll leave you to think it over.”

Damn. That girl has some balls.

Ethan and I barely a second’s warning of feet approaching the door. We split in opposite directions, hurrying down either end of the hall. I hear Jamie coming out the room, but don’t look back, not wanting her to know that I was eavesdropping. Not that I was eavesdropping, but I don’t want to give her the wrong impression in any case.

Ethan and I meet up in the rec room. Thomas wanders in a few minutes later, looking dazed.

“Well, how’d it go?”

“She plays hardball, that’s for sure,” Thomas mutters. “She wants me to let it go.”

Ethan snorts. “That’s what we’ve been saying from the beginning. How come you’re listening to her, huh?”

“It’s a condition of her taking me back.” Thomas frowns. “At least you two aren’t threatening to end our friendship if I don’t agree with some ridiculous standard.”

I roll my eyes. “Ok, first off, she’s not threatening to end your friendship. You already did that, remember? And secondly, it’s hardly an unreasonable demand. Ethan has told her about how impossible you are when you’re like this. Can you really blame her for not wanting to deal with it?”

“I guess not,” Thomas mutters. “I don’t know if I can do it, though. How do I just let it go? A man is dead!”

“The same way you let all the others go. You acknowledge that it’s the nature the job, and you move on.”

Thomas grumbles under his breath.

“Well? Are you going to do it or not?” I wish he would hurry up and make up his mind. If he decides he can’t do it, Ethan and I will have to do damage control. I know how much she cares about Thomas and she’ll be devastated to lose him for good.

“I guess I’ll do it.” Thomas takes a deep breath. “I should go tell her.”

“Yes, you should.” Ethan grins at me, and I grin back. It finally feels like things are returning to normal.

I manage to restrain myself from following Thomas and having another slow walk past his conversation with Jamie. The two of them return several minutes later, their shoulders brushing as they walk. They’re both smiling.

“All made up, then?” Ethan asks.

“Yes, we are.” She glances at Thomas. “You’d better never do that to me again.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“You as well, Adam, Ethan. I... I need all three of you. I can’t have you leaving me.”

I wonder if she means more than she’s saying. Is she talking about just friendship, or does she mean a sexual relationship too? Because those feelings are there, I can’t deny that much.

Ethan claps his hands together once. “We should go out and celebrate our new beginning, all of us. How about a movie, Jamie?”

“I’d love to see a movie. All four of us?”

“I’m in,” Thomas says easily.

I don’t have to think about it for long. This sounds suspiciously like a group date, but the idea doesn’t bother me as much as it once did. Maybe I’ve been coming around to the idea ever since I slept with Jamie. Maybe it was even before that.

Whatever the reason, the words are out of my mouth before I can really think about them. “A movie sounds great.”

So, the next day after work, the four of us head out to the movie theater. We let Jamie pick, and she chooses a horror; clearly, she has great taste in movies. Thomas is less enthused, but he goes along with the group. Or rather, he goes along with Jamie.

We take out seats. Jamie ends up between Thomas and Ethan, but I’m not bothered by it. There will be plenty more opportunities for me to sit next to Jamie.

The movie is hair-raising, exactly how I like it. Thomas cringes through most of it, but Jamie’s eyes are bright, and her mouth is set in a grin as she watches.

We eat popcorn and sip on sodas until the movie is done. As we walk out, I realize that I’m not ready for the night to end. I enjoyed the movie, and I liked that I got to spend time with Jamie, but I never really got to talk to her. It seems almost a waste of an evening if I don’t get to speak with her.

“Let’s go out for drinks,” I suggest.

“I’m up for drinks.” Jamie glances questioningly at Ethan and Thomas.

“Drinks sound good to me.”

“Agreed. There’s a bar around the corner from here, I think.” Thomas points off to our left. “We can try there.”

There is indeed a bar around the corner, a small thing set in between buildings that seems bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

We waste no time ordering drinks. Jamie gets through her first drink quickly and orders a second not long after. We play pool, Jamie and me against Thomas and Ethan. I’m the undisputed pool champion between the three of us, and Jamie is... well honestly, she’s awful at pool, so we’re fairly evenly matched.

Jamie orders a few more drinks as we play. She seems to be getting through them quite fast, but she’s clearly having

fun, so I don't say anything. She's an adult, after all. She gets to decide how much she does and doesn't drink.

As the night wears on, Jamie gets more and more wasted. At one point, Thomas suggests we leave, but Jamie insists that she's having too much fun to go. I subtly switch to sodas after Jamie's fifth drink. One of us needs to be in fit shape to manage her when she starts falling over.

I keep my laugh to myself when I notice that Ethan and Thomas have done the same. Well, it certainly won't hurt to have all three of us relatively sober. Jamie is certainly making up all of us.

When she can't stand up straight anymore, we give up the pool and go to one of the tables. Jamie throws herself across my and Ethan's laps, her head resting over my thighs as she looks up at Thomas, who is next to me.

"Date me."

"You're drunk, Jamie."

"No, I mean it." Jamie struggles to get up. She doesn't manage it, but I see what she's trying to do and help her into a sitting position. She looks at Ethan and me. "Date me. All of you. You could share me. It would be great. We could fall in love together and buy a house and have lots of children."

Ethan, Thomas and I exchange glances. I'm not sure what to do here. Jamie is clearly plastered and doesn't know what she's saying... or does she? Alcohol tends to lower inhibitions, not cause someone to make up lies.

"Well? Would you do it? Would you all be with me, together? Tell me!" Jamie demands petulantly.

Ethan is the first to speak. "I would," he says firmly. "You've known from the start that I want to be in a relationship with you, Jamie. I'd be more than happy to share you with Thomas and Adam. In fact, I'd prefer that option."

Jamie gives him a silly grin. "You're the best, Ethan. Well? What about you guys?"

She looks expectantly at Thomas and me. Thomas is the next to respond. “I would like that, Jamie. However, I think you should ask this question again when you’re less drunk. We can have an adult conversation about it tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, when you’re less hungover.”

Jamie reaches up for his face, stroking his cheeks. “I knew you liked me. You never really wanted to leave me.

Adam?

What about you, Adam?”

I’m torn. Now that it comes down to it, I realize that I would really, really like to date Jamie, particularly if Ethan and Thomas are involved. On the other hand, I’m still worried that the relationship would be doomed to failure.

The question is, would I be willing to risk that for Jamie?

As I look into her wide, innocent eyes, I realize that I’ve known the answer all along. Of course, I would risk it for her. I’d risk anything for her, even my own heart.

“Yes, Jamie. I would like to date you with Thomas and Ethan.”

“Yay!” Jamie wraps her arms and legs around Ethan and me, using one arm to pull Thomas into the impromptu, messy hug.

I tell myself that I shouldn’t take this seriously. Jamie is extremely drunk and will probably regret this tomorrow. Still, now that I’ve acknowledged to myself the idea that I want to be with her, it’s more than tempting. It’s alluring and nearly impossible to resist.

Still, I shouldn’t pressure her. She may not even remember this in the morning. I shouldn’t mention it unless she does. If she remembers, and she doesn’t regret it, she’ll bring it up.

I don’t want to do anything to ruin this. I really like Jamie. If her friendship is all I can ever have, then I will gladly take that as far better than nothing.

Jamie moans and rolls over, promptly splattering vomit all over the floor. “Right, I think that’s the cue to get you home.”

Thomas gently extracts himself from the hug. “I’ll see if the bartender has a bucket we can borrow.”

We manage to get Jamie home without any more vomiting incidents, though the moment we get into her apartment, she runs for the toilet and heaves her guts into it.

I hold her hair out of the way while Ethan rubs soothing circles on her back. Thomas goes through the medicine cabinet, looking for some kind of a painkiller or anti-nausea tablet. He finds both and has Jamie take them before we take her to the bedroom.

Here, we all pause. Jamie’s clothes have vomit on them. We can’t possibly put her in bed like this. I can tell we’re all thinking the same thing. Is it appropriate of us to undress her while she’s in this state? I’m not going to put her to bed in filth, though, so undressing her seems unavoidable.

“Adam and I have both seen her naked. I don’t think she’d mind.”

“Fine,” Thomas grumbles. “I’ll go get her some water in the meantime.”

Ethan holds Jamie up while I gently strip her dirty clothes off. We rummage through her drawers and find a pair of pajamas. Getting them on her is more difficult than you’d expect. She is no help whatsoever. Pulling her arms through the sleeves is like trying to get pieces of wet spaghetti to cooperate.

Finally, we get her dressed and into bed. Thomas returns with a glass of water and helps prop her up against the headboard.

“Jamie, you need to drink this.”

“Nooo, no more drinks,” Jamie moans.

Thomas chuckles. “Glad to hear you’ve finally realized that you’ve had enough. Don’t worry, this is just water. Trust me, you want to be as hydrated as possible. Tomorrow is going to be brutal, and the more water you have now, the better things will go for you.”

Jamie mumbles another protest but allows Thomas to tip the water up to her mouth and takes a few gulps. He manages to coax the whole glass into her before laying her down and pulling the covers up.

“One of us should stay here,” he murmurs. “We can’t leave her like this. She could pass out and choke on her own vomit.”

“Agreed. I can stay.” Now that I’ve come to the realization that I want to be with Jamie, I’m eager to spend more time with her. Sure, she’ll be sleeping for most of that time, but she’ll wake up in the morning, and then we can talk.

“We can take shifts if you’d like?” Ethan offers. “You’d have to stay up the whole night and watch her...”

“I can do it. I’ll tackle that coffee maker of hers. I’m sure it’ll be fine. I’ll rest tomorrow; it’s a Saturday, after all.”

“Alright. We should head out, then. Goodnight, Jamie.” Thomas strokes a hand down the side of Jamie’s face. She turns into the touch, but otherwise doesn’t react. I can’t tell if she’s asleep or not, but if she’s not, she’s pretty close.

“You’ll take her to the hospital right away if she shows symptoms of alcohol poisoning, right?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, I will, Ethan. What do you think I’d do, sit here and let her die? I was a student, too. I know how to care for a drunk person.”

“Yeah. Ok, right. We’ll go, then.”

Ethan and Thomas let themselves out, leaving me alone with a sleeping Jamie. I get myself comfortable in a chair and settle down to wait, watching her steady breathing.

Thankfully, she doesn’t vomit again. She seems deeply asleep. I would have preferred it if she woke up at least once or twice so that I could get her to drink some more water, but I suppose I can’t have everything. At least she doesn’t seem to have alcohol poisoning.

I’m just starting to relax when something loud blares through my ears, making me jump up and send the chair skittering back behind me.

It takes a second to realize that it's the alarm system we got Jamie. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, there's an intruder. I look around for some kind of weapon. I don't see anything close by, but then I remember that Jamie keeps pepper spray in her purse.

I lunge for the purse and dig through it for a few frantic moments before coming up with the pepper spray.

If it's the man who hurt Jamie before, I'm going to destroy him.

Whoever it is, if they think they'll find a helpless woman living alone, they're in for a big surprise.

I creep out of the bedroom, pepper spray raised.

JAMIE

I'm woken from a dead sleep by the screaming of the alarm system. My stomach roils and my head spins as I flop out of bed, trying to get to my purse, where I keep my pepper spray. Where is my purse? It's dark in here. I should have turned on the light. Crap.

My brain doesn't seem to be working very well, and neither does my body. I try several times to get up, but my limbs keep splaying out on the floor in front of me.

There's a dark shape moving in the corner of my room. My breath freezes in my throat. I can't even scream.

The light clicks on. The dark shape is Adam. Is that my pepper spray he's holding?

The alarm suddenly shuts off. Adam creeps forward, pepper spray raised. I can't see what's going on in the corridor, but there's a sudden shriek of alarm.

"Adam! What are you doing here?"

"Charlotte! Are you alright? Did you see the intruder?"

"I don't think there is one. I think the wind caused one of the tree branches to trigger the sensor outside the window. I could hear the tree slapping against it over and over again."

Adam lets out a long sigh. "We'll need to get the alarm company in to fix that. Are you sure that's all it was?"

“I think so.”

“Let me check the house anyway, just to be safe. You should go back to bed, Charlotte.”

“What are you doing here, Adam?”

“I was out with Jamie. She got completely wasted. I decided to stay the night, to keep an eye on her.”

“You didn’t think to wake me?”

“You were asleep, and it was late. I was happy to stay.”

“Well next time, you can always wake me. I’m happy to take care of her.”

“So am I!”

“Hey, relax. I didn’t mean to imply that you aren’t taking good care of her.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, Charlotte. I guess I’m just on edge. If that man gets in here and hurts Jamie again...”

“Again?”

“Surely she’s told you?”

“You mean she’s told you?”

“Well, not exactly. We figured it out. We don’t know the details – Jamie still won’t talk to us about it – but we know that she’s afraid of someone. That’s why we got her the alarm system and sent her for self-defense classes.”

“That was you? Wow, you must really care about her.”

“I do. We do. Anyway, I need to check the house. You should go back to bed, Charlotte.”

There are footsteps, and a few minutes later, Adam returns.

“Jamie, what are you doing on the floor?”

“I fell,” I say stupidly. My brain is still working to catch up with the conversation I just heard. “What’s wrong with me?”

“You’re just drunk, sweetheart. You’ll be fine tomorrow. Well, not fine, exactly, but you won’t be drunk anymore. The

hangover may last a few more hours, but you'll be right as rain in no time."

I'll have to take his word for it. I try to crawl back into bed, but my arms collapse underneath me.

"Here, let me help you." Adam easily lifts me into bed and tucks me back in. "There you go. Here, drink some water before you go back to sleep."

I groan. Water is the last thing my rolling stomach needs.

"I'm not asking, Jamie."

I make a face at Adam but allow him to tip the glass up. I drink the water and gratefully lie down in bed. I'm asleep almost instantly.

The next morning, I wake up, but immediately wish I hadn't. Surely, being asleep – or even being dead – is better than this agony. It feels like my brain is trying to bash its way out of my skull. The curtains are closed, but the shards of light that are coming from behind them are stabbing my sensitive eyeballs, even when I squeeze my eyes shut.

I groan and pull the blanket up over my head, trying to shut out the pain. It doesn't work. The pain pursues me.

"Jamie? You're awake?"

Oh, fuck. Adam. I have vague memories of him helping me into bed last night.

That's not what I'm worried about. What I'm worried about is the drunken question I let slip while I was with them.

I remember so clearly asking them if they wanted to date me and then... nothing. Why can't I remember their answers? Surely, even if I was to forget the rest of the night, that should be the one, most important part that I should remember.

Apparently, my brain disagrees, because it is stubbornly blank on the subject.

"Jamie? Are you there?"

"No," I moan. "Go away."

I can't bring myself to face him. How can I? I embarrassed myself so thoroughly last night that I don't see any way I can ever come back from it. Why did I have to ask them if they wanted to date me? Why the hell did I have to *forget*?

It wouldn't be so bad if I just remembered how bad the damage was. I push the blankets aside slightly, wincing as the light stabs me, and peek up at Adam. I could just ask him. He'd be honest with me.

I try, I really do, but I can't do it. The words simply won't come. If there's any chance they thought I was kidding around with my question, I have to take it. Bringing it up again will invalidate that chance.

Maybe if I just don't say anything about it, they will assume that I was too drunk to know what I was saying.

"I'm not going anywhere until I know for sure that you're alright," Adam says steadily.

Does he have to be so nice? That's not helping matters. It makes me want to pop the question even more. Would he date me with Thomas and Ethan? They're all so wonderful, and when I'm with them, I feel like I'll never be able to get enough.

"I'm fine. Just leave me alone."

"You're cranky when you're hungover." He doesn't sound bothered. "There's Tylenol here, if you want it."

That's enough to lure me out of my blanket cave of mortification. I snatch up the Tylenol and then retreat back to my bed like some kind of goblin.

"You may want some water to swallow those." Adam sounds like he's trying hard not to laugh. I have to admit that he has a point. These will be a lot easier to swallow with water.

I reluctantly push the blanket further back and reach for the glass of water Adam is holding out. I swallow the Tylenol and wonder how long it'll take to have an effect.

I want to go back to bed and sleep off my hangover, but I feel gross and I want to shower. However, I also want to get rid of Adam. I can't be around him right now, not when seeing him makes me want to cringe in embarrassment.

I still need to come to terms with my behavior and figure out what my question means for us now. Figuring that out would have been a lot easier if I'd remembered their answer, but I suppose you can't have everything in life.

"I'm fine now, Adam, really. You can go. Charlotte can take over from here."

Hurt flickers briefly over his face. "I don't mind taking care of you, Jamie."

"Charlotte can handle it," I repeat. "Thank you for staying, but really, I don't need you here right now."

"Alright." Adam stands and pats my shoulder through the blankets. "Feel better, Jamie. I'll see you at work on Monday."

"See you."

It's not long after Adam leaves before Charlotte prances into the bedroom. She looks far too perky for such an awful morning.

"Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Awful. I want to die?"

"Yeah, excessive drinking will do that to you. Why did you send Adam away? He was so sweet, staying up with you all night to make sure you were alright. The least you could've offered him breakfast."

"He stayed up the whole night?"

"I think he did. He was awake in that chair when I went to bed, and still awake in that chair when I woke up."

That's so sweet, it makes me want to cry. Adam deserved better than to be thrown out the moment I woke up, but I still can't get my head around the idea of facing him – or any of my guys – right now.

“So, what happened? Did you two have a fight or something? You only just woke up, right? It must have been a short fight.”

“No, we didn’t have a fight.”

“Then what. I know you like him. Why kick him out like that?”

I hesitate, but I don’t really mind Charlotte knowing. She knows plenty of embarrassing things about me, and vice versa.

“I got really drunk last night.”

“No kidding.”

“Anyway, while I was well on the way to being completely wasted, I asked the guys if they wanted to date me. All of them at once.”

“No!” Charlotte gasped. “What did they say?”

“That’s just it! I can’t remember!” I wail. “How could I have forgotten something so crucial?”

“Maybe you did remember it, but it wasn’t the answer you wanted to hear, so your mind is protecting you.”

That is an idea I haven’t considered and not one I particularly like, but I suppose I can’t rule it out.

“I don’t know. The point is that no matter what they said, there’s no denying I screwed up big time. If their answer was no, I probably freaked them out and made them think I’m too weird to have as a friend. After all, it’s not a typical arrangement.”

“And if their answer was yes, or maybe?”

“Then I’ve made a horrible impression by asking them when I’m drunk. They’ll probably think it’s something I’m not serious about and will only talk about the idea when I’m wasted out of my mind.”

“Is it something you’re serious about?”

I pause for a moment, thinking. “Yes,” I say eventually. “It’s been hovering on the edges of my mind for ages, but I

haven't really given it a huge amount of thought. I've fantasized, sure, but I got serious about considering the specifics of it, which I would need to do if we're going to go ahead with this."

"That's true. It sounds like you have an important conversation to have."

"Don't you get it? It's too late. I already fucked it up. I scared them off or made them think I can only want them when I'm drunk."

"Those are assumptions you're making, Jamie. They're not necessarily correct."

"Oh yeah? What else could they possibly think?"

"Well, let's say their answer was no. They could simply believe that you're an open-minded young woman, and be flattered that you're attracted to them, even if the idea will never work for them.

"Or if the answer was yes, they could realize how anxious you've been about asking them, given that it took some liquid courage to get you there, and they'll know that they need to tread carefully."

I have to admit, both of those options sound much more appealing than the ideas floating around my head.

"How do you know, though? I think my options sound more likely."

"I don't know, and neither do you. That's the point. There's only one way you can find out, you know that, right?"

"I know. Wait and see what happens."

"No, not wait and see what happens. You've told me how respectful they all are. Think about this from their perspective, Jamie. You were blind drunk. They probably thought you didn't mean it and now don't want to pressure you into something you said when you were mentally incapacitated."

That... actually makes sense. Thomas, Ethan and Adam are all annoyingly noble. They wouldn't want to take advantage of me in any way.

“It’s still a risk, though, talking about it.”

“Life is a risk. My apartment burned down the other day, and the only risk I took was living in it. You can’t live without risk, Jamie.”

“So, what do you think I should do?”

“First off, I think you should apologize to Adam for so rudely kicking him out after he took such good care of you. Then, you should arrange a meeting with all three of your guys and talk things out. It’s the only way to get through this.”

I know she has a point. I do know that. Unfortunately, my emotions and my logic are two separate things. No matter how many times I tell myself just to get over what happened and deal with the aftermath, thinking about it still makes me want to sink into a hole in the ground and never return to the surface again.

“I’ll think about it.”

“But –”

“That’s the best you’re going to get for now, Charlotte.”

Charlotte rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue further.

I decide to change the subject. “How about we watch a movie?” I’m honestly not up for anything more than that. Hangovers are a bitch.

“Sure,” Charlotte says easily.

We’re halfway through one of Charlotte’s favorite romcoms when I get a text from Adam.

WE NEED TO TALK.

I STARE at the text with rising worry, waiting for him to say something more, but he doesn’t. Fuck. When has that sentence ever led to a conversation that goes well?

THOMAS

I stare at my screen in frustration. I can see that Jamie has read my message, but she's ignoring me. We need to talk about what happened last night, but we can't do that if she's avoiding us.

Well, she can't avoid us forever. We work together, after all. Sooner or later, she'll have to face us.

Unfortunately, Jamie seems to disagree. When she arrives at work on Monday, instead of coming to greet Ethan, Adam and me, she goes straight to the dispatching room.

"I'm going to talk to her."

"Don't," Adam warns me. "If she wants her space, we should give it to her."

"If she wants space, she can tell me that herself. I'll respect that if it's what she wants, but right now, she's just ignoring us."

"Give her time." Ethan runs a hand through his hair. "I know it's frustrating but remember that all this is probably new to her. We don't even know if she meant what she said last night. What if she's regretting it and trying to figure out how to tell us?"

I still think that the best way out of this would be for us all to talk, but I can't force Jamie to talk to me, so on Adam's and

Ethan's advice, I give her space. Surely, she will come to us when she's ready to talk.

Four days pass, and Jamie is still avoiding us. I'm growing more and more frustrated, and I can tell that Ethan and Adam feel the same.

I'm the first one to break. It's during lunch on the fourth day of Jamie's avoidance that I lose my patience. "I've had enough of this," I mutter, standing up.

"Thomas, whatever you're planning to do –"

"Shut it, Adam. I'll do what I want."

I stride out of the cafeteria and toward the dispatching room, where Jamie has started having her lunch.

I do my best not to slam the door open, but it still bounces back against the wall as I step inside. Jamie squeaks in alarm as she spins around to face me. "Thomas. What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk, Jamie."

She folds her arms. "I don't want to talk."

"Then perhaps I should show you what I'm thinking." I step forward and grab her by the shoulders, hauling her up and pressing her against the wall. I kiss her, grinding my body against hers and claiming her mouth.

Jamie moans into the kiss and wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me in closer. I push my tongue into her mouth, it's hot and wet and tastes delicious. My cock is hardening quickly, and I grind my hips against hers again, creating breathtaking friction between us.

Jamie is moving her hips urgently with mine and she lifts a leg to wrap it around my waist. I take a moment to admire her flexibility before grabbing her ass and lifting her up. She wraps her other leg around me, holding on and pressing down onto my cock.

I carry her over to the desk in the corner of the room and sweep the pens and papers aside with one arm before laying her down.

Jamie lifts her hips, allowing me to pull her pants and panties down in one. I find her wet and ready for me. Her pussy glistens and I can't resist spreading her folds and slipping my tongue inside her, tasting her core.

“Oh, fuck yes, Thomas!”

Jamie braces her feet on the desk, keeping her legs spread wide for me and pressing into my tongue. I start thrusting in and out of her, drinking in the noises she is making. Her hand comes to her clit, but I quickly push it away, replacing it with my own.

I start rubbing her in time with my thrusts. Jamie is crying out on every thrust and her thighs start to shake as the muscles tense.

I can tell she is close to coming, but I don't want her to come yet. I want to be inside her when she does. My cock is an aching bar of iron in my pants, begging for relief.

I pull away, causing Jamie to moan in protest, but I don't leave her wanting for long. I strip out of my pants, giving my cock a few quick strokes.

“Take your shirt off – and your bra.”

Jamie is only too eager to do as I ask. Her breasts spring free, her nipples hard and too tempting to resist.

I position my cock and slide easily into her pussy. Her wet heat around my throbbing cock is so good, it feels like I might explode on the first thrust, but I hold myself back. I want to make Jamie come first.

I lean down and pull one nipple into my mouth, sucking hard.

“Oh! Just like that, Thomas!”

She's being very loud. I like it. The rather high chance of discovery only adds a thrill to the experience that has me hurtling toward orgasm faster than ever before.

“Touch yourself,” I growl, pulling off her nipple just long enough to talk before going back down, this time sucking on the other one.

Jamie wriggles her hand between us, moaning she gets her hand in the right position.

I start pounding into her at a frantic pace. I can feel my orgasm building and I can't hold it back anymore.

“Come for me, Jamie. Come for me, right now!”

Jamie screams as she comes, her pussy clenching tightly around my cock. That extra pressure is all I need to push me over the edge. I pulse into her, my hands gripping the sides of the desk as pleasure overwhelms all of my senses.

When I come down from my high, Jamie and I are both panting to catch our breath. I manage to maintain my composure while running around in a fire suit with smoke all around me, but Jamie has me gasping like I did as a recruit.

I slowly pull out and look around for something to clean up with. There is a box of tissues on the floor – I must have knocked it off the desk without realizing – and I pick it up, handing it to Jamie.

“Thanks.” She smiles shyly at me.

“We need to talk, Jamie,” I repeat as the two of us clean up.

She sighs. “I suppose we do.”

“What do you remember of what happened that night in the bar?”

Jamie goes as red as some of the burn victims I've seen. “I... uh... I asked, Ethan and Adam if you'd like to date me. All of you at once.”

“Do you remember what we said?”

Jamie's face is flaming as she shakes her head. “I'm so sorry, Thomas. I got wasted and made a complete fool of myself. Can we just forget it ever happened? Please?”

“I'm not going to forget it happened, because I don't want to forget you asking us to date you. We said yes, Jamie. We'd like to be in a relationship with you.”

Her gaze comes up from the floor to meet mine. “Really? Do you mean that? You weren’t just saying it because you felt sorry for me?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course, we meant it! When have you ever known any of us to do anything we weren’t committed to?”

“I suppose that’s true.” Jamie smiles. “I guess we should talk to Adam and Ethan, then.”

“Yes, we should.”

I hand Jamie her clothes and put my pants back on. Once we are both dressed, I take her hand and the two of us walk through to the cafeteria.

Adam’s and Ethan’s eyes are on our joined hands from the moment we enter the room, and they aren’t the only ones.

I get close enough to them so that I can speak without anyone else hearing. “Let’s go talk somewhere private.”

“Of course.” Adam grabs the last of his muffin and follows us, with Ethan close behind.

The rec room is empty and the four of us sit down.

“Well, you two seem to have made up.” Ethan winks at us.

“What do you mean?” Jamie asks neutrally.

“You’re not exactly quiet, Jamie.”

Her face is once more the color of a ripe tomato. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have heard that.”

“I’m not exactly complaining. It was hot. Maybe we can join you next time?” Adam raises an eyebrow.

Jamie is still red in the face, but she smiles. “I’d like that.”

“It seems that Jamie doesn’t remember the important half of our conversation – the part where we said we’d like to date her.”

“Oh. Well, that explains a lot.” Adam gives me an apologetic look. “I guess you were right, Thomas. Space wasn’t what was needed in this situation.”

“I’m sorry I was avoiding you. I was just so embarrassed. I guess it was silly.”

I shrug. “Well, it’s over now. We can learn from it, yeah? If we’re going to do the dating thing, we’re going to need to be completely honest with each other. Dating is complicated enough with just two people involved. With four of us, things will fall apart quickly if we don’t communicate.”

“I guess you’re right. This is all so new to me. I never even knew that this kind of thing was done until recently.”

“It’s not common, but it happens.” I hesitate, wondering whether to tell her about Melissa, but decide that telling her about our dead ex isn’t the best way to start a new relationship. We can always fill her in about our history with Melissa later.

“How exactly is this going to work? Do we all go on dates together? Separately? And in the bedroom?”

“Ultimately, our relationship is whatever we decide it is,” Adam explains. “We can do what we want. My preference is a mixture of both. I’d like some individual time with you, both in the bedroom and out, but mostly I would prefer to do things as a group. The idea of all three of us pleasuring you together... well, it’s kept me up at night more than once.”

“Me too,” Jamie admits. “I like the idea of doing a mixture. For our first official date, though, I’d like it to be all four of us.”

“That sounds perfect.” My mind is already spinning with possibilities. I want the first date to be perfect. I’ll need to brainstorm with Ethan and Thomas. What would Jamie like the most? Something more mainstream, or something a little unusual? It has to be memorable, that’s for sure.

Jamie grins at us. “This is great. I can’t believe I almost missed out on this just because I was embarrassed.”

“Hey, we all do embarrassing things when we’re drunk. I could tell you some stories about Thomas and Adam....”

“Except you’re afraid of what stories Thomas and I would tell about you in retaliation.”

“True.”

“I should probably get back to my station.” Jamie shoots a guilty look in the direction of her workspace. “I guess it’s not exactly professional to take time out of work for... this.”

“Do you regret it?” I don’t, but I wonder if Jamie does.

“Not in the slightest. I really should go, though.”

“Yeah.” I can’t resist catching Jamie’s hand and pulling her in for one last kiss before she goes. She’s grinning from ear to ear as she leaves, and glances at Ethan, Adam and me several times over her shoulder before leaving.

I turn to Ethan and Adam. “Well, that went better than I expected.”

“You can say that again.”

I expect it to be at least a few hours until I hear Jamie’s voice again, but a mere half hour later, my radio comes to life.

“Thomas? There’s a fire on twenty-five Janan Street.”

“We’re on it, Jamie.”

There’s something wrong in her voice. I can tell she’s unnerved, but there isn’t time to discuss it now. Adam and Ethan are already grabbing their gear and I follow suit.

We hurry to the fire truck, to find multiple other teams already there. If we’re not the only team being called in on this, that must mean it’s a bigger than average fire. No wonder Jamie is sounding nervous. The last time we were on a difficult call, things didn’t exactly go well for us.

When we get to the scene of the fire, the familiar rush of adrenaline is tinged with unfamiliar fear as I look at the building. I learned a long time ago to bury most of my fear, but seeing a fire like this, a fire so huge and encompassing that I wonder whether I will come out of this call alive or not, is enough to shake even my nerves.

There must be at least ten houses on fire. How did it get this far without anyone arriving to deal with it? Why did no one call us before now?

There's no time to dwell on that either. I can only deal with the situation. I glance at Adam and Ethan before rushing in.

The fire may be worse than usual, but our task is the same – get as many people out alive as possible.

I just hope we can get ourselves out alive in the process.

JAMIE

I know that I can't do any good at the scene of the fire. I'll just get in the way. I should stay here.

As logical as that is, logic doesn't make it any easier just to sit here and wait for my guys to come back. Will they even come back here, or will I be visiting them in the hospital again?

Or even worse... no, I won't think about that. I can't.

An hour passes. An hour and a half. No word. I'm sure they're really busy. It was a big fire, after all. There's probably nothing wrong.

Eventually, I can't stand it anymore. I put myself on standby on the system; it's not like I'll be getting any more calls with my guys all out in the field. I hurry to my car and put the address of the fire into my phone. I'm not supposed to be doing this – just running out of the station in the middle of a work day – but I'll take whatever consequences come of this. I need to see Thomas, Adam and Ethan right now. I need to know they're ok.

My breath catches in my throat as I come upon the scene of the fire. The flames are leaping high into the sky, topped by billowing clouds of smoke.

The area is cordoned off, and there is a crowd packed close to the dividers. I push my way through to the front, much to the indignation of the people around me.

“Let me through!” I growl. “I need to be there!”

A few people swear at me, but I don’t care. I get to the front and try to duck under the barrier, but a police officer stops me.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you can’t go past this point. It’s not safe.”

“Please, people I care about are in there.”

“The firefighters are doing everything they can to get everyone out.”

“It’s the firefighters I’m worried for! Have you heard from Ethan, Thomas or Adam?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but I don’t know the names of the individual firefighters working the scene.”

Great. That’s just great. I crane my neck, trying to see past the thick smoke.

Firefighters are coming in and out of the building, carrying civilians to the waiting paramedics before going back into the flaming nightmare.

There. Adam and Thomas are each under the arm of an unconscious guy. My knees go weak with relief. They’re ok. At least, as far as I can tell from this distance. At least they’re upright and still moving.

Where is Ethan? I search frantically through the firefighters coming in and out, but I don’t see Ethan.

“Alright, everyone out!” someone shouts. “These houses are coming down!”

No. Ethan is still inside. They can’t just leave him in there. What if he’s trapped, or unconscious?

Thomas and Adam exchange a look before ducking past the supervisor and hurrying back into the building, ignoring the indignant shouts behind them.

I realize I'm holding my breath when I start to get dizzy and force myself to breathe. I could lose them – all of them. Maybe coming here was a mistake. I'm even more terrified than I was waiting at the station.

It feels like an eternity, but in reality, it's probably only a few minutes before Thomas and Adam return.

Ethan is with them.

He's walking on his own, a bit unsteadily, but still under his own power.

He seems to be protesting as Adam drags him to the paramedics.

I duck under the cordon and dash over before anyone can stop me.

“Ethan!”

He looks up as the paramedics are taking his blood pressure. “Jamie? What are you doing here?”

“Are you alright?” I demand. I want to fling myself into his arms, but I'm worried about hurting him if he has an injury.

“I'm fine,” Ethan assures me. “I just got trapped, but Thomas and Adam got me out.”

That's all the assurance I need. I throw myself into Ethan's waiting arms. He hugs me close to his chest, murmuring softly in my ear. “I'm ok. You worry too much, Jamie. I do this all the time.”

“This was a bad one.”

“It was,” Thomas agrees, stroking my hair. “Still, you need to trust us. This is what we do, and we'll always look out for each other.”

The paramedics are waiting impatiently to get at Ethan and Adam pries me from his arms. I go into Adam's embrace, and Thomas joins us, sandwiching me between the two of them. They smell of sweat and smoke, but I don't care about that. I just care that they're alright.

We stay like that until the paramedics pronounce Ethan fit to go; he doesn't even need a hospital visit. He was merely a bit unsteady from a blow to the head, but it seems he doesn't have a concussion.

The four of us head back to the station and I wait impatiently while the guys shower.

They join me in the rec room. Ethan immediately pulls me onto his lap and I wrap my arms around his neck, resting my head on his shoulder. Adam lifts my feet off the floor and places them over his knees, while Thomas starts stroking my hair again.

My heartrate slowly starts to calm down and I begin to relax. They're ok. I'm going to need to get used to this if we're going to be together. If I'm this worried now, it'll only get worse as time goes on, but I would never ask them to give up their careers for me. I'm just going to have to learn to trust that they know what they're doing and that they will always do everything they can to come back to me.

* * *

“WELL? Are you going to tell me where we're going?”

“No,” Thomas, Ethan and Adam all say in unison.

I roll my eyes. They've been insistent on keeping this date a surprise and have so far resisted my every attempt to wheedle it out of them.

Thomas pats my shoulder. “You'll see soon enough.”

“I suppose,” I grumble. I've been waiting almost a week for this. The guys were insistent that they needed time to plan.

My curiosity grows as we drive out of the city to what looks like a farm. I have no idea what we're going to do at a farm, but I'm sure that whatever my guys have planned, it's going to be great.

We stop and Ethan opens the car door for me. I get out, finally understanding why they told me to wear practical pants

and boots. Traipsing all over a farm in heels and a skirt would not have been fun.

I stop dead as I see the sign in front of the entrance. “Camel riding?”

“That’s right.” Adam grins at me. “Don’t worry, you’re going to love it.”

I peer doubtfully over to the enclosure, where there are at least a dozen camels milling around. “I’m not so sure about this...”

“You’ll be fine. Trust us, this will be fun.”

Thomas sounds so sure of himself that I can’t help but pick up a little of his enthusiasm. “Ok, let’s give this a try, then.”

The camel handler briefly instructs us on how to handle the camels before helping us climb on. I sit between the two humps, clutching the reins for dear life.

Thomas, Ethan and Adam sit astride their camels as though they’ve been doing this for years. I feel like I might fall off at any moment, and that’s nothing to how I feel when the camel starts moving with a jerky gait.

I don’t fall, though, and as we ride slowly around the corral, I find myself grinning. “Ok, so this is kind of fun.”

Thomas winks at me. “I told you so. How about a race?”

“No way!”

“I’m down for a race.”

“Shut up, Adam! It’s not safe!”

“Don’t worry, Jamie, it’ll be fine. Besides, Adam and Thomas will be eating my dust. Come on, Betty, let’s go!”

Ethan whips his reins and spurs his camel into a slow fast trot. Adam and Thomas are right behind him. They’re all laughing maniacally as they nearly bump into each other, steering away at the last moment. I’m caught between laughing and trying to stop them.

Eventually, laughter wins out. Camel racing just looks so ridiculous, it's impossible not to laugh.

Ethan takes a turn too sharply and his camel bumps into Thomas'. Thomas goes tumbling to the ground and rolls.

“Thomas!”

I run slide off my camel and over, but Thomas is already rolling to his feet, laughing. Ethan and Adam race to the gate, Adam making it there a few seconds before Ethan.

“Victory!” He pumps his fists in the air.

I give Thomas a quick peck on the cheek before jogging over to Ethan.

“A kiss for the victor?”

“Get down here and kiss me, then.”

Adam wraps an arm around my waist and bends me over as he kisses me deeply, taking my breath away.

When we pull up, the camel handler is watching us with raised eyebrows, but doesn't say anything.

“There's a café here. We figured we could go for lunch now that we've worked up an appetite.”

I survey Thomas doubtfully. He's covered in dust from his fall. “Do they have a shower here, too?”

Thomas looks down at himself. “Probably not. I'll make do. Here, help me dust off.”

He dusts his front and I do his back. I linger on his ass, squeezing it and pressing myself against him, not caring that I'm getting myself covered in dust as well.

The camel handler's eyebrows are raised so high that they're no longer visible beneath her bangs.

I don't care. I'm having fun with my guys and that's all that matters.

Once Thomas is as dusted off as we're going to get him, we head to the restaurant, chuckling about the doomed camel race. Thomas is already demanding a rematch.

“You know, I somehow don’t think they’ll be inviting us back here. I glance at the camel handler, who is giving me the side-eye as Ethan feeds me bits of quiche from his own fork. I giggle as he brings my hand to his mouth, kissing my knuckles.

“If she doesn’t like our relationship, she can just go suck it.” Thomas shrugs, seemingly completely unbothered. “I think you’ll find a lot of people don’t understand what we have. Ignoring that kind of bad attitude is a good skill to learn.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I do my best not to pay any attention to the camel handler, and eventually she goes away, leaving me to enjoy my lunch with my guys. We end up staying for an extra hour when I discover the farm has baby goats.

“I have to pet them!”

“Why would you want to pet them? Goats are gross.” Ethan looks doubtfully at the adorable little bleating bundles of fluff.

“Look at them! They’re so sweet. Come on, pet them with me.”

“Only for you,” Ethan mutters before stepping over the fence. Thomas and Adam are already on the ground with two goats on each of their laps. Ethan and I are accosted with cuteness the moment we step inside. The goats seem to want treats, but when they discover we don’t have any, they’re equally happy with cuddles.

The staff are watching us disapprovingly as Ethan starts cavorting with the babies, chasing them around the enclosure, much to their delight – so much for not liking goats. They don’t stop us, though, so we continue having fun with the goats until I’m too breathless with laughter to stay any longer.

We’re all filthy at this point and more than ready for a shower. Adam’s car is going to need a wash after we all ride back in it. The guys bicker good-naturedly on the way back about who gets to be the first to kiss me goodbye on the doorstep.

Eventually, they agree that Adam should get me first, since he won the camel race, Thomas should be next, given that he suffered the indignity of falling off.

“Don’t worry, I always save my best kisses for last,” I tell Ethan in an audible whisper.

Ethan chuckles and wraps an arm around me, pulling me as close as our seatbelts will allow. When we get to my apartment, I eagerly pull Adam in for a kiss. It’s soft at first, but as our lips meld together, he pulls my body more firmly against his and deepens the kiss. I moan softly into his mouth, exploring him with my tongue as he does the same with me.

The sound of Thomas clearing his throat has us breaking apart. He’s looking at us with one eyebrow quirked. “Save some for the rest of us, why don’t you?”

“I’ll never run out of kisses for you, Thomas.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

Adam transfers me easily to Thomas’s arms. Thomas kisses me lightly on the lips before pulling back and doing it again, several times, teasing me until I’m leaning into him, yearning for more.

“You’d better give her what she deserves, or I’m taking over,” Ethan warns.

“Well, we can’t have that.” Thomas finally comes in for a real kiss, catching my lips with his and sweeping his tongue inside my mouth. After a few breathless moments of returning the kiss, I have to break away to gasp for air.

Ethan steps forward and I wrap my arms around his waist, resting my head on his shoulder as I recover from Thomas’ kiss. Ethan takes the opportunity to grope my ass. His fingers gently kneading into my flesh hardly do anything to help me catch my breath.

I tilt my head up, and he’s waiting for me, bringing his lips down to connect with mine. I gasp into the kiss, taking in the delicious taste of Ethan’s mouth as he starts licking into me. We kiss so deeply that I feel like I’m drowning in him and nothing else in the world exists.

When he finally pulls back, I'm left staring dazedly at him – at all three of them. “Well, you sure know how to kiss a girl goodnight, all of you.”

They all grin. “We'll see you on Monday at the station, Jamie.”

I pout at Thomas. “What, you don't want to see me tomorrow?”

“No, that's not what I meant! I mean, would you like to do something tomorrow?”

“Actually, I would. And since you asked so nicely, how about we go on an individual date tomorrow?”

“That sounds perfect.”

“We have the whole day. I bet we can squeeze three separate dates in if we try,” Ethan says slowly. “We can do morning, afternoon and evening, one for each of us. What do you say, Jamie?”

The thought of spending the entire day going on dates with Ethan, Thomas and Adam is almost as enticing as the idea of getting them all into bed – and I definitely want to get them all into bed.

“That'll be perfect. You just let me know who is picking me up when.”

Adam gives me a wicked smile. “How about you let the three of us sort out who gets which slot? You just be ready at nine tomorrow and prepare for a surprise.”

“As long as I'm going somewhere with one of you, I'm happy to be surprised.”

“Then we'd best get planning. Goodnight, Jamie. I had a really great time today.” Adam strokes one hand down my cheek.

“Yeah, me too.”

“It was incredible, Jamie.”

I giggle as Ethan kisses the back of my hand. “You're going to have to work hard to top this date.”

“Prepare to be surprised.” Thomas grabs my waist and pulls me in for one more kiss before stepping back. “We should go. We have some dates to plan, after all.”

I wave as they leave. There’s still a silly grin on my face and I don’t do anything to try to dislodge it. I can’t believe the date went even better than I thought it would, and I’d had high expectations. I go inside, humming to myself. I have a good feeling about this.

* * *

I WASN’T unhappy before I started dating Thomas, Ethan and Adam. I liked my life... but at the same time, I now can’t imagine it without them.

We’ve only been dating for four weeks, but it feels like much longer than that. Right now, I feel like I’m in a state of perpetual bliss.

We’re in Thomas’s apartment, which has the most space. It’s no bigger than Adam’s or Ethan’s, but he has less clutter lying around, which means there’s more space for the three of us to spread out.

I’m lying on the couch with my head on Thomas’ lap and my feet on Adam’s. Ethan is sitting on a cushion on the floor and I’m playing with his hair with my free hand.

The doorbell rings and Ethan hauls himself to his feet. “That must be the pizza. Does anyone have cash?”

“I do. Here.” Thomas opens his wallet and pulls out some cash. As he does, a small picture falls out of the wallet, right onto my lap. I pick it up curiously.

It’s of Thomas, Ethan, Adam and a woman I don’t recognize.

“Who is this?”

I’m caught off guard by their reaction. All three guys stiffen, and exchange looks that are both worried and sad.

“I’ll get the pizzas,” Ethan says shortly.

No one speaks until he gets back. He sets the pizzas aside and sits down on the cushion again, this time facing me.

He take the photo gently from my hand, staring sadly at the unknown woman. “This is Melissa.”

“Who was she to you?” I ask quietly.

Thomas sighs heavily. “She was our girlfriend.”

“Your girlfriend? As in, all of you?”

“Yeah.” Adam squeezes my ankle. “The four of us were together for five months. She... she died. Ever since we lost her, we never dated anyone together again – until you.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “And you didn’t think to tell me this?”

Thomas holds up a placating hand. “Melissa’s loss hit us all hard, Jamie. It’s difficult to talk about.”

“And yet, you’re talking about it now! You didn’t think you could have mentioned it a few weeks ago, before we started dating?”

“I don’t understand what you’re upset about.” Ethan glances at Adam and Thomas, who are looking equally confused. “It’s in the past. You can’t have expected to know everything about us before we started dating. We learn about each other as our relationship progresses.”

Are they really this dense? “Of course, I didn’t expect to know everything about you, but I at least expected you to be honest with me about anything relevant! I thought you were new to this as well. I thought we were exploring the possibility together, and now I find out that’s been a lie.”

“Nothing has been a lie, Jamie! We never hid anything from you; it simply hasn’t come up until now.” Thomas runs a hand through his hair and looks to Ethan and Adam for support.

“I think we all need to take a breath and think about this calmly,” Adam says slowly. “We’re getting emotional and I think we should slow down before any of us says anything we’ll regret.”

I know logically that Adam is right but hurt is burning in my chest and I'm in no mood to be logical.

I extract myself from the couch. "Maybe this was a mistake. I need some time."

"Jamie, wait –"

"Just leave me be, Ethan. I said I need time."

I don't wait to see if any of them will protest further. I walk out of the door, already wondering if I've made an awful mistake.

ETHAN

I glance toward Jamie's work station, but the door remains stubbornly closed. My instinct is to go in there and force her to talk to me, but every time I contemplate it, her words ring in my head. *I said I need time.*

It goes against everything I believe to force myself on a woman when she has made it clear that she doesn't want me. Still, the desire to burst in and make Jamie listen to reason is strong. It's only the self-control I've learned on the job that stops me from doing just that. When you're a firefighter, you need to learn to master your impulses, or you die quickly.

I sigh and change directions. I don't feel like sitting in the rec room waiting for a call right now. I need to stretch my legs.

I go outside to the area where the fire truck is waiting and decide that I may as well check on all the equipment. It's checked daily, of course, but I have nothing better to do and it never hurts to double check.

I'm half way through examining a long fire hose for any damage when I notice that someone is watching me. I look up to see a vaguely familiar face. It takes a moment for it to click in my head. This is the guy who Jamie was so freaked out by all those weeks ago. The one who hurt her.

I clench my hands into fists, resisting with all my might the temptation to jump on him and pummel him. He's not

doing anything now, I remind myself. I can't just go beating him up for past crimes. He's not hurting anyone now, which means my hands are tied.

However, he is trespassing, and I can do something about that.

I drop the hose and storm over to him. "Get out of here," I snarl.

"Oh, hello. I think we've met before. I was under the impression that this place was open to the public if they needed assistance."

We do get people wandering in here looking for help in one form or another, but I'm in no mood to tolerate that from this man. "Call 911 if you need help," I snap. "Now get lost."

"I guess that answers the question of whether or not Jamie works here. I don't know what she told you about me, but you should know that Jamie is prone to... creative truths."

I want to punch him more than ever for telling lies about Jamie, but I can't give him any more reason to believe that she does work here. The less he knows about her current whereabouts, the better.

"I don't know who this Jamie is, and I don't care. Go look for her somewhere else. You're trespassing here, and if you don't leave, I will make you leave."

Technically, I should call the police rather than forcibly remove him myself, but I'm seconds away from losing control and I'm half hoping he gives me a reason to haul him out of here. Perhaps he senses my thoughts, because he takes a step back.

"Fine. I'll be going, then. Tell Jamie that Mike says hello."

I glare daggers at his back as he leaves. I stay for a few minutes to make sure he's not returning before heading inside, thinking hard. Should I tell Jamie about this? On the one hand, it's sure to freak her out, but on the other, I think she has a right to know. I'd be furious if I had a stalker and someone kept information about them from me, even if it was for my own good.

I make my decision and go to Jamie's work station, knocking on the door. "Jamie, we need to talk."

No response.

"It's about Mike."

The door is yanked open a moment later. Jamie's white face appears in the doorway. "What did you say?"

I step inside and push the door closed behind me. "He said his name was Mike, and he was looking for you – the same guy who came before. I got rid of him and told him that I don't know you, but I don't think he believed me."

Jamie sways on the spot and I quickly reach out to steady her. "Jamie, I need to know what he did to you."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's obvious that he did something. How bad are we talking? If I'm going to protect you, I need to know what I'm dealing with – we all do."

"I – I don't know what you mean."

I'd be frustrated if she didn't look so terrified and distressed. I don't know why she thinks keeping the information from me is better than being honest, but she's probably not thinking very rationally right now.

I wish I could take her into my arms and comfort her, but her body language – stiff and angled away from me – tells me that this move wouldn't be welcome.

I'm trying to decide how best to address this when Jamie's work station beeps with an incoming call.

Jamie wrenches her gaze from mine and bends down to answer. "Station twenty-two responding."

"Building fire at Longreach Mall, thirty-five Manion Avenue."

"Understood, dispatching firefighters now. Twenty-two out."

Jamie ignores me completely as she grabs her radio and notifies Thomas. Only once that's done does she look at me again. "You should go," she says quietly.

I know she's right. "We'll talk later," I promise, before hurrying out.

The call starts off normally. Our sirens wail as we speed through the streets. We can usually tell where we're going quite easily by simply following the smoke, but this time, I don't see any smoke to guide us.

That's good, I suppose. It means that the fire was called in before it got too bad. We pull up at Longreach Mall and hurry in.

I frown as Adam, Thomas and I dash through the entrance. There are no fire alarms going off. No evacuation. Everyone seems completely calm, though we are getting some rather alarmed looks.

Thomas catches the attention of one of the security guards. "Where's the fire?"

"The fire? I wasn't aware – hang on." He grabs his radio. "John, we've got firefighters here, saying there's a fire somewhere in the mall. Do you know if anyone made a call? Ok, I'll check in with the others."

We all wait impatiently while the security guard makes several more radio calls, but all of them say the same thing: there is no fire.

"Prank call," Thomas says through gritted teeth. "We'd best call the police, see if they can catch the idiot who did it."

The three of us walk back to the fire truck at a much more relaxed pace. There's no emergency here. I'm jolted back to full alertness by the sound of an engine starting – a very familiar engine.

If all three of us are here, who the hell is driving our fire truck?

Thomas and Adam break into a run at the same time as me. We arrive just in time to see the fire truck pulling out of the

mall parking lot. As it drives past, I catch a glimpse of the driver.

My heart goes cold. It's Mike.

"We have to get back to the fire station, now!"

"We need to call the police," Thomas growls, glaring off at the disappearing truck. "Some idiot stole our truck! The sooner we get the police on it, the better."

"No, you don't understand – I saw the driver. It's Mike – the guy who hurt Jamie. He was just at the station, but I sent him away. He must have been the one who called 911, to get us away from the station. He's going after Jamie!"

The blood drains from both Thomas' and Adam's faces.

"We have to get to her." Adam frantically starts trying to flag down a taxi.

In the distance, I hear a familiar wail. Mike has figured out how to put the sirens on. Even if we get a taxi at once, it'll never be as fast as a fire truck with the sirens on.

Mike is going to get to Jamie first.

JAMIE

I stare off after Ethan, still in shock. Mike was here, again. Is he ever going to leave me alone? Maybe I'm being silly by not telling the guys the full truth about what happened. I know they would do everything in their power to protect me, whether we were dating or not.

I sigh as I think back to those few happy weeks together. They had truly been a dream, but now, that's all over, and the worst is, it's by my choice.

I remember that fateful day when I found the photo of Melissa. They were honest with me as soon as I asked about her. I was hurt, and I still am, but the shock of knowing that Mike is still hanging around has put a few things in perspective for me.

Guys like Ethan, Adam and Thomas don't come around every day. Sure, I'm hurt they didn't tell me everything from the start, but I haven't exactly been honest with them about Mike, have I? I don't exactly hold the high ground here.

They don't owe me their entire romantic history, just like I don't owe them mine. I've been hurt in relationships before, and that past trauma led me to make such a big deal of a situation that could have been resolved with a simple conversation.

I sigh and slump back in my chair. I can't deny it anymore; I've messed up. I let my emotional baggage rule my decisions, and that's never a good idea.

Well, it's not too late – at least, I hope it's not. I know my guys care for me. Surely, if I apologize, they will forgive me? We can try again. Maybe we can get things back to how they were before – or perhaps even better.

There's nothing I can do right now except wait. When they get back from their call, I'll talk to them.

The fire truck returns sooner than I expected, and to my surprise, it has the sirens on. Why would they have the sirens blasting like that on their way back from a fire?

I'm too eager to talk to them to dwell much on that mystery. I hurry forward as the truck parks.

At first, I think I'm seeing things. Surely, this must be a scene from one of my nightmares come to haunt my waking life.

I blink several times, desperately hoping the vision before me will change, but it doesn't.

That's not Thomas driving.

It's Mike.

He grins darkly at me as he puts the truck into park and hops down. I back up several steps, reaching for my pepper spray, but it's in my bag by my work station, useless to me now.

“Get away from me!”

“Come now, don't be like that. Let's talk about this like adults.”

“We can talk about this like adults with the police! You do realize that you're in violation of your restraining order, don't you?”

Mike's expression darkens. “If you get nasty, then I'm going to get nasty right back. You don't want that, Jamie.”

“Fuck you, Mike!”

“I’ve just had enough of your bullshit- you’re coming with me.”

I skitter away until my back hits the station wall. Mike is advancing on me, and all I can see is the scene of the last time he came at me in this way.

But this time, the scene is interrupted by other memories. Adam dropping me off at my self-defense class. Ethan testing me on techniques. Thomas playfully attacking me and telling me to defend myself.

I’m not helpless anymore. I’m not letting Mike hurt me again.

I wait for him to get close enough, which doesn’t take long. Mike reaches out to grab me, but I grab him first, pulling myself right into his space and bringing my knee sharply into his groin. He cries out and doubles over, giving me the perfect opportunity to elbow him under the chin.

I shove him hard and he topples over. I take the opportunity and try to run, but it seems Mike either isn’t as hurt as I’d hoped, or his anger is letting him power through the pain.

He rises up behind me and lunges, managing to wrap his arms around my waist. Both of us go tumbling to the ground and he lands on top of me. I buck my hips up, trying to dislodge him. He braces himself with a hand to either side of my head and I grab for one of the hands, but he moves them out of my reach.

Panic starts to take over as I kick and struggle. The carefully memorized techniques start to give way to frantic flailing. Mike is a lot bigger and heavier than me, and he’s quickly overpowering me.

“I wanted to do this the easy way, but I see you’re not having any of that, are you?”

His hand clamps around my throat. I try to scream, but I don’t have the oxygen for it. The edges of my vision start going black.

“DON’T YOU DARE TOUCH HER!”

Even in my fading state, I'd recognize Thomas' voice anywhere.

Mike's weight is suddenly gone from above me. I turn my head weakly to see him and Thomas rolling around on the floor together, fists flying. Adam throws himself into the fray a moment later. Ethan kneels next to me, cupping my face with one hand.

"Are you ok, Jamie? Are you hurt?"

"I'm – f-fine," I cough. My throat is sore, but it could be a lot worse.

We both jump as the sound of a gunshot rings out.

I turn to see that the fight has gone to hell. Mike is upright, panting with blood streaming down his face from his nose. He's holding a gun to Adam's head.

"Give me the girl, or he dies."

"Go to hell," Adam snarls. "Kill him, Thomas! Rip his fucking head off!"

"Think about this." Thomas is backing away with his hands raised. "You're in a fire station. People have heard the shot. They're no doubt calling the police right now. You'll never get away. Do you really want a murder charge added to the assault charges you're already facing?"

Mike ignores him completely and turns to me. "Well, Jamie, what's it going to be? You come with me and we have an adult conversation... or this one here dies."

I know that what Mike has in mind is far less civilized than a conversation, but I also know I have no choice.

I can't let Adam die. The idea is unthinkable.

I stand up. "I'll come with you."

"Like hell you will," Ethan growls. He grabs my arm and starts dragging me back, away from Mike.

"Let me go, Ethan!"

"So you can sacrifice yourself? I don't think so."

“Take her, Ethan. Get her out of here. I’ll deal with this.” Thomas has his murderous gaze fixed on Mike. If Thomas was looking at me like that, I’d be terrified, but Mike is armed, and Thomas isn’t.

“No! Mike, don’t hurt him!”

“Go with Ethan, Jamie! I’ll be fine.”

Ethan is still pulling me away. I can’t let him. I have to get to Adam.

I look up at Ethan. “I’m sorry.”

Then I stamp on his instep as hard as I can, just as I’ve been taught.

Ethan cries out and his grip on my arm loosens momentarily. I take advantage of the opportunity and pull free, running toward Mike.

“I’m here, Mike. Let him go.”

Mike is looking at me and not Thomas, and Thomas doesn’t waste the moment. He lunges for Mike’s right wrist, grabbing it and tipping the gun upward.

I scream as it goes off, but there is no spray of blood. Thankfully the barrel of the gun is pointing towards the sky.

Adam and Thomas converge on Mike like a clam shell snapping shut.

Mike isn’t without his last say, however. He rears back aims a kick at my ribs. I scramble back out of the way but trip over my own feet. I go crashing to the ground and feel a blinding pain in my head.

I only have a moment of excruciating pain before my world goes black.

ADAM

My vision goes red. Seeing Jamie on the ground, blood trickling from her head, makes everything else vanish.

I slowly turn to Mike, the one who hurt her. He's going to die.

Ethan, Thomas and I all pounce on him at the same time. The gun goes clattering away, leaving nothing but the sound of fists on flesh.

In hindsight, it's probably a good thing that Renard and some of our colleagues come and pull us off Mike. I don't really want to be a murderer, but such logical thoughts are far from my mind as I kick and struggle against the arms holding me back, trying to get back into beating Mike into nothingness.

I come back to my senses when I see Jamie being loaded into an ambulance. I glance back to see that the police have arrived and are cuffing Mike's unconscious body. He's in good hands. Right now, Jamie needs me.

"Only one person may ride in the ambulance with the patient."

I growl under my breath. "We need to be with her – all of us."

The paramedic is unphased. “Two of you can meet us at the hospital.”

“You go, Adam. You’re the one who almost took a bullet in the head.”

“Yeah, go. Thomas and I will follow along.”

I’m certainly not going to argue there. I scramble into the ambulance with Jamie and sit down in the small space the paramedic directs me to.

“How is she?”

“She’s unconscious. The bleeding is superficial. As to any internal damage, we’ll need to wait for scans to see.”

“But she’s going to be ok, right? She’ll be laid up for a few days and then she’ll be fine. Right?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s too soon to say. Try not to think the worst. We truly can’t tell anything until the tests come back.”

Well that’s just great. I reach over and take Jamie’s limp hand, squeezing it gently. “Be ok, Jamie,” I say softly. “Please.”

We get to the hospital, where there are doctors waiting for us. Thomas and Ethan are already in the waiting room when a nurse directs me there. I wonder if this is how Jamie felt waiting for me when I was hurt all those weeks ago. This fucking sucks. I’d much rather be the unconscious one.

We wait for nearly an hour before the scans finally come through.

Jamie’s doctor finds all three of us in the waiting room. “Are you family?”

“Yes,” Thomas, Ethan and I say in unison.

“Very well. Jamie is extremely lucky. She has a concussion, but a mild one. We’ll need to keep her overnight for observation, and her skull will be tender for a few days, but other than that, she should make a full recovery.”

I let out a slow sigh of relief.

Thomas clutches the doctor's arm. "Thank you. Can we see her?"

"Of course. She's in room nineteen. It'll be a while until she wakes, though."

As much as I want to see Jamie awake, I'll take her asleep. I just want to see her and assure myself that she's ok.

The three of us hurry into her room. Jamie looks pale and fragile in the bed, and she is hooked up to at least three different monitors.

Thomas and I each take one of her hands on opposite sides of the bed, and Ethan perches on the edge of the bed, right by her feet.

None of us speaks for a while. I drink in the sight of Jamie. She looks hurt, but she's breathing and the doctor says she'll be ok. That's what matters most right now.

There's a knock on the door. "Hi, Renard told me I could find you here. I'm Officer Garrey. I'm in charge of Mike's case. I need to take your statements."

"Can you take them from here?" My eyes don't seem to want to leave Jamie's face. I know I should at least do Officer Garrey the courtesy of looking at him, but my eyes seem fixed in place.

"I'm afraid you have to come down to the station. I can come back if now is a bad time."

"No, I'll go." Thomas stands up. "I'll come back once I'm done. We can take shifts here. The sooner we get the charges against that scumbag set, the better."

"Thanks, Thomas. I'll go once you're back," I offer. I just hope that Jamie doesn't wake up until I've returned. I need to be here with Thomas and Ethan when her eyes finally open. She'll likely be scared and confused, and she'll need us – all of us.

However, giving our statements is necessary and can't be avoided. We need to make sure that Mike goes to prison for a

long time – long enough that when he gets out, he thinks twice about coming near Jamie ever again.

Jamie doesn't wake while Thomas is away giving his statement. Her doctor comes to check on her and assures us that she's doing fine. She just needs time to rest and for her brain to recover from the knock it took.

I go down to the station with Officer Garrey and find myself face to face with Mike, who is being brought out of an interrogation room, followed by a man in a suit I can only assume is his lawyer. The fucker doesn't deserve a lawyer. He deserves to suffer in the deepest pits of hell... but prison will have to do, for now.

“Well, Adam, I've already heard the story from a number of people, but I'd like to hear it in your own words.”

“Yeah, ok.” I struggle to get the image of Jamie out of my mind so that I can focus on telling Officer Garrey what happened.

He listens carefully and takes notes, even though the conversation is being recorded. Once I'm done with my retelling, he grills me on details for what feels like hours.

I try to remain patient, but it's difficult when I know Jamie could be waking up without me at any moment. “Look, you said you've already spoken to other witnesses. Don't you know all this already?”

“I do, but it's important to make sure all the details match. Differing accounts could help the defendant make a case that the facts are unclear. Remember, the law is innocent until proven guilty. We need to prove beyond a doubt that the facts are as we state they are, and that means having consistent accounts.”

I suppose that makes sense. I don't like it, but I'll do whatever I have to in order to protect Jamie. “Alright,” I sigh. “What else do you need to know?”

As soon as we're done with the interrogation, I rush back to the hospital, and just in time, too. Ethan ushers me in through the door.

“She’s just stirring.”

I hurry to Jamie’s side. Thomas and Ethan have claimed her hands, so I put a hand on her knee, my eyes fixed on her face.

“Jamie? Can you hear me?”

“Adam?” Jamie mumbles, turning her head toward the sound of my voice.

I squeeze her knee lightly as relief fills me. If she can recognize my voice, even before she knows where she is, that must be a really good sign.

“Yeah, it’s me. Thomas and Ethan are here too. You’re in the hospital. Do you remember what happened?”

“Mike...”

“Don’t worry about Mike.” Thomas strokes the back of Jamie’s hand tenderly. “The police have him. he’s going to prison for a long time. I spoke to the detective about potential charges, and he reckons we can get Mike on attempted murder. That’ll be most of his life wasted away behind bars.”

“Are you sure? People get off murder charges all the time.”

“We will protect you, Jamie, whatever happens.” Ethan brings her hand up to his lips to kiss. “He’s never getting near you again.”

Jamie nods, her frown slowly fading. “I know you will. You saved me, all of you. I... I’m sorry I’ve been acting so weird. I was hurt that you didn’t tell me about Melissa, but that was no reason to overreact in the way that I did. I almost threw away true love, all for my own insecurities.”

Her words take my breath away. Can she possibly mean what it sounds like she does?

“Jamie... what are you saying?”

She takes a deep breath and looks me right in the eyes. “I love you. All of you.” She looks at Ethan and Thomas in turn.

“I’m in love with you, and I want to be with you, if you’ll still have me.”

My heart almost leaps out of my chest. She loves me – loves us. I want to jump up and whoop in triumph, but I don’t want to scare the other patients, so I force myself to remain in my seat.

“I love you too, Jamie. I never thought I’d say this, but you are the light of my life, and I don’t want to be with anyone else.”

Ethan kisses Jamie’s hand again. “I love you, Jamie. I wish I had words to describe how much you mean to me, but all I can say is that I’ll work every day to make you the happiest woman alive, and I’ll never stop appreciating you for the amazing person you are.”

Jamie squeezes Ethan’s hand before glancing under her lashes at Thomas. He gives her a wry grin. “Your father might just kill me, but I’d risk anything for you, Jamie. I love you, and as long as you have me, I’m going to be with you. I’ll be proud to share you with my two best friends.”

“And I’ll be proud to be shared by you. I know it’s hardly a typical relationship, but it’s what I want. I never even imagined it was possible to feel this happy, or this safe, with anyone.”

“I guess sometimes, your wildest dreams come true, whether you imagine it or not,” Ethan murmurs, staring deeply into Jamie’s eyes.

“Look at you, getting all philosophical.”

“What can I say? You inspire me.”

“I’ll take it. Do you guys know when I’m getting out of here.”

Thomas’ voice immediately turns stern. “Not until your doctor gives you the all-clear. You have a head injury and we’re not taking any risks with that.”

Jamie pouts. “I don’t want to be in hospital. I want you to take me home.”

The idea of taking Jamie home is deeply appealing, but like Thomas said, we're not taking any risks with our health. Of course, she's an adult and we can't force her to do anything she doesn't want to do, but a little bribery can't hurt.

I move in closer so that I can speak in her ear. "Stay in for as long as the doctor tells you to, and we can make it worth your while when you get back."

"Yeah, we'll be sure to show you how much we appreciate it." Ethan leans close and whispers something to Jamie that I can't quite make out, but it makes her face go red and her pupils dilate slightly.

"I guess it can't hurt to stay a few days."

I do my best to hide my smug smile, but I fear I'm failing miserably. Before we can continue the conversation, Officer Garrey sticks his head in. "Ethan, if it's alright with you, I still need to take your statement."

Ethan groans. "Can't it wait, officer? She just woke up."

"It's ok, Ethan. I'll be alright. Thomas and Adam will take good care of me. It's not like I'm going anywhere."

"Yeah, I guess. Alright, officer, but let's make this as quick as we can."

"I'll see what I can do."

I want to tell Ethan not to count on that, but it seems rude when Officer Garrey can hear me, so I just keep my mouth shut.

Jamie falls asleep shortly after Ethan leaves. I'm sure her body needs its rest, so I try my best to be quiet and not wake her. Thomas' eyelids are drooping. It's been a long day for all of us.

"Go home. I'll sit with her."

"No, I can stay."

"You're exhausted." So am I, but Thomas looks closer to dropping than I feel at this stage. "We can't all stay up for the entire time she's in hospital. Go home, shower, take a nap and

come back when you're rested. I'll feel better leaving to take care of myself if I know you're refreshed and not half asleep while watching over Jamie."

This argument works on Thomas, as I knew it would. He'll neglect his own needs at times, but if he can help someone he cares about, he'll always do what he can, even if that means taking care of himself.

"Alright, but you call if she needs anything. Or if you hear anything about Mike."

"I will, I promise. Now get out of here. I'll hold down the fort here."

Jamie wakes once more, but she's confused from her most recent dose of medication and I can't make sense of most of what she's saying. Amidst the babble, though, I make out the phrase 'I love you' multiple times, and that makes me smile, even if I am still worried about her.

The nurses assure me that this is normal and there's no need to call the doctor. I know that they must know what they're doing, but this is Jamie we're talking about.

I throw a complete fit until they call the doctor, and he confirms to me that Jamie is fine. Probably not my best moment, but I'd rather have the whole hospital see me as an ass than have Jamie not cared for properly.

By the time I'm settled back in Jamie's room and she's sleeping peacefully again, Thomas and Ethan are back, Ethan looking drawn and weary, Thomas looking relatively awake.

"You guys go home and sleep. I'll call you if anything changes."

I'm too tired to argue at this point. I go home and fall into bed, fully dressed. I'll worry about showering tomorrow. For now, I'm just glad that Jamie is alright.

Jamie is released from hospital two days later with a clean bill of health from her doctor. Thomas, Ethan and I now have some promises to live up to – promises that I think I will thoroughly enjoy making good on.

Jamie glances at us from under her eyelashes. “So... I suppose you guys need to get to work.”

“Not a chance. We all took the day off. We’ll be starting again tomorrow, when you come back. Today is ours.” Thomas squeezes Jamie’s ass lightly and she blushes, but she’s grinning widely.

“I like the sound of that.”

I grab her around the waist and pull her into my arms, carrying her bridal-style into Thomas’ apartment. Jamie has slept a lot over the past few days, which has given the three of us time to plan. We know exactly what we want to do to her and how we want to coordinate it.

I lay her down on the bed and start taking her pants off. Ethan handles her shirt while Thomas starts rummaging through drawers for the items we recently purchased.

Jamie wriggles beneath us as her clothes come off, but neither of us touch her yet.

Ethan and I reluctantly back off, giving Thomas space.

“Spread your legs and lift your hips.”

Thomas holds up a vibrator for Jamie to see. It has straps to hold itself firm around her waist. There is a long part that goes into her pussy, as well as a nub that fits over her clit.

“You got that for me?”

“Well, it’s certainly not for us.” I wink at her.

Jamie snorts. “No, I guess not. I – *oh*.”

Her head tilts back and her eyes go wide as Thomas slides two fingers inside her, testing her wetness before inserting the toy. He seems satisfied as he withdraws his soaked fingers and slides the vibrator inside her, carefully positioning the nub at the top so that it’s sitting right on her clit.

He hands me the remote and I give Jamie a wicked grin before turning it on.

“Oh, fuck!” Jamie’s legs fall apart, and she moans as I click the remote again, stepping up the vibrations.

“Now, you lie back and enjoy the show.”

It was Ethan’s idea to look up videos on how to strip sexily. It seemed silly at first, but after reading a few tips, we decided that it was something we wanted to do for Jamie.

Thomas puts on the pre-recorded playlist he has waiting on his phone and the three of us get into position for our routine.

I start swaying my hips, running my hands over my chest and playing with the hem of my shirt. Thomas and Ethan are doing much the same, Ethan facing away from Jamie, sticking his ass out on display.

I get behind Thomas and pull his shirt slowly up over his head. I’ve never undressed a guy before, and while it does nothing for me, it’s clear that it does something for Jamie. She whimpers and presses her hand to the vibrator, guiding the part on her clit in small, quick circles.

Once Thomas’ shirt is off, he does the same for me while Ethan slowly rolls his pants and underwear down, leaving Thomas fully naked. Thomas strikes a pose for a moment before turning to Ethan.

Between the three of us, we undress each other as sensually as possible. While the feeling of Thomas’ and Ethan’s skin under my fingers doesn’t excite me, Jamie’s increasingly harsh panting certainly does. I glance at her to see her leaning back on one elbow, her free hand frantic on the vibrator as she rubs it over her clit.

We drew straws for who would get her pussy, her breasts and her mouth first. I got her mouth, and I waste no time in getting onto the bed and kissing her.

Jamie surprises me, moaning frantically into the kiss, her hips arching up and her thighs clenching. Her free hand holds onto my neck for dear life as she comes, never breaking contact between our lips.

I swallow her noises, breathing her breath, excitement coursing through me as she is carried away on waves of pleasure.

When she goes limp, Ethan steps forward to remove the toy and I pull back from the kiss.

“I’m sorry,” Jamie pants. “I didn’t mean to come so quickly. I just... fuck, that was hot.”

“You don’t need to apologize. You’re so beautiful when you come... and we’re far from done with you.” Ethan runs a hand over her nipples, which harden instantly under his touch. “We’ll just need to make a few adjustments to our plan. If you’d like to continue, you just tell us when you’re ready.”

“Hell yes, I’d like to continue. I want to see you touching yourselves – all of you.”

I don’t need telling twice in that area. My cock is already hard and leaking against my stomach and it jumps upward when I take it in hand.

“No coming yet,” Jamie warns. “I want to see you bring yourselves right to the edge, and hold off, for me.”

“If you keep saying things like that, you’re not going to get what you want,” I warn through gritted teeth. My body is already gearing up to come, but Jamie is right. Men take longer to recharge after coming than women do, and I don’t want to end this prematurely.

Of course, that is easier said than done. I can feel my balls drawing up in preparation to come, and I know I should stop, but this feels so good, I can’t seem to remove my hand from my cock.

“Who is the closest to losing control?”

“I am!” all three of us say at once. I would laugh if I wasn’t concentrating so hard on not coming.

“Hm... I think Ethan looks like he’s closest, though I’ll admit, all three of you do look pretty desperate. Let’s add some stakes, shall we?”

I don’t know what she means by stakes, but I’m certainly eager to find out. Jamie shuffles forward on her knees and pushes Ethan’s hand away, replacing it with her mouth.

Ethan cries out and surges forward into Jamie's mouth. She chokes slightly for a moment before managing to fight her gag reflex and swallow around his length. Poor Ethan looks to be in dire straits. He's whimpering helplessly as his hips thrust forward over and over again into Jamie's mouth.

"Jamie – I can't – I'm gonna come!"

Jamie pulls back so that she can speak, but she keeps working his slick cock with her hand as she does so. "I don't think that's a good idea, Ethan. If you come, you'll be all left out while Thomas and Adam get to fuck me."

With that, she gives him a wicked grin and takes his cock back into her mouth.

I didn't know Jamie had this side to her, and I like it a lot. My own cock is straining almost as badly as Ethan's looks to be. Watching Jamie swallow his cock, imagining it was mine... well, let's just say that Ethan isn't the only one in danger of coming prematurely.

Jamie truly has an evil streak to her. She bobs up and down on Ethan's cock at an increasingly rapid pace, heedless of his growing noises of distress.

"Jamie, I can't! I'm going to – Jamie!"

Jamie acts just in time, grabbing the base of Ethan's cock and squeezing hard, never stopping with the motions of her mouth.

Ethan cries out as his body surges and tries to come but isn't able to past Jamie's grip. I have to stop pumping my cock at this point for fear that I'm going to explode.

Jamie chuckles as she sees me pull my hand away from my erection as though I've been burned.

"Have you had enough of this game?"

"I need you. Right now."

"I'm yours."

We had plans. We were going to slowly torture Jamie until she was begging for us, but she turned the tables on us. I'm

certainly not complaining.

“I think Ethan should get his pick, since he’s the one who had to endure the most torture. How do you want me, Ethan?”

“I... can I have your ass, Jamie?”

Jamie’s eyes widen. “You... you would do that for me?”

“Oh, with great pleasure.”

“Then hurry up.”

She falls forward onto her hands and knees, spreading her legs. Ethan wastes no time. He starts licking her rim, dipping his tongue inside her ass and wriggling it to spread her wider.

I’m not in a patient mood. I maneuver myself underneath Jamie and find her clit with my tongue. Jamie cries out as I hit the right spot, but her cry is quickly caught my Thomas’ mouth as he kisses her.

I can’t see what Ethan is doing, because my face is full of Jamie’s pussy, and that’s exactly how I like it.

I can tell when Ethan enters her because she all but screams, jerking back against him.

“Wait. No, don’t pull out! Just – I want two of you at once. One in my pussy and one in my ass.”

“With pleasure. Let’s get you standing.” I help Jamie stand. She whimpers slightly as Ethan’s hard cock slides out of her ass and spreads her legs the moment she is on her feet.

She wraps one leg around my waist, giving both Ethan and me the perfect angle to enter her. We do so at the same time, our cocks sinking into her wet heat.

It’s the most divine thing I’ve ever felt. I hope she’s going to come soon, because I know I can’t hold out long like this.

“Thomas, come here. Give me your cock.”

Thomas eagerly steps over and Jamie takes his cock in her hand. She starts pumping him in time with my and Ethan’s thrusts. It takes a few minutes, but the three of us manage to work up a rhythm.

Jamie's choppy cries ignite me, and her pussy starts to tighten around me as her body prepares to come.

Jamie screams again as she comes for the second time, her pussy clenching wildly around my cock. The contractions send both Ethan and me over the edge, and the three of us topple over together, with Thomas following not long after.

We all sway alarmingly as everyone tries to keep their feet. Thomas manages to push us toward the bed so that we collapse there rather than onto the floor.

I pull carefully out of Jamie and take the wash cloth Thomas hands me. Once I'm done cleaning both of us up, I hand the cloth to Ethan. He finishes up with himself and pulls the blanket over all four of us.

It's a bit of a squash, fitting four people in Thomas' king size bed, but we manage.

I happily breathe in the scent of Jamie's hair, wiping sweaty strands off her forehead. "I'm glad you're home, Jamie."

"So am I. You certainly fulfilled your promise – staying in the hospital was worth my while."

"You ruined our plans. We had to reevaluate entirely – you're just too seductive for your own good." Thomas runs a gentle hand down her side.

"I can't help it that my guys are too sexy to resist."

"Well, we'll have to resist tomorrow, but we've got the rest of the day." Ethan squeezes Jamie's hand. "Maybe we can see about revisiting some of those original plans of ours, hm?"

"I'd like that."

EPILOGUE

JAMIE

SIX MONTHS LATER

I begin to smile as Thomas pulls me closer in the water. “This was a good idea.”

He grins at me. “I always have good ideas.”

“Yeah, but a vacation in Mauritius is one of the best ones you’ve had yet. What made you suggest it?”

Thomas suddenly gets a shifty look, one I’ve seen a number of times from him, Ethan and Adam over the past few weeks.

“Nothing. We just needed a break.”

They’re up to something, I can tell. However, I trust that if it’s important, they will tell me. I just need to wait.

I wrap a leg around Thomas’ waist and lean my head back against Ethan’s chest as he comes up behind me. Adam isn’t far, floating in the water. He paddles over to us and leans in between Thomas and Ethan to kiss me. I turn my head so that I can reach him properly, letting our tongues intertwine.

We kiss for several moments before reluctantly pulling back. We’ve already been in trouble for getting too intimate in public, and we don’t want to get kicked out of our hotel.

“I’m going to head back early. I think I want a nap.” Adam extracts himself for me, giving me one last kiss before turning toward the shore.

“We can all go back. I wouldn’t mind a nap myself.” The warm water is relaxing, and I’ve been taking a lot of naps recently. There’s nothing better than falling asleep entangled with all of my guys. Of course, I get to do that at home too, but here, there is no pressure from work or other responsibilities. We can just enjoy each other.

“No, stay. I’m not done in the water yet.” Thomas’ arms tighten around my waist. So far, we’ve been doing everything together, but I suppose it isn’t going to kill me to be separated from one of my guys for a while.

“Ok. I suppose I could do with a bit more of a soak.”

Adam blows a kiss over his shoulder as he heads out.

Thomas and Ethan keep me in the water for nearly a full half hour. I’m beginning to get suspicious. It seems like they want to keep me away from our hotel room. This must be what they have been up to. I guess I’m about to find out.

When they finally agree to go back to our room, for a moment I think we’ve stepped into the wrong place.

Every inch of spare space is covered in photographs. They’re stuck to the walls, the chairs, the bed, even the ceiling.

It’s all photos of the four of us. I feel my mouth falling open as I gaze around in awe. There are so many memories here, and it’s only been six months. It already feels like a lifetime.

Movement in the center of the room has me tearing my gaze from the photos, and my jaw drops even further.

Ethan, Thomas and Adam are on the floor on one knee. Each of them is holding up a box with a ring in it.

My hands fly to my mouth. I know what they’re planning now.

Thomas is the first to speak. “Jamie, I wish I had words to describe how much you mean to me, but I’ve always been a

man of action rather than words. All I can say is that I love you, and I want to be with you forever.”

“You have changed me irreversibly, Jamie, and I couldn’t be happier.” Adam’s eyes are filled with love and sincerity as his gaze holds mine. “You were always the one I was meant to be with. I love you more than anything or anyone else in the world.”

“The words ‘I love you’ don’t seem enough, but I’ll say them anyway. I love you, Jamie. We all love you, and we want to be your husbands.” Ethan holds up his ring box. “Will you marry us?”

I realize that there are a few stray tears on my cheeks, and I wipe them away. My hands are shaking, but my voice is sure and steady. “Yes. Of course, yes! I love you all so much, and I would be proud to be your wife.”

I hold my hand out, unsure who to offer it to first and wondering how I’m going to wear three engagement rings, but the guys seem to have it all planned out.

Ethan and Adam hand their rings to Thomas, who positions them and presses them carefully together. There is a small click as they slot together, forming an infinity symbol with four diamonds set along one edge.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe as Thomas slides the ring easily onto my finger – the perfect fit.

I lean in and kiss him, melting into his touch. Thomas kisses me for several moments before pulling back and handing me over to Ethan and Adam in turn.

“I can’t believe it. I should have known what you were plotting.”

Ethan laughs and pulls me into a hug, which Thomas and Adam quickly join.

“Now that you know our secret, how about you tell us yours?”

I can feel my face going red as I force myself to hold Adam’s gaze. “I don’t have any secrets.”

Thomas snorts. “Please. You’re even less subtle than we are. It’s only fair.”

I wasn’t going to tell them yet. I honestly hadn’t decided how I was going to tell them. I wanted it to be special, but honestly, what could be more special than this moment?

“I’m pregnant.”

I pull back to look at my guys – my fiancés. I’m met with three stunned, delighted faces.

“Really? Jamie, that’s fantastic!” Ethan grabs me by the waist and spins me around in the air. I laugh and grab him around the neck as he puts me down. Thomas wraps his arms around me from behind, speaking into my ear.

“That’s the best news I’ve ever heard, Jamie. You’re going to be a great mother.”

Any doubts I had about their reactions melt away. “You’re going to be amazing fathers – all of you. I... I don’t know whose it is, though.”

“It’s all of ours,” Ethan says decisively. “It doesn’t matter who the biological father is. This child will have three fathers, no matter whose bloodline it comes from.”

Adam nods. “Agreed. The biological doesn’t matter. All that matters is that this child has a loving family.”

Ethan presses a kiss to the side of my neck. “It doesn’t matter to us, Jamie, but if you want to get a paternity test –”

“No! It doesn’t matter to me, either. I was worried it might to you, but I guess I shouldn’t have worried. We’re going to be parents all over again.”

Ethan chuckles. “Somehow, I don’t think Pumpkin and Spice really prepare us for a baby.”

When we adopted the two kittens, none of us had realized how much work kittens really were, but we didn’t regret it for a moment. Charlotte dotes over them and is staying over at our place now looking after them.

She's currently living in my old apartment. Ethan, Thomas and Adam sold their apartments to buy a bigger house for all four of us. We have a huge bedroom with a custom-made bed that fits all of us comfortably.

Though Pumpkin and Spice are considerably smaller than us, they seem to take up at least enough space for three people. They're tiny at the moment, but by the time the baby is born, they should be big enough that they're not going to be squished by an infant who wants to cuddle them and doesn't understand how delicate animals can be.

I lie back on the bed and gesture for my guys to join me. We all fall into an easy cuddle pile. My head ends up on Ethan's chest, with my legs over Adam's and Thomas' head resting on my stomach. I wonder vaguely about ordering room service. It's been a very lazy holiday – exactly what we needed. We all love our jobs, but in our line of work, taking a break is important to prevent burnout. We've still got two weeks, and I intend to spend them relaxing as thoroughly as possible.

The only demanding activities I plan on are ones that end in orgasms.

"I never thought I'd be this happy," I murmur.

Thomas chuckles. "Join the club."

"Very exclusive club, too. Membership restricted to four."

I can't bring myself to disagree with Ethan. I know that other people all over the world are in happy relationships, but I can't see any of them coming close to the sheer amount of joy I feel. Most people only get one amazing guy in their life. I get three. Three times the joy, three times the laughs, three times the support... not to mention three tongues all vying to get onto my clit.

We do end up taking that nap, all of us entwined together, and when we wake, we start planning our future. We have a baby to plan for now, and while the thought is intimidating, for the most part, I'm excited and filled with love and joy.

This is going to be a crazy journey, but I'll have my guys supporting me every step of the way, and I'll be there to support them in turn. I'll need to pick up some parenting manuals, but that's a task for when we get back. For now, I can just relax and let myself be happy.

We're already a family, of course, but our little family is growing, and I couldn't be happier about it.

This is where I belong.

MORE FROM RAVEN BLAIRE

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I'm hiding from the mob when I should be running from my irresistible bodyguards.

I'll do anything to avoid my life ending like my mother's...

Dead from a rival gang's bullet.

So, when my father sends me into hiding,

I don't question him. Because I have *them*.

Xander, Cash, Hunter & Lucas—my bodyguards.

Sexy, badass, older Mafia Gods.

Hired to protect me.

But they possess me.

They're fierce and relentless in their mission to keep me alive.

And savage and merciless in their desire to own me.

The attraction between us is insane.

Forced into spending long days and hot nights together
fuels the fire between us.

Sleeping with a boss's daughter isn't in their job
description.

And when daddy finds out we'll have more to worry about
than the men hunting me down.

Because my father will do anything to save me,

And they'll do anything to keep me...

Start reading "Princess and the Bodyguards" NOW!

[My Book](#)

Sneak Peek - Chapter One

Chapter 1

Mia

My mother quickly grabs my shoulder and pushes me behind her, placing her body between me and the man with the gun. I don't know who the man is, but I can tell he is angry. We have no idea how he broke into our home. But here we are, my mother and I standing in the corner of the parlor. The strange man has greasy, black hair and a round nose. He holds the gun in one hand and grins.

"I guess if you won't tell me where your husband is, I'll have to kill you both."

"He is not here," My mother spits back. "I don't know where he is. Get that gun out of my face. How dare you attack the home of the Bacino family." Her Italian accent is heavy.

"Shut up," the man snaps back.

My mother flinches but holds her ground. I peer out from behind her. The gun looks huge. The black emptiness of the end of the barrel appears to grow larger.

“Your husband stole my entire shipping business from under me.”

1

Raven Blaire

“That business belonged to our father before your family took it over and you know it.” My mother tries to reason with the man, but it is clear there will be no negotiating.

“That’s only the story he told you.” He extends his arm and cocks the hammer back with his thumb.

“I am not afraid of you. You are a coward.” My mother always was feisty.

“I don’t need you to be afraid,” he says. “I just need you to die. You and your daughter.” His eyes “nd me, and he points the gun right at me.

“You do not threaten us,” my mother says as she adjusts her stance, placing me behind her again. “When Roberto “finds you, he will kill you slowly. Now get out of my house.” Her voice is strong; the presence of the gun does not scare her at all. I wish I was as brave as her.

I peek out from my mother’s other side.

“I can’t wait to tell your husband how I killed you and your daughter.” His “finger slowly presses the trigger. The gunshot is so loud I jump.

One gunshot turns into many as my father, Roberto Antony Gastone Zeffri Bacino, storms in from the side door, shooting his own gun. How did he get home so fast?

The stranger crumples to the floor. My father keeps walking toward him, still “ring. Bullets riddle the man’s body. His gun clicks; it is empty. My father keeps pulling the trigger

as he continues to advance on his target. The dry click of the gun tells me it is empty, but my father wants to keep shooting.

He stops, looks at the empty gun, then back down at the bloody body he just killed. He spits on the body and curses in Italian.

Then his eyes “find me. “Mia?”

2

Princess and the Bodyguards

I don't know what to say. I am in shock.

His eyes trail over to where my mother was standing. Then his eyes fall to the floor. “Anna!” My father drops the gun and runs to my mother. She is laying on her back, her white dress stained with blood. I didn't realize the man got one shot o” before my dad killed him.

My father blows by me and picks her up in his arms. “Anna, my love. No!” Her eyes are alive for only a brief moment. Then they become glassy as her skin turns pale. Her head falls back, limp in his arms. “No, no, no!”

I stand there staring at the pool of blood that has soaked through her white Gucci dress onto the silver carpet.

Beep, beep, beep.

I slowly pry my eyelids open and realize the beeping that just woke me up is a text notification coming in on my phone. Just like that I'm back in my room. Back from the past. I usually dream about the day my mother was killed right in front of me about once a month. I rub my eyes and sit on the edge of the bed, pulling my comforter around me.

My mother died ten years ago. And it was on that day I learned what my father really did for a living. It is a reminder of the danger that can happen in the world I live in. Before that day, I believed what he told most people. That he was the CFO of the biggest waste management contractor in all of New York City. He does own that business. But in reality, he is the Don of the Bacino crime family.

I turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. And in return, he keeps me safe, in the money and in Gucci and Prada. I live a privileged but sheltered life. Some might say I am spoiled rotten.

The text is from my dad. •••

3

Raven Blaire

PAPA: *I'm sending a car to pick you up.* MIA: *ok*

I start to dress and collect my things. Knowing my dad, he sent the car a long time ago. It's probably outside already.

I text my friend Laurie, letting her know I am going to miss our breakfast date.

MIA: *Can't do breakfast today. My dad is sending a car for me. Sorry, maybe some other time.*

LAURIE: *No worries. I know when Daddy calls you got to go.*

If she only knew. Something in the pit of my stomach tells me that the reason for my dad calling me to his home, insisting on sending me a car, is a biggie and that it's going to have a major impact on my life as I know it.

Sure enough, the car and the driver are waiting for me outside. The ride to my dad's mansion is quiet. I sit there, watching the streets pass through my window, wondering what my dad has in store for me this time.

"There she is." He practically sings his welcome to me as I walk in. "I should have named you Angelina, for you are an angel. My beautiful daughter. Come."

There is always a tone of cordiality in my father's words, but when there is no warmth, I know he is all business and ice cold. Flanked by two men whom I've never met before, I follow my dad to his den, which is decorated in a scheme of brass, leather, and polished wood. He has a cross on the wall, a picture of his family on his desk, and a gun in

4

Princess and the Bodyguards

his drawer. That sums up my dad pretty good. He kisses me on the cheek.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs. “Sit.

Then he looks to the nameless, twenty-something lackeys who drove me here.

“Leave us,” he directs them.

He waits until he hears the door close.

“So,” he begins. “You look well.”

“Papa.” I smile. “You just saw me last week.”

“Can’t a father take comfort in his only daughter’s good health?” he asks.

“Yes, Papa,” I say in my best ‘daughter’ voice.

“So,” he says. “I want you to take a little vacation, a little leave of absence if you will, just for a little while.”

My eyes fly open.

“When, please?” I ask, trying my best to remember my manners.

“Now,” he says with a nod.

“I have a class I’m taking at NYU,” I say, knowing it was for nothing. “But I guess I can take it again in the fall.”

“For your graduate degree thing, right?” he asks.

“It’s not important,” I say, bowing my head.

It is just a coveted program that only a few people make it into. Now I have to leave without giving word or notice when another student can slip in and take my spot.

“I guess there’s no sense in asking if I could email my professors?” I ask.

He shakes his head no.

“No sense at all. There will be other classes,” he says in a hushed tone. “So, the gentlemen who picked you up, polite? Respectful?”

“Of course, they were,” I assure him.

5

Raven Blaire

“Of course, they were or else,” he says, with a look in his eye that makes my blood run cold.

That ‘or else’ means that those two men would be history if they were anything but. That’s about all he ever needs to say to me. I can usually fill in the blanks all on my own. My sudden trip is because something has seriously gone wrong or volatile in his world. The world that pays for my lifestyle. Anxiety ripples through me. I try not to show it because that will tip my hand that I suspect something. I have never come out and acknowledged what my dad does for a living. We maintain this game, and any sudden nervousness would ruin that illusion.

A shiver runs down my spine as I put two and two together and suspect he is hiding me out to save me. To protect me. My eyes meet his, and I realize right then and there, I am my father’s daughter. And I can see in his eye, he knows I know.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Just cold,” I lie.

“Look, Mia,” he begins. “I’m going to talk to you as the grown up, intelligent woman that you are. But I’m not going to forget for one second that you are my daughter, do you understand me?” he asks firmly.

“Yes, sir,” I say.

“Things happen in life,” he admits with skillful vagueness. “Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Yes, sir,” I say again.

“Good,” he pronounced. “So, you understand. So, I don’t have to worry that you’re going to get a little stir crazy on this

trip you're about to take and do something impetuous. Like a foolish teenager. Now, I know you are not a teenager anymore. Don't get me wrong, there are times to act wild and crazy. This is not one of them.

6

Princess and the Bodyguards

There is going to be some security accompanying you. You have never met them before. But I want you to think of them as extensions of me. I won't be with you on this trip, but if they tell you to do something, or more importantly, not to do something, think of it as coming from me."

"Yes, sir," I say.

On the outside, I am polite, but on the inside, I am sinking. I have friends and a life, and it almost feels normal. I am always aware in the back of my mind that my reality is different from my happy-go-lucky friends. Many of them are dating, going to parties, living the single life we all should in our twenties. But not me. Any guy Papa did approve of didn't stay around long once they heard his name.

Today I'm reminded that with all of the luxuries I have, they sometimes come with a price. Having to put my normal life on hold and go on a "vacation" for safety reasons is the price I am going to have to pay.

What he really means is one of the other families has just upped the ante on their little turf war. If he gives me a quick tutorial on how to operate a gun, then I know I'm in real danger.

"So, you know I love you, right?" he begins.

"Yes, Dad," I say.

"And I only want the best for you. That's why I put in the long hours. So that you can have whatever your heart desires," he says.

Except for freedom right now.

"Yes, Papa," I say.

I try not to let my voice break. I want to ask questions, but at the same time, I don't want to act like I am questioning him. Nobody questions my father.

7

Raven Blaire

“And sometimes in life, there are little sacrifices we have to make for all the good things we have,” he says.

He's trying to sound philosophical, but he's talking in circles. Since I was little, all I had to do was start to cry and he would give me whatever I want. I don't think that's going to work this time.

“Is there anything I should know?” I ask.

There's a look of terror that “ashes across his face.

“I mean like while I'm on the trip, or should I just go and have a good time?” I clarify so that he doesn't think I am asking about what's really going on.

“Like I said,” he answers, “you'll be with a security team. They'll give you guidance.”

I feel my chin quiver. But I do my best to not let it show.

“So,” he says with as much positivity as possible, “would you like to meet the team?”

“The team? How many are there? I mean, you're way more important than I am. Shouldn't they be with you?”

I think it is a valid question, but then his eyes grow dark and stern.

“I have plenty of security.” He smiles. “Are you ready to meet your bodyguards?”

“Yes, sir,” I say.

He hits a button on an ancient intercom set that he insists on using. I imagine a room full of guys at the ready, waiting for the buzzer to beckon them.

“Yes, sir, Mr. Bacino,” a deep, rich voice responds.

My body reacts – something else I must hide from my father – to the sound of the disembodied voice. It conjures all kinds of images of a handsome, brawny – Italian, of course – man. It must be in my DNA, but I am a sucker for the muscly, dark and handsome type.

“Would you come into my office, please? And bring the

8

Princess and the Bodyguards

men,” my father instructs. “Mia is here. I would like for you to meet her.”

“Yes, sir,” he says.

My father turns to me.

“The gentleman I just spoke with is Xander,” he says.

I giggle.

“What?” he asks, caught off guard.

“What kind of Italian name is Xander?” I ask. “Alessandro Castelluccio,” my father replies with a

shrug. “He goes by Xander. Respect that.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply.

As I hear a knock on the solid mahogany door of my father’s office, I sit up straight. I am wearing a demure dress, and I reflexively draw it to my knees.

“Come in,” my father commands.

In walk the four men of the bodyguard team that my father has selected especially for

me. If Xander answered the intercom, I have to assume he is in charge. I pick out the most

senior looking man among the four. *Xander*. He might not have a particularly Italian nickname, but everything about him speaks of his Sicilian heritage: the way he moves, his clothes. And even though he’s wearing black jeans, a T-shirt and work boots, they are so styling. I have an eye for

the finer things, and Xander is looking mighty *fine*.

He dares not smile at me in front of my father, but there is a glint of amusement in his eyes. He all but winks when he catches me checking him out. The other three are not so attentive, but I get why Xander is in charge. Not because he is older – almost old enough to be my father – but because he is smart.

“Mia,” says my father. “This is Xander Castelluccio.”

Xander nods his head. “È un piacere,” he says. *It’s a 9*

Raven Blaire

Xander nods his head. “È un piacere,” he says. *It’s a pleasure.*

“This is Cash, Hunter, and Lucas,” my father introduces.

The men do not sit; instead they stand like soldiers with their chests out, their backs straight, and their hands drawn behind their backs.

“So, when you say I’m leaving now,” I ask my father, “do you mean now now? Or should I go home and pack?”

The crazy thought darts through my head that if I were lucky enough to get back to my apartment, I could probably slip out a window and down the fire escape. I don’t know what makes me think this, because it would never work. Not with my father involved, and surely not with the four men who are surrounding me like predators, and I, their prey.

“You are already packed, Miss Bacino,” Xander replies. “We have all the things you need for now. Whatever else you may need, we will acquire along the way.”

The idea of these men going through my closets makes me blush. “How do you know what I need?” I ask like I am my father.

Xander cuts his eyes to me but says nothing. My father laughs.

“This will work out well,” Xander says.

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My Book

Do you like FREEBIE Romance books?

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Every inch of my body screams to be touched by my savagely hot Mafia captors.

They possess me and my body.

And I’m afraid my soul will be theirs too.

The Ferrari men are monsters that disturbingly get sick pleasure out of torturing people.

I’ve witnessed firsthand the most blood-curdling things.

Things no girl should ever see.

Now I’m afraid I’ve seen too much.

Will they ever let me go?

Do I even want to leave?

But if I leave, I might never feel the heat of having those strong, brutal,
muscular arms around me again.

Arms that took my body to places I didn't even know I desired.

The strong connection between us is undeniable and addictive.

They're messing with my head and they love it.

I want to run

I want to stay

I want them all...

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