

From



No to 0



A REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

Mika Lane

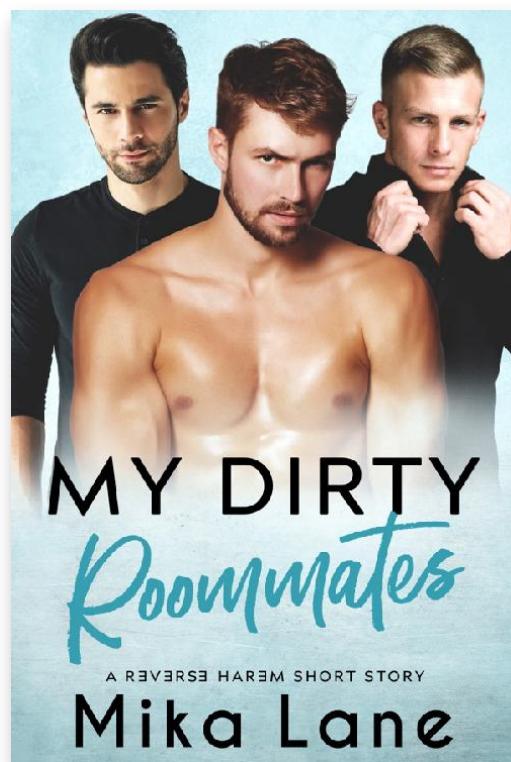
FROM NO TO O

THE WHY CHOOSE CHRONICLES

MIKA LANE

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[My Dirty Roommates](#)

When my three sexy roommates agree to help me as long as I do whatever they ask...I can't say no.

The last thing I expect when I take a job in a new town is to end up living with three smoking hot roommates. Who also happen to be personal trainers. They are so out of my league, and I am so out of my element. But I can't afford to live alone in San Francisco, so have resigned myself to sharing.

Apparently, these guys like to share too... Overhearing them say I'm cute gives me a nice ego boost. But I want to get in

shape, and they'll only help me under one condition...

I have to do *whatever* they tell me to, *whenever* they tell me to do it. Instead of scaring me, the thought of being at their

beck and call sounds hot. And once they start with their naughty demands, I want them to never stop. They work me hard in the gym and everywhere else.

This whole roommate situation just put a new spin on 'sharing.'

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About the Author

DEDICATION

To all the Big O's.

SYNOPSIS



Wanted: Seeking multiple virile men who understand that the Big O is not just another letter in the alphabet.

I, Ava Sterling, am queen of juicy tidbits, sizzling advice, and intimate anecdotes in my monthly “Sex & Love” column, enlightening women all over America for *Glisten Magazine*. To countless readers, I have it all: glamour, brains, and an enviable sex life.

But here’s the scandalous truth that lies behind the glossy pages: in a top-secret and ironic twist, I’ve never, actually, had my own Big O.

Not even close. And DIY ain’t cutting it.

So when my editor drops a bomb, assigning me a topic for our anniversary issue, my heart plummets to the bottom of my stilettos.

The daunting task?

Write a first-hand account of my first O.

In mere seconds, my flawless reputation is headed for disaster.

I've reached my finish... without a happy ending.

Enter my overprotective dude-roommate and his hot friends. They somehow get wind of my predicament, coming up with a secret plan of their own to help me cross the finish line.

Sometimes it takes a village.

Or in my case, three dreamy, devoted men.

But when hearts entangle, I find myself in an emotional chaos even I have no advice for. I may have started out looking for my Big O, but now I have a whole alphabet of desires.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Friends:

This, my first real romantic comedy, has been swirling around my storytelling brain for too long, refusing to be ignored. Now that I've gotten Ava's story down on paper, I couldn't be happier.

From No to O is also the longest book I've written to date, clocking in at 400+ pages.

So many firsts with this baby!

Thank you for being a reader,

XOXO

18+. For steamy romance lovers only.

PROLOGUE

Glisten Magazine

Love and Sex

by Ava Sterling

Final Draft, April issue

Dear Reader:

I kick off today's column nestled by the front of the window of my shared Manhattan apartment on a Sunday morning, in my beloved green easy chair, feeling as luxurious as I ever have. I pull my plushy robe tighter in the face of a little draft and set my latte to the side while hefting the nearly-five-pound *New York Times* onto my lap like a precious and loved little baby. And like a mother to a baby, I adore my bundle of joy: its smell, the soft pages, even the noise it makes as I slide out the sections I like to read first. I reorder the twenty-odd departments the way I always do, starting with, like any (nosy-dishy-gossipy) respectable young woman in Manhattan, the *Style Section*.

As a columnist for *Glisten Magazine*, I am a big reader, just as I imagine you are, and with the art of reading etched into my soul, my adopted Sunday routine has become as essential to me as breathing. I toss aside the paper's high-brow World, Business, and Art sections, promising to

get back to them (but knowing I may not) once I have indulged myself in the sort of human-interest stories only *New York Times' Style* can offer.

And within *Style*, 'Engagements' is always my number one go-to feature if for no other reason than the next day at work, on glorious Monday morning with my office mates, it's such fun to chuckle over the names of the descendants of folks who must have been on the Mayflower's crossing four hundred years ago. Cromwell, Morris, Thomas, and Speers regularly pepper the pages' coveted announcement spots like an elitist serenade of love songs. This morning, however, the melody has turned into ugly, ear-piercing static. The photo of a familiar face smiles back at me, a horrifying reality replacing the fantasy I'd clung to regarding my ex-boyfriend Bran, short for Brandt.

Oh Bran, the man I'd most recently and completely given my heart to, who claimed to love me in return with every fiber of his being. Yes, we'd broken up, sad enough, but here he is today, staring at me in the privacy of my home, two months after our parting, already holding another woman in his arms. Of course, her name is Angel, and she is as beautiful as her namesake, as if the morning's news isn't already tragic enough.

There he stands in their effing engagement photo (sorry, but *Glisten* does not publish f-bombs), his arms wrapped around her with a tenderness that sends a frigid chill down my spine, under a headline reading, 'Bran and Angel, united by love, finally commit to taking their big leap after a five-year love affair.'

The two paragraph-long announcement continues with his explanation of having met her five years prior, knowing it was just a matter of time that he had to wait for her to be 'ready for him.' He

stressed that his 'waiting years' were torture but worth it now that they are together. He thoughtfully added that no other woman he ever dated came close to measuring up to his betrothed, and how grateful he was to be out of the horrible dating game that is Manhattan.

Now I'm no math whiz (that's why I became a journalist, yo) but numbers immediately start crunching in my brain like a bitter pill that leaves a sour taste no amount of sugar can wash away. The love affair that was Bran and me, the coals still smoldering from the recency of our breakup, had all along belonged to the angelic Angel? Five years, they'd been together? Riddle me this, my Reader... Bran and I were together for two of that. If the numbers don't seem to add up, it's because they don't.

G*ddammit (another curse word *Glisten* doesn't permit).

I'd been cast in a role I was neither aware of nor signed up for: that of placeholder.

Yes, Dear Reader, this is what I learned that peaceful Sunday morning, sitting with my plushy robe, latte, and beloved *Style* section, smugly ready to collect names to make fun of Monday morning at work during the regular weekend debrief around the Keurig machine.

A realization grows within me like a cold winter morning, bleak and unforgiving and just downright mean. I was the interlude, the half-time show in the grand performance of this man's love life. The side character filling in until the leading lady could take center stage. Like one of the post-its stuck on my computer monitor, I was a reminder to Bran that he was just biding his time with good old me until Angel came to her senses, realizing he was the prize catch he relentlessly sold himself as, and she was good and ready to commit.

As you might imagine, this morning's revelation is a rude and brutal blow, a general insult to every inch of my being. The humiliation of being a designer knock-off that Bran settled for until he could afford the real deal is soul crushing. How had I been so blind to the truth hiding behind Bran's sweet words and tender kisses? All those shared confidences, birthdays and holidays, weekends away? Completely meaningless.

The tumult of emotions running through me right now is not fun, as you might imagine, striking like a thunderstorm against my soul. But just as quickly, it's replaced by a desperate attempt at self-preservation called denial, which strikes its ridiculous, insidious head. Surely, this is another Bran who lives in New York City and looks exactly like my ex.

Right?

Talk about clutching at straws. Freaking pathetic.

Denial is followed by bargaining, a last-ditch effort to calm the rage making my skin crawl. It's surely all a big mistake, a typo, an editing boo-boo on the part of the *Style* section in the Sunday *New York Times*.

Yeah, no.

Then comes anger and sadness, drenching me in their intensity. The two-faced rat bastard, I cry. Hot tears threaten my already-destroyed Sunday morning, smearing the black and white print between my shaking fingers, blurring and blending Bran and Angel's names together as if that's how they were always meant to be.

It's acceptance, though, that begins to clear my stormy skies. After spilling my latte all over my faux-wood parquet floor by flinging the newspaper, I find the strength to face the bitter truth.

Dear Reader, I am here to tell you there is opportunity hidden in heartbreak.

Taking the lemons life tossed my way, I decide not to just make lemonade but to add a jigger of vodka and simple syrup to create a lemon drop martini, a potent cocktail that will be the metaphor for my newfound perspective on life. And love.

Never again will I be a placeholder. I am a woman of substance, strength, and resilience. The two years with Bran will not have been merely a romantic interlude, but also a transformative journey shaping me into the woman I am today. I have evolved, learned valuable lessons about love, and most important of all, preserved my self-worth.

Bran might have cast me as his substitute for true love while waiting for his Angel, but in his dust, I have found myself. I am so much more than a supporting character in someone else's love story. I am a force to reckon with, the protagonist of my own story, and no one, not even the as*hole Bran, can take that away from me.

To all the 'placeholders' out there, remember this: you are not defined by someone's inability to see your intrinsic worth. You are neither a stand-in nor stepping-stone on someone else's journey to love. You are the main event, the super star, of your own show. The author of your own story.

And my message to Bran in case he ever reads this? Next time you decide to 'wait' for someone, I suggest you consider a hobby. Axe throwing? Poison tasting? Cliff diving? It would be far less injurious to the innocents who cross your path.

As for me, I have chosen to bask in the glory of self-love, as you, Dear Reader, should as well. I am savoring my lemon drop martini and raising a toast to every placeholder like me who's

discovered her true worth. Here's to us, the phoenixes who've risen from the ashes of a love never meant to be ours. Here's to our journey from being an option to becoming a priority. Here's to our transformation from proxy to powerhouse. We don't just survive. We thrive.

And here's to Bran, short for Brandt, my unlikely mentor, who showed me my worth by failing to recognize it himself. Despite the heartache, I am grateful for the lessons learned, the truths unveiled, and the strengths I've discovered.

And I don't miss his tiny dick at all.

Until next month, Dear Reader.

XOXO

Ava

AVA

FIVE MINUTES LATER...

What. Utter. Bullshit.

I click *send*, delivering the final draft of my April column to the *Glisten* editing team who, unless they are complete idiots, will see right through the false bravado of this month's column like the sheer dress that hot young actress wore on the red carpet last year.

I swish cold water through my mouth to remove the bad taste of another dumbass article that will have the readers of *Glisten* wiping their tears and shoring up their defenses for facing not only the dating world but also the universe as a whole.

My work here is done.

I slither out of the office unnoticed, in desperate need of a moment to myself, not in the mood for the company of a coworker in want of an impromptu coffee break. Sometimes a girl just has to look out for herself, right?

But when I push open the heavy glass doors to the world headquarters of the conglomerate Bonded Crest, publisher of some of the top-selling magazines in the world, I stumble in my red patent-leather stilettos. Damn shoes will be the death of me. But hey, I have a reputation to uphold. A *brand*. A certain *look*.

As my boss puts it, *a package*.

If she only knew.

I freeze in place. There, across the lobby, is one of my coworkers. Well, by the look of the banker's box he's carrying, complete with half-dead fern hanging out of it, he's now an *ex*-coworker.

I still don't move, and busy New Yorkers swirl around me like I'm a rock holding up a rushing stream. Not even a couple shoulder chucks nudge me from my spot.

Holy shit. The guy carrying the clichéd box of shame is none other than Danny Merrick, *Glisten's* chubby, cheerful, and renowned food writer.

Danny? On his way out? How? Why?

The man has been at *Glisten* for as long as the magazine has been open and is credited in large part with helping it achieve its meteoric rise in the competitive world of women's magazines.

And now he's leaving?

The banker's box indicates *yes*.

Heads turn as he moves through the lobby, that's how well-known he is, so I'm clearly not the only person trying to put together what the hell is going on. In fact, I want to run to him and ask what's going on, but from the grim expression on his face and the two beefy security guards at his sides, I instead step behind a giant potted plant.

The guards hold the door open for him since his arms are full, the least they can do given the humiliation he's sure to be feeling. He squints in the bright morning light before leaving the Bonded Crest building, probably for the last time ever.

I click back across the lobby's polished marble floor to the elevator, my coffee break forgotten, and catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glitzy mirrored walls. My narrow pencil skirt, fitted white blouse, and tight bun give me a 'naughty librarian' look, part of my wardrobe rotation. Yesterday, I was in red leather pants.

Hey, a girl's got to live up to her reputation—bold, professional, fearless, and an expert in all that's to be known about the pleasures of the flesh.

Or so everyone thinks.

While I wait for the elevator to take me to the building's top floor, unease crawls up my spine. What went wrong for Danny? The magazine business is a fickle one—you can be riding high one day, and out on your ass the next. But even with this knowledge, seeing a seasoned professional like Danny get ousted has the hairs on the back of my head standing straight up.

The elevator door dings open and too many people push to get inside. We might be in one of the fanciest buildings in Manhattan, but that doesn't mean it's not crowded as hell like the rest of New York, where getting to work is an exercise in the survival of the fittest. Just because women and men wear designer shoes and carry luxury handbags doesn't mean they won't take you out if you push past them when they think they're up next.

I squeeze to the back, holding my breath the whole ride, as if that will control the knot of dread threatening to push the morning's Cheerios out of my stomach and onto the back of the man standing too close in front of me.

When we reach the twentieth floor, I finally exhale and run as fast as my stilettos allow to my work BFF and company gossip connoisseur Cami, a tiny redhead whose personality makes up for the challenges she faces in the height department.

“Cami,” I hiss.

Her gaze snaps up from her keyboard to me, flits from side to side to assess any dangerous ears in the vicinity, and reads my expression in a split second. “I know,” she whispers. “Danny's gone.”

Hearing the words out loud multiplies my queasiness. I guess I was hoping the man I saw in the lobby was a Danny-lookalike. Or maybe the real Danny's off to a mid-morning

dentist appointment where he's bringing all his desk crap and the security guards offer to open the door since his arms are full?

Get a grip, girl.

As if on cue, Cami and I glance in the direction of the coveted offices on our floor ringing the exterior of the Bonded Crest building, the ones with the views that indicate a user's status in the organization. The office where Danny works—or *worked*—has views of Manhattan as far as the eye can see. He camped out there for years, and was cool enough to let the rest of us crowd in for a look whenever anything interesting was going on in the city, even if it was just a crazy summer thunderstorm.

And now? Bare but for a few loose papers, empty picture hanging hooks, and a lonely desk and chair.

“What the fuck, Cam?”

Cami is okay being known as the company gossip, in fact, she relishes the role. I, on the other hand, pretend I am above such shit.

Which, of course, I am not.

Everyone needs a Cami in their lives.

“*Martha Stewart*,” she simply says.

“*What?*” I whisper.

She looks around. This must be serious if even Cami's being careful.

She leans closer, so I do too. “He wasn't developing new recipes for his column. He was stealing them from the *Martha Stewart* magazine.”

My hand flies to my mouth in time to stifle a gasp that for sure would have given us away.

Danny? Martha Stewart? “But he always derided her. Said she was nothing but a hack. A pretty face backed by corporate money.”

Cami's eyes widen as she slowly nods. "Exactly. That's why everyone's so freaked. Hey, wanna go for coffee?" she asks, perking right back up as if we weren't discussing the downfall of a legend.

Mumbling 'no' over my shoulder, I'm already heading back to my own cube on the other side of the office, eager to sink into my fancy Herman Miller office chair, the one extravagance afforded us lowly cubicle dwellers. I lean back, close my eyes, and steady my breath the way they teach in yoga. Hopefully, no one swings by for a chat before I recover from the bombshell news of the day. The formidable publication *Glisten* is built on carefully created fantasies, offering our readers the aspirational life they crave. But for reality to crash land as publicly as it has today is a chilling reminder of... my own precarious position, if I'm to be honest.

And it's about goddamn time I *am* honest about it.

Here I sit, Ava Sterling, 'sexpert' and resident femme fatale, immersed in *Glisten's* world of glossy pages and designer fragrances, offering advice and insights on a world I am only vaguely familiar with.

Exactly what am I getting at? I mean, hell, I'm not a freaking virgin, but the fact of the matter is, I am a sex columnist who has never, not even once, experienced the ultimate outcome of the very act that makes the world go around.

My slow breaths and efforts to drive away a panic attack are doing nothing. Fear intensifies around me like a boa constrictor. I have to do *something*.

I cannot afford to be vulnerable. I've got too much at stake—a carefully curated resume of expertise that could crumble at a moment's notice, were the news of my secret to get out. *Glisten*—hell, this whole world—is a shark tank, and any sign of weakness could reduce me to prey. I might laugh about my predicament with my trusted Cami, but on the inside, I am nearly always a ball of terror, waiting for the shoe of revelation to drop.

One last glance in the direction of Danny's office serves as a haunting reminder of the high stakes game of glossy journalism, these coveted jobs that might not pay well but are full of the sort of perks only a certain level of Manhattan society gets to see.

I have no intention of being the next to pack my shit and head out the door in the equivalent of the corporate walk of shame, clichéd banker box and all. No, before anything like that happens, I am going to make some changes to my life as I continue to weave my sex and relationship column with words. I won't be like Danny. I won't be a fraud. I place my fingers on my keyboard, as if they might begin to move like marionette puppets, to answer email, while I deal with the shock of Danny's ouster.

Here I am, smugly having just submitted my latest completed column where I assure my readers they are fabulous women regardless of the douchebags they might end up dating, and I am right back to a diminished ball of insecurity and fear. Exactly what I lectured my readers they *are not*.

So many secrets, so little time.

And while I may have a secret, that does not mean I won't come up with a plan. What choice do I have, really?

I, queen of sex tips, am a fraud, a hack, a poseur, and a fake-ass storyteller. And I desperately need to make some changes.

AVA

“I’M SO OVER IT,” a small voice growls from the other side of my cubicle wall.

I look up from my computer screen, the same email blinking at me for the last fifteen minutes, and find the top third of Cami’s head, barely able to see me over the wall.

From what I can see of her, she’s wearing an expression she does all too often.

I push back in my chair and cross my arms. “What did he do now?” I ask, waiting for a debrief on her latest domestic squabble.

If you were to ask me if I *really* want to know what Cami’s husband did this time, and whether he really is the asshole she makes him out to be, the answer would be a big fat no. But I can’t seem to do anything else, so freaked out I am by Danny’s situation and what it means for me, that I’m happy for any help with my procrastination.

Even if it means listening to Cami bitch about her husband. Who I really don’t think is as bad as she makes him out to be. But, because she’s my work BFF, I humor her by listening, always with great interest.

“Well,” she says indignantly, joining me in my cube and propping a butt cheek on my desk, “before I start, did you notice Lana’s nowhere to be seen?”

I pop my head up to view the cubicle three down and one over from mine, home of the office diva, glamour girl, and notorious over-sharer. Who's also our friend. "Where is she?"

Silly question. We know where she is. Well, with ninety-nine percent certainty, anyway.

I glance at the time on the corner of my computer screen. "How long do we have?" I ask.

"Ladies!" a sing-song voice calls.

Shit.

We look up to see the smiling face of our boss, and the queen of all things *Glisten Magazine*. "Morning, Glenda," we chirp back, smiling like idiots.

Her extreme cropped black hair, blinding red lips, and oversized eyeglasses give her the air of 'New York power player,' that simply would not work anywhere else in the country, where she'd be viewed as eccentric at best, and deranged at worst.

But here in Manhattan, the woman is an indisputable cult super star. Her borderline homely countenance screams 'don't fuck with me or I *will* cut you.'

I aspire to that.

"Meeting's in thirty, ladies. And your friend Lana is nowhere to be found," she says, her gaze wandering in Lana's direction. Or rather, where Lana is *supposed* to be.

"Oh, um, I texted with her. She has really bad cramps," Cami says earnestly.

Glenda raises a finger and nods in understanding. She might be a power player, but she's far more a mother hen than monster, at least with her *Glisten* team. "Ah yes. I remember my fertility days—the cramps, the moods, the breakouts. The utter hell Mother Nature puts us women through," she says with a mix of nostalgia and reverence.

I steal a glance at Cami and see she's trying not to laugh.

She's not done. "You girls think periods are so bad. Wait—just wait—'til menopause comes knocking at your door." She shakes her head sadly and turns to leave us but stops short.

She points a manicured fingertip in our direction. "Call Lana to make sure she's okay. Oh," she adds, digging into her designer trouser pocket, "here's a twenty. See if she needs some chicken soup."

Cami thinks fast. "Oh, Glenda, last time I called, she didn't answer. She's probably sleeping. I told her a nap would help."

Glenda waves away Cami's objection. "Nonsense. Run over to her apartment. And hurry. Bring her back in time for the meeting."

She floats away to find someone else who needs her.

Cami squeezes her eyes shut. "I hate it when she sneaks up like that."

"I heard that!" Glenda sings.

Ugh.

"Hey, does Lana really have cramps?" I whisper as we stop by Cami's cube on the way out.

She grabs her bag and scoffs. The very nice and very expensive Louis Vuitton bag her husband bought her as an apology for leaving his socks on the floor. "I doubt it. She's probably doing what she always is when she's AWOL."

Which means we not only should *not* show up at her door, we should stay far, far away. Instead, we press her doorbell long and loud when we arrive.

It takes only a millisecond to realize Cami's right. Standing there before us, with a white bath towel slung low on his hips, is our favorite club's bartender, a tall, dark Italian guy Lana's had her eye on for weeks.

"*Buongiorno, mie bellezze,*" he says, his dark brown eyes dilating as he looks us up and down like a hungry lion.

"Um. Hi. Is Lana, um, here?" I fumble.

Shoulders back, chest out. Be not afraid of this sex god.

“Darlings! I’m in here!” Lana calls from deep inside her apartment.

The Italian hottie steps aside and ushers us in with a deep flourish, nearly dislodging his towel.

Which very nicely outlines his goodies.

We wander back to Lana’s room, where she’s splayed, only partially covered, with the best ‘freshly fucked’ look I think I’ve ever seen.

“Hey Lana, get dressed,” Cami says, pulling off the sheet to reveal Lana wearing a strap-on with a giant dildo. “What. The. Fuck,” she chokes.

Otherwise naked, Lana gets up and starts unbuckling what looks to be a very complicated contraption. “Guys, don’t you know,” she sighs, “it’s all about pegging now. You know, giving it to straight guys in the butt.”

Really?

I plop on the edge of the bed and look away while Lana dresses, my head spinning. Dammit, I’m going to have to cover this in my column now. I just know it.

Pegging! The new joy of sex!

Cami leans over the strap-on like if she gets too close, it will bite. “Damn. If I came near Steve with that, he’d probably divorce me.” Studying it where Lana tossed it on the floor, she rubs her chin in confusion, then looks up at us in a panic. “Oh my god. Maybe that’s why he’s cheating on me. He found someone who’ll give it to him in the bum.”

I can’t. I just can’t.

Sighing, Lana pulls a short, tight dress on and glances in the direction of Italian guy, who excuses himself for the shower. “Ladies. I think I have broken my all-time record for number of fucks in one night—”

I jump to my feet. “Guys, we have got to get back to the office. The meeting is in fifteen minutes.”

“Yeah, Lana,” Cami adds. “Glenda sent us to check on you. I lied and said you have cramps. She gave us a twenty to get you chicken soup, which I should get to keep since I covered your ass.” Cami crinkles the bill between her fingers.

Lana’s brows rise with interest, and she snatches the money out of Cami’s hand. “It’s mine, honey.” She looks my way. “Hey, Ava, you gotta do a write-up on pegging. It’s all the rage. You should have seen how hard Mario came—”

“Ok, ladies,” I shrill, heading for the door. “I’ll be out front hailing a cab. Please get a move on. I, personally, do not like to be late for Glenda’s meetings. The woman deserves more respect than that.”

Lana’s and Cami’s eyes widen at my outburst. Yeah, it might have been bitchy, but I really don’t want to hear any more about Lana’s butt-fucking conquests.

For cripes sake, I read and write about sex all day long. Isn’t that commitment enough?

On one level I’ve always admired Lana’s audaciousness, her talent for diving headfirst into whatever life throws her way, yet still managing to come up roses. But sometimes I just don’t get her.

Actually, I just don’t get anyone who’s that enthusiastic about sex. I mean, it’s nice and all, but what’s the *big fucking deal*?

“Wipe that judgmental look off your face, Ava Sterling,” Lana laughs, pulling on her floral Jimmy Choo platforms.

I consider pointing out she forgot to put on panties and a bra, but then I realize that’s the point.

“I... well, you guys, you know what my... issue is.”

Lana slings an arm around my shoulders while we head out, leaving the Italian stallion on his own. “Look, honey. Sex is like wine. You have to develop a taste for it.”

“Av, we know you’re the only sex columnist in the world who really isn’t into sex. And your secret is safe with us. But

girl, what are you gonna do about it? Just keep... living this double life?"

Yeah, no. She has a point. This *double life*, as she calls it, is not cutting it.

"Honey, why don't you make use of one of those vibrators the sex toy companies send you all the time? They're free, for Christ's sake!" Lana says.

"I... I don't... know," I stammer.

We squeeze into the backseat of a cab. The driver has a hard time taking his eyes off Lana, but she doesn't notice. In fact, she doesn't even lower her voice, speaking as if the three of us were in the cab alone.

She lectures me in her usual booming voice. "It's very nice how you share the sex toys with the rest of the office, Av, leaving them in the break room next to the coffee and donuts, but it's time for you to take one or two of them for yourself. You gotta get yourself off, girl," she says like it's the easiest thing in the world.

The cabbie swerves. Lana still does not notice.

"If you wanna surf, you gotta get in the ocean, honey," she says, patting my knee. "I suggest you pick out the vibe you like best, take it home, and see what happens. Oh, and turn on some porn. That's where I learned all about pegging..."

While Lana drones on about her sexual prowess, I know what I need to do. I've known for a long time. But I still don't understand why everyone places so much importance on sex. It's nice and all, but people are just *so* obsessed with it.

Lana would say I don't understand because I haven't experienced a mind-blowing orgasm that will surely get me hooked.

What she doesn't know is that I haven't had an orgasm at all.

It's true. I've never had my own Big O.

Not even a little O.

My deepest shame and darkest secret.

I mean, how the hell can I advise others when I don't know what I'm doing?

And for how much longer can I fake it? Both literally and figuratively... especially after I saw what happened to Danny.

AVA

GLISTEN's glass-walled conference room is buzzing with a predictably attractive mix of fashion writers, beauty editors, and a host of others who contribute their creativity and wise words to the magazine. We greet each other politely as we clamor for the best seat, arranging ourselves with notepads and pens poised to take notes on the wise words that come out of Glenda's mouth.

For as long as I've been here, it's been an unwritten rule that the chair next to the head of the table, where Glenda sits, is reserved for the most senior member of staff. But today, that seat, normally Danny's, sits glaringly empty. No one's even looking at it, never mind sitting in it, as if his dismissal is some sort of catching virus that might infect the rest of us.

Glenda whirlwinds into the room with fresh lipstick and a great flourish, smiling brightly at the team that, as she says, 'put *Glisten* on the map,' and oh, by the way, has made her a fortune.

She doesn't say that last part about the fortune. It's just something we all know.

"Hello, everyone," she says graciously, as if the meeting were optional but we figured we'd attend for the hell of it. "Lana, glad you could make it. Your cheeks are bright and pink! I knew you needed chicken soup."

I don't look at Cami. If I do, we'll both start laughing.

Glenda dives in, kicking things off like she always does, with a weirdness only she can get away with. "Everybody, let's kick off our shoes and all start with a cleansing breath."

The room fills with the sound of shoes clumping to the floor, and Glenda sits up straight in her chair, eyes closed, and breathes in deeply through her nose, letting it out through her mouth.

About half the people in the room close their eyes and play along, but the rest of us, like Cami and me, nudge each other and try not to giggle. When Glenda is satisfied we've all gotten enough oxygen, she places her hands on the conference table and dives in.

As she goes through assignments for the beauty team, I am half listening, watching the giant clock on the wall tick each second off with an awkward lurch forward. I've never understood why the second hand on the clock does not move more gracefully. Every other piece of office furniture here is so carefully curated, it doesn't make sense that someone opted for an Ikea timepiece.

"Ava! Earth to Ava," Glenda laughs as Cami slams me in the bicep with her elbow.

I straighten up in my chair and smile brightly. "Oh, sorry, was lost in thought for a moment." I wave my hand and laugh lightly, all calm and cool.

Glenda puts her hands together, pointing her fingertips my way like she's piercing my thought bubble. "No worries, dear. I do hope that you're thinking of something brilliant to top your latest column about that horrible ex-boyfriend Bran. It's going to be a sure hit when it reaches the newsstands and the socials are going to absolutely blow up. I can see it now."

She smiles at me with great pride, as if she might have given birth to me, and I return the favor, nodding humbly. "Thank you, Glenda. I... hope it resonates with readers."

I don't usually go so personal in my columns, but lately I've been feeling kind of... dry.

Murmurs of agreement fill the room, and while the piece I wrote about my ex using me as a placeholder is hardly a work of art, it's nice to be acknowledged. For all we gripe about Glenda, she really is a pretty nice person.

“Yeah, not sure how I'll top that last one!” I say with a helpless shrug, wishing she'd move on to someone else.

Not so fast.

She taps the side of her giant eyeglasses. “Actually, Ava, I *have* been thinking about the perfect next assignment for you.” She stares so intently I wonder if she's trying to send me her thoughts telepathically.

Her grin unnerves me. What is this ‘assignment’ she has in mind?

The room echoes with a polite hum as everyone waits for Glenda to drop her brainchild.

She looks around at the excited faces in the room. “As you all know, our tenth anniversary is coming up. All our columnists will be writing something about one of their ‘firsts.’ Lana will write about the first designer handbag she ever got, Cami will write about the first diet she ever went on...”

Oh god no. Please no.

“...and Ava, darling, your next column will cover your first ever orgasm.” She claps her hands together like she discovered a cure for cancer.

To say I want to sink into a hole in the floor is an understatement. My heart thumps in my chest and I know my face is beet red. The only thing worse would be if I fainted. Actually, maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

I thrum with fear, the same fear that's been lurking since I watched Danny's humiliating fate.

Everyone is going to figure me out. My career will be ruined. I'll be disgraced, walked out of the building, flanked by two security guards with a banker's box of my crap.

Instead of passing out, I take a deep breath through my nose like Glenda taught us, and hold my chin up like her assignment will be a breeze. I squash my fear of the time-bomb threatening to blow up my career, if only for a moment.

I plaster a grateful smile on my lips, accepting Glenda's challenge with the most fake-ass enthusiasm anyone ever mustered.

After the meeting, I wander back to my desk like a zombie, leaving Cami to share her latest husband fiasco with Lana and whoever else will listen to her theories about him and pegging. Among the emails waiting for me is one from Aunt Dede, reminding me about lunch. I can almost hear her impatient tone through the screen. Like Glenda, she's another Manhattan journalism powerhouse and is not accustomed to waiting for anyone's response. Not even mine.

Maybe she can provide some guidance in this manner?

Actually, no. Hell no.

While I compose my response to Aunt Dede and read it several times to make sure there are no typos, the mailroom guy arrives with a box I've been expecting. I tear it open to find a bunch of new sex toys sent by a manufacturer in hopes of a good review.

But to review them, I'd have to use them.

The irony. A sex columnist who doesn't use sex toys.

I gather the box and head for the break room, where I dump it next to the coffee machine. My coworkers love unexpected gifts, and relish reporting back to me how useful they are—or are not. I always listen with interest, wondering how everyone else can lose themselves in orgasmic pleasure, but I can't.

I return to my desk, relieved at getting rid of evidence of my inadequacy.

I have to write a story about my first orgasm. How hard could it be? People lie about stuff like this all the time. Hell, I know women fake it half the time anyway. I could surely just make some shit up.

But what if I really, this time, try to write something truthful? It doesn't feel good to be a fraud, and it's even scarier knowing what happened to Danny this morning could happen to me too.

I glance at his empty office, random papers scattered on his old desk, blank spots where his artwork has been taken down. *Why, Danny? Why didn't you try?*

I have to do this. I have a secret to protect, a deadline to meet, and an orgasm to chase.

Besides, if everyone else is doing it, why the hell can't I?

AVA

I LET myself into my apartment with a sigh of relief at having the place quiet and to myself. It's a sizeable two-bedroom, hard if not impossible to come by in Manhattan. But thanks to Aunt Dede, who made it clear when I first moved here that she didn't house New York ingenues, I was quickly dropped into this great apartment after she enlisted the help of her far-reaching tangle of connections. And because she is so proud to have set me up in such a nice pad and loves to remind the family of her acumen and largesse, she strong-armed me into letting my older brother Andy's friend Jasper Russo crash here while he's getting himself set up in the city.

I needed to 'share my good fortune,' as she put it.

The truth is, I don't really mind having a roommate that much, even if Andy's buddy is someone I'd never be friends with. We're cordial and all but have our own lives. It's just nice to have someone to split expenses with. But would I live with one of my brother's friends from college if I had the choice, a dude-bro if ever there was one?

Not really. And in the end, I had very little say about it.

Jasper is a nice enough guy. Just not my cup of tea.

Andy even helped Jasper line up a job. Actually, he didn't help him as much as the ever-connected Aunt Dede, who knows all the higher-ups at Bonded Crest. She got Jasper an

interview at *Sports Incorporated*, just like she got me one at *Glisten*.

I love that she likes to help people, but hell, this Jasper guy isn't even family. So, thanks to her, I not only see him at home, I also occasionally run into him in the elevator at work.

But he's out tonight like he is most nights, which means I can chill and think through my predicament. Before I do, I turn on an old *Sex and the City* rerun, always guaranteed to help me clear my mind. Just as the opening credits have Carrie twirling around in her pink tutu, from outside my window comes the familiar roar of a motorcycle.

Damn.

Yes, Jasper the dude-bro brought his motorcycle to New York, and uses it—successfully, I might add—as a chick magnet. I turn up the TV to drown out the noise of his bike, and even when he's shut it off and I hear the downstairs door slam and him run up the steps to our place, I don't turn it back down.

Let him listen to Samantha drone on about her latest conquest, something about rotten-tasting semen. See if I care.

“Ava!” he calls, rushing inside. “Didn't think you'd be home so early.”

Thanks for pointing out you have a better social life than I do.

And it's even more evident when a willowy brunette follows him in the apartment.

Great. Just great.

“Hey,” he says, gesturing at his date, “this is my roommate, Ava. My best friend's sister.”

“Hi,” she says to me with a bored wave.

Without responding, I turn back to the TV, where Samantha continues to complain about ‘funky spunk.’ Jasper and his date are unfazed. They leave their helmets on the table by the door—where I've asked him not to—and head for his bedroom.

In the few months he's been living with me, I don't think I've ever seen him come home with the same woman twice. Actually, I can't be sure about that, since the women he goes for all basically look the same.

His date-night-return-home was always a precursor to an evening where I could count on getting little sleep, kept awake by his amorous love life, filtering through the walls separating our rooms.

Just like his motorcycle, Jasper lives life at full throttle with an unapologetic appetite for good times and pretty women. There's nothing discreet, subtle, or reserved about him.

Next morning, the blinding morning sun wakes me, leaving me with burning eyes and a parched throat. I stumble out to the kitchen for a glass of water and run smack into Jasper—date nowhere to be seen—cheerfully chugging his green smoothie before he hits the streets for his morning run.

I guess if you work for a sports magazine, you have to be athletic.

I take a deep breath, determined to address what ails me, when he grins sheepishly. Which I wish he wouldn't do because, dammit, he's fucking adorable at six-foot-three-ish with thick black bed-head hair and piercing blue eyes so brilliant they can't even be hidden behind his thick-framed glasses, the momentary fashion rage among Manhattan men.

God help me.

“Hey, Jas, last night—”

He takes a step closer to me and his eyes twinkle, damn him. “Whoa. Are you jealous, Ava?”

Huh? What? *Jealous?*

Is he kidding?

I'm at a momentary loss for words. I mean, I expect some push back when I let him know I'm not happy about being kept awake until the early hours by his dalliances, but is he *flirting?*

With *me*?

He seems the flirtatious type, no doubt. My brother's friends are all lady-killer sorts of guys, men who make a profession out of getting into the pants of attractive women. But until now, I've never been the target of their charm, especially Jasper's. When we do interact, which is not often, he usually rubs my head and calls me *kiddo*, as if he's an extension of Andy.

And for fuck's sake, this is not about jealousy.

But his effortless approach to life does intrigue me. I can't lie. The lightness of his being is enviable, confounded by my own inability to really let loose.

He places a hand on my shoulder, bare except for my sleep tank, and tilts his head. "You're too pretty to be jealous."

He finishes the last of his smoothie, winks, and leaves me standing there like a starving lion in front of a meat buffet.

As the door clicks shut behind him, I realize everything is within my reach. Everything I want, I can have. And the gap between my double lives—one where I'm the confident sex columnist and the other where I'm a sexual incompetent—can be closed quickly and quietly. The drive to understand the 'big deal about sex' just took a dramatic, personal turn. Why isn't the woman orgasming under my roof until the wee hours of the morning *me*?

Why not me?

I'm not fighting for a column in *Glisten*, I'm fighting for myself.

JASPER

BASTARD.

He gets an office while I am relegated to the shithole bullpen with all the other *Sports Incorporated* writers.

I know that's how journalism works and all that crap, and that's why my noise cancelling headphones are my office savior, but my buddy Ethan Lancaster, just because he's in sales, has a view of New York City as far as the eye can see. His walls are covered with giant posters of our top-selling issues, which are usually the bathing suit covers, so that means he gets to look at the world's most beautiful women all day long while he flaps his gums over the phone.

I don't mean to put down what he does. Hell, if guys like Ethan didn't sell ad space in the magazine, none of us would have freaking jobs. It doesn't matter how expertly I cover trends in sports—no advertisers equals no money equals no magazine.

And no job for good old me.

So, the fact that he's seen as a rainmaker, actually the top rainmaker among the entire sales team, gives him a special God-like status in magazine-world. Guys like him are hard to come by.

But guys like me, who can type over a hundred words a minute and churn out an article analyzing sports scores like a

freaking math savant?

A dime a dozen, especially in a city like New York.

Score one for Ethan.

And not a damn thing for me.

I glance around to make sure no one's looking over my shoulder because God knows there is not a bit of privacy in the bull pen, and shoot Ethan an IM.

I'm out.

He looks up from his computer, through his fancy office's glass walls, and sends a discreet nod my way.

This is our routine, at least it has been for the past few months I've been working at *Sports Inc.* I throw my crossbody bag across my chest, and when I round the corner, reaching the last cluster of cubicles before my escape, I rap my knuckles on the desk of the third in our regular poker game, Leo Wemberly, *Sports Inc.* photographer and all-round workaholic.

Leo has a fucking awesome job too, attending endless sporting events and working with all the stringers—temps—photographing the events he and his team can't get to themselves.

Go Leo.

I breathe deeply when I hit the street, ironic, given that at least in this part of town, the smell of exhaust and hotdog vendors fills the nostrils with their thick sweetness, leaving no chance to experience what most people would consider 'fresh air.' Regardless, I'm loving New York for a shitload of reasons, not least of which is the endless supply of beautiful women. Yeah, it's expensive as fuck here, which means I have to live with a roommate, but I get by and it beats the pants off the small town I came from. Every damn day I am grateful I left behind the shit that was my upbringing—a drunk father, midnight knocks on the door from the sheriff, and Mom bawling her eyes out.

No thanks. That garbage is quickly becoming nothing more than a bad memory.

My thoughts shift to the evening ahead. On the way home, I detour into the corner bodega, the rusty bells on the door jingling loudly to announce my arrival.

It's funny, when I first moved here I thought those bells were annoying. Now, I find them comforting and familiar, like when you're a kid and come home from school to a house smelling of freshly baked goodies.

Not that my childhood was like that. But I know it was for some.

The scents in the bodega, of slightly overripe fruit and dusty cans of soup, are equally comforting. It's odd, where you find your home.

Behind the counter, Raul chats with a customer who seems unhappy with a mango—or is it a papaya? I can never tell the difference—and his mini-me, the nine-year-old Maria, who twirls a strand of hair around her finger, her eyes fixated on the iPad she has propped up against the counter. I catch her attention when I approach, and her eyes widen in the cutest way possible.

“Hey princess,” I say, ruffling her curls.

“Jasper! You're messing up my hair,” she squeals, a smile accenting her chubby cheeks.

“Maria, be nice to our customers now,” Raul chides.

Maria rolls her eyes with perfect nine-year-old drama, sighing like my attention is the worst thing she'll ever experience.

I guess to a nine-year-old, it is.

I open the cooler and grab two six-packs, hesitating before claiming a third.

Purchasing alcohol is something that always gives me pause. I wish I could move beyond it, but certain things stick with you forever.

I grab a third but put it back. If we need more, we can always run out for it.

“Jasper, all that beer will make you fat,” Maria laughs.

I set my purchases on the counter and add a couple bags of chips to the pile. “It’s not all for me, princess. Having the guys over tonight for poker.”

Raul shakes a finger in my face while he rings up my purchase with his other hand. “I played last week and lost all my money. A word to the wise, my friend” he warns.

“I promise not to go broke because if I do, how could I come in here and torment my little friend?” I ask, ruffling her hair one last time.

I hustle home from the bodega in order to get things set up before the guys arrive. I put the beer in the fridge and set up the table for our game. My roommate has promised to be out tonight, so I have the place to myself, at least for a few hours, which does not happen often.

Ava doesn’t have much of a social life, at least not compared to me. Actually, few people do. What can I say? This city has no end of shit to do and hot women to fuck. Tonight is the first night I’ve been home in weeks. Maybe I’ll even get to bed before one a.m. for a change.

That would be something new.

I glance around the apartment and realize that Ava, bless her, straightened up the place before she left for work. Not that it’s ever that bad, the common space anyway, but she knew I was having friends over for cards, and it was cool of her to do this.

It’s a great apartment we have, and I know I’m lucky as hell that Ava’s brother Andy, my buddy from college, hooked me up with it via his aunt. Sure, I could do without all the girly throw pillows, scented candles, and the weird green chair in the corner, but it’s a small price to pay to have decent rent, the bane of everyone but the super-rich here in New York City. At least the cheesy ‘Live, Love, Laugh’ sign is over in a corner, mostly hidden behind a dying fern.

The doorbell rings with the guys’ arrival while I’m still organizing, so I just dump the cards and chips in the middle of

the table knowing that the uber-organized and anal Ethan will take over the minute he sees what needs to be done.

“Dude!” Leo roars, giving me one of those half-hugs that guys do, as if I hadn’t seen him just an hour ago.

We quickly get down to playing, which is, really, just background noise to our hang-out time. Personally, I tend to play in a half-assed way anyway, because I can’t focus on the cards and talk at the same time.

“That fucker at work will just *not* get me Knick’s tickets,” I grouse. “You’d think working at *Sports Inc.* would afford a benefit like this.”

Ethan shifts in his seat. “Sorry, man. You know I’d take you with my tickets if I didn’t have to wine and dine our advertisers.”

I throw my bad hand into the pile and open another beer.

Slow down, buddy.

“Hey, if you don’t like *Sports Inc.*, you can always snag a job down the hall at *Glisten*,” Leo laughs, smacking me on the back.

“Fuck me,” I say. “Have you looked at that rag? What a piece of crap journalism.”

Leo scoops up the chips he won in the last hand. “Oh, I don’t know. You can learn a lot from reading that girlie stuff.”

Ethan rolls his eyes and throws his own cards down, also pissed at losing. “Last thing I read in that magazine was advice on giving a blow job. Not my thing.”

“Right?” I exclaim. “What about that article on pegging? Jesus Christ,” I say, stuffing my mouth with chips to drive out the bad taste.

“Pegging?” Leo asks. “What the hell is that?”

Ethan and I look at each other and burst out laughing. “Google it, dude. Find out for yourself.”

His eyes widen as he puts pegging in his search bar, and when the reality of what we’re talking about dawns on him,

his expression throws Ethan and me into howls of laughter.

“Holy fucking shit, man. How it is I never heard of this?” Leo says, scrolling to the next Google result.

“You wanna give it a try, buddy?” I ask with a smirk. “I hear girls all over town are dying to do their boyfriends’ backsides.”

Leo chugs the rest of his beer and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’ll have to get back to you on that,” he laughs, a horrified look on his face.

We play a few more hands, grouching about life in the city and its inconveniences, regardless of the fact that we love it. Yeah, there are pains in the ass about this place, just like there are anywhere you live, really, but I’ve gotten some great friends out of the deal. They get the grind, the aspiration, and the humor of it all.

There’s no doubt about it. I’m one lucky son of a bitch. On more levels than I can count.

Knicks tickets aside.

JASPER

IT USUALLY GOES hand-in-hand that Ethan, the grump of our trio, loses his cool as his supply of poker chips dwindles, and tonight's no different. He's had one bad hand of cards after the other, each one exponentially cranking up his shitty mood.

He puts his last one on the table. If I didn't know him better, I'd think he's getting ready to turn the whole table on its side.

Leo glances at me and I throw him a little nod. "Hey, guys, I think we could use a breather. How 'bout we put last night's game on?"

Ethan's scowl diminishes slightly, the desired effect.

"Shit. I left my laptop at work," I say, looking around.

Ethan groans.

"Hold on," I say, jumping to my feet. "My roommate may let me use hers. I'll hook it up to the TV and we'll be in business."

I hustle to Ava's room, which I've only ever been in a handful of times, and see a big pile of books on human sexuality on her desk. Behind them, I find her laptop, which I bring to the living room.

"Hold on while I text her to see if it's okay to use."

Ava, left my laptop at work. Can I use yours to watch last night's game?

Yeah. Sure.

Password?

A few moments pass. I know, I wouldn't give my password out to just anyone either.

Right. It's: Gramps951932!

Guess that's your gramps's bday?

Ding ding! You are correct!

Thanks, I owe you.

Yes, you do.

The warmest person, she isn't.

"We're back in business, boys," I say.

I enter the password and seconds later I'm in. I connect the laptop to the TV while Leo serves us each a fresh beer.

We settle into the living room, gazes glued to the TV, waiting for my sports cable package to load when an open chat window on Ava's laptop catches our attention.

"Hey, close that, man, I can't see the game," Ethan says.

"Dude, c'mon," Leo says when I don't move fast enough.

In my haste, I click the chat window *open* instead of *closed*, and Ethan groans loudly when it also streams to the TV set, obscuring the entire game.

So, I read it out loud.

Actually, it's more like I mumble, which is fine because we're all reading the same thing.

The room falls into an awkward, shocked silence, the only sound coming from the streets outside.

Turns out my roommate Ava, sex columnist at *Glisten Magazine*, is on a mission to experience her first orgasm.

Or to 'lose her O cherry,' as her friend Cami puts it.

Ava is on a mission to score her first O? What the fuck?

“Th... that’s your roommate, right?” Ethan asks. “Doesn’t she write about sex or something?”

“Um, yeah,” I say, scrolling through the rest of a conversation I wish I never found but can’t look away from.

The discovery transforms our faces into stunned reactions, with Ethan scratching his head and Leo’s mouth hanging open.

“I’ve never met her, Jas,” Leo says, “but didn’t you say she was good looking? Kind of sexy?”

I nod. “Yeah. She is. How in the fuck has she never had an orgasm?” I mutter.

I’m embarrassed I stumbled onto her secret, and even more so that I unintentionally revealed it to my friends. Poor woman.

Poor Ava.

How the hell does she write a sex column if she can’t even come?

“Hey, um, Jas, I think maybe you should close her computer. We can go do something else,” Leo says, glancing at his watch. “In fact, I have an early morning call. So, I’m gonna just get out of here.” He gets to his feet like his ass is on fire.

Ethan clears his throat. “Yeah, man. Just pretend you never saw that shit. I mean, that’s personal, and I’m sure she doesn’t want you seeing it. Or us, either.” He joins Leo.

Jesus, it’s not like reading this will infect them with herpes or something.

I raise my hand, gesturing for them to sit back down. “Wait. Hold on. Guys, we’ve got to help her. We can help her. I mean, she’s my best friend’s little sister. If she’s on a mission to have her first Big O, we can’t let her just fuck some rando. New York is full of creeps. Just look at me.”

“What are you saying, man?” Leo asks.

If my protective instinct surprises my friends, it's shocking the hell out of me. Who is this guy who wants to help some chick who can't get off? How the hell is that my problem?

And yet... Andy is my best college bud. He did hook me up with this sweet apartment, not to mention getting his aunt to line me up with an interview at *Sports Inc.* To say I owe this family a debt of gratitude is an understatement.

But an orgasm? Isn't that above and beyond the call of duty?

Although I've been known to initiate more than one woman into the world of sensual pleasures. But Ava? She can't stand my ass. She couldn't make it more obvious that I'm nothing other than an irritant to her, like a pebble in your shoe you can't shake out.

Ethan and Leo return to their seats, the silence in the room stretching on while we each try to figure out what our responsibility in the matter is. These guys don't know Andy the way I do, and have yet to meet Ava, but if I ask them for help, they have to join the cause, right?

I mean it's the man code. Or part of it.

This is some fucking delicate terrain, even though when I moved to the city, Andy requested I look after his sister. To an extent.

He also warned me never to lay a hand on her.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Um, well, Jas, if you feel you should really get involved, the situation must be handled very carefully," Leo says.

No shit.

"Dude, I can't get freaky with my best friend's little sister. Andy'll have me strung up by the balls. You don't know this guy," I say.

And yet, if she strikes out blind, just pursuing her damn O wherever she thinks she might find it, is that any better? This city is full of snakes. I know, because I am one.

“Guys, she has to write an upcoming column about her first O. That’s why she’s so eager to get it over with,” I say.

We’ve all had crazy work assignments, but I’d say this one takes the cake.

Well, shit. We were just three guys having our poker night, who are now suddenly privy to the intimate life of a woman we really don’t know all that well, yet have an obligation to.

I didn’t sign up for this. I will just close Ava’s laptop and forget I ever saw her instant messages. It’s none of my business. It’s none of the guys’ business.

And yet...

As the shock wears off, I have to say I find the situation funny—both Ava’s and us guys’. How absurd that we help her in her quest, which would leave any of us on the wrong side of a punch from her brother, Andy.

“Okay. We need a plan. Because we are going to help her. All of us. We can’t just let this nice, unassuming woman start fucking New York assholes,” I say.

“Sounds like you know them well, Jas. Does that mean you are one?” Leo teases.

I flip him off.

Even though he’s not far off the mark.

It’s beyond bizarre. Three guys get together for poker night and end up obligated to keep a woman out of the clutches of all the creeps out there, while we bring her closer to her goal of experiencing an orgasm.

A woman who also happens to be my best friend’s sister *and* my roommate, who works in the same building as us, for the same parent company.

I did not see this coming. But I’d like to see Ava coming.

Just sayin’.

AVA

“WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO?”

If only I could answer that question. But I am in utter crisis, my mind a whirling pandemonium of the ways my reputation and career might be ruined in a moment, not unlike Danny’s was for trying to pass off Martha Stewart recipes as his own.

Here I am at *Glisten*, day after day penning racy columns on pleasures of the flesh, and yet I can’t rustle up my own. I’m like a starving chef in a world-class kitchen, unable to boil water.

So. Freaking. Lame.

In my panic, I have to admit there’s only one person I can truly lean on. Who else is there in my life who not only knows my deepest, darkest secrets but also has the decency not to think I am a deranged loser?

My work bestie Cami, in all the time I’ve known her, has a knack for handling the curveballs life throws at us, of course with her own peculiar flair. I need that Cami magic, stat.

“So, remember the time you went to cover fashion week, and you ended up wearing the same outfit as that disgraced former designer who ripped off her models?” I ask.

Cami blanches, the freckles practically jumping off her face, as I remind her of her worst career fiasco—which she

also handled like a champ.

“Um, yeah? The one where I had to run around and make sure I got my story while not being photographed, a nearly impossible task when there are more cameras than humans around?”

“Yes! That one. So, you’re good at getting out of tough situations. Tell me what to do,” I beg.

Cami presses her lips together and looks into the distance, clearly running a variety of options through her thoughts before landing on the perfect one for me. While she does, I slouch—more like cower—into the embrace of my office chair after peeking around to make sure no one can hear our quiet conversation.

We are on a mission where failure is not an option. Except, at this very moment, it seems the likely outcome.

And if it is the outcome, I will have to move back home, tail between my legs, big-city girl put in her place by trying to trick the world into thinking I was some sort of ‘sexpert’ with the qualifications to advise other women on their most intimate concerns.

I can see it now.

‘Did you hear? Ava Sterling is back in town. Turns out she didn’t know jack about all that sex stuff she was writing.’

‘I heard. In fact, did you know she’s never even had an orgasm?’

“Hey!” Cami says, snapping her fingers in front of my face. “Earth to Ava.”

“Oh. Oh, sorry. Yeah, I’m listening,” I say.

With one butt cheek propped on my desk like always, Cami’s hands are on her hips like she’s made a decision.

I just hope it’s about my situation.

“The way I see it Av, there are a few ways out of this predicament,” she starts.

I nod, holding on to her words like a lifeline.

“You could have your Big O on your own, like most of us do when starting out,” she says, decisively. “But then you have to write about masturbation. *Your* masturbation.”

“Shhhh. Keep it down,” I beg.

“Or....” She says temptingly, “you could have your orgasm with another human. Male or female, you know I don’t judge.”

So nice of her.

“Personally, I have always opted for the dick. But if that’s not your thing—”

I hold my hands up. “I prefer a guy. I really do, Ava. At least for starters.”

She shrugs. “Fine. Now do you want to have your first O by yourself, or with a dude?”

Good question. Which was it Glenda preferred I write about? More importantly, what would our readers most respond to?

“You know,” Cami says dreamily while waiting for me to make up my mind, “I remember the first time I came. I was in high school at one of those parties where the parents are out of town. I went upstairs with Bobby Ledder, who was *so* good-looking. Before I knew it, the earth felt like it was moving, and I was floating above it all. I didn’t even know what was happening—”

I hold my hands up again. “Okay, okay. I’ve heard this story before.”

Her gaze snaps back to me. “Oh, right. Sorry. It’s just that it was so freaking hot.”

I widen my eyes with expectation. “What about me?”

She vigorously nods. “Yeah. Right. Okay. This is what I propose...”

Why is she hesitating? She knows how desperate I am.

“We’ll place an anonymous ad on Craigslist for you.” Her smile is triumphant, like she’s solved all the world’s problems.

Not so fast. “Um, Cami. Are you fucking kidding?” I hiss.

She shrugs one shoulder, like she was deciding whether to order pizza or burgers for lunch. Just another day at the office. “It’s the only way, honey. Sorry.”

Placing an ad on Craigslist is the only way I can snag a dude to give me an orgasm? Is that how desperate my situation has gotten? I’ve sunk to the depths of a freaking Craigslist hook-up?

“I mean, you could do Tinder or something like that. But I think you have to pay to sign up. Unless you want to sign up. Ya know?”

I look in the direction of Danny’s office, through the windows that used to be his view, and feel all my hopes and dreams slither out of my pores, dispersing like droplets of a fragrance that eventually fade to nothing.

As if the dating scene in Manhattan is not already perilous enough, I’m now facing the prospect of hooking up with some stranger just to save my career. My sanity as well.

Then she hits me with her ultimate theory, embellished, of course, with her usual layer of magic. “You know, right, that the Big O always leads to falling in love. That’s how I landed Steve,” she says matter-of-factly.

Just like Cami, always infusing the mundane with her crazy theories.

But she has a point. Not about falling in love, but about Craigslist. It’s definitely a no-frills approach—the budget, third class express train to getting my O. Not pretty, luxurious, or memorable, but it will get the job done.

There’s no time for the comfort of a first-class experience, not at this moment.

She sees the contemplation in my eyes and leans closer. “Just be prepared. Your O-face will look like you either just sneezed or have really bad hiccups. But it will be the best damn sneeze of your life.”

She dodges the pen I throw at her. “Desperate times call for desperate measures, my friend,” she points out.

Much as I’d like to dismiss this as another of her cockamamie ideas, I admit it holds merit. Besides, I have no other choice.

But damn.

I hope my O-face looks better than a damn sneeze.

AVA

“HEY AVA. I hear you have a *hot* new assignment. That it’s really *exciting*.”

The office pain-in-the-ass, perfectly named, Pia, peers over my cube wall. She’s got a particular talent for wedging herself into everyone else’s business with her snide smiles and sly glances, like a cat stalking her prey.

My first day on the job at *Glisten*, I was warned to stay away from her. But did I listen? Hell no.

I was new to town, with no friends, and completely overwhelmed by the cacophony that is New York. She invited me out to a club with her friends, got me to dance wildly and even make out with some guy, took pictures, and then showed them around the office.

Since then I’ve been nice but conveniently busy whenever she wants to hang out. Keep your enemies close and all that. This time, though, I bristle at her intrusion. I know how she operates, and she doesn’t make small talk unless she wants something.

While I formulate my answer, knowing that anything I say can and will be used against me, her words hang heavy in the air.

Hot.

Exciting.

Not how I'd describe my predicament, but whatever.

Does she... know anything?

No. No way. Not possible.

"Yeah, I'm working on something good," I say, all casual and indifferent.

But the reality is my heart is pounding against my ribs and my palms are so sweaty I don't dare pick up my can of Diet Coke.

Act normal, Ava. Get it together, girl.

She leans closer, over the wall of my cube. "I hear it's quite... personal. Something to do with O's?" She smirks.

Can this woman really not know how transparent she comes across?

I lean back in my chair.

"Oh no, Pia, I'm not doing a story on O-rings. But it sounds like something you're interested in. Maybe Glenda would let you do a write up on them."

The smug melts from her face. "Huh? O-rings? Like assholes?"

Yeah, I can be evil when I need to be.

I lean towards her, conspiratorially lowering my voice. "Hey, if that's your thing, no judgment here. Go forth and rim. Enjoy that backside. Know what I mean?"

Pia wrinkles her nose and steps back, as if just by talking about this, she's tainted. "Oh, well, no, I mean... that's not my thing. That's not what I was talking about."

I touch my fingers to my parted lips, my version of pearl-clutching. "Right. Sorry 'bout that. Don't worry, Pia, your secret is safe with me. The O-ring is a very sensuous part of the body," I say, tormenting her further, all while dealing with my own inner agony.

One wrong step, one slip, and I'll be exposed as the next office fraud.

As I render Pia speechless, Glenda pops by.

Saved by the boss?

“Hello, Pia,” Glenda says dismissively.

Pia steps aside, but still doesn’t vacate, even when Glenda stares at her for a moment.

Giving up, Glenda turns her attention back to me. “Ava, how’s the new article coming along?” She pushes her heavy glasses up on her nose, somehow managing to look glamorous and nerdy all at once.

“Great, Glenda!” I lie, flashing her my biggest, fakest smile while quashing down the terror roiling in my belly. It figures, the universe is getting back at me for tormenting Pia. I can’t get away with a damn thing.

From the corner of my eye, I catch my nemesis smirking, pleased as punch to see someone put on the spot.

“You know, Glenda, before I get in too deep with this assignment, though, I wanted to run something else past you.”

Her face brightens. “I always love to hear new ideas, Ava. Hit me with it.”

To build a little suspense, I rub my hands together like I’ve thought long and hard about this, coming up with something so brilliant it’s sure to blow her panties off. Glenda isn’t exaggerating, she really does love new ideas.

One of the reasons her team has stuck around for so long. She gives us what she calls ‘agency.’

I love agency.

“What do you think, Glenda, if instead of writing about my first orgasm, I write about the first time I had sex. You know, popped the old cherry and all that.”

Glenda wrinkles her nose at me, letting me know I need to do more convincing.

So I continue, praying I can get my boss off the first O track. The one that’s leading to my downfall. “I’m thinking, Glenda, that this is a more meaningful, universal experience

that all our readers can relate to, something that is truly life-changing—”

“Hmmm. Not sure about that, Ava,” she says, interrupting me.

Shit.

A glance in Pia’s direction makes me forget for a moment I’m not coming to this from a position of power and am, in fact, quite vulnerable.

Glenda shoots any remaining bravado I have right down.

“You know, Ava, I really don’t think anyone needs to be reminded of their first time, and the big loser guy they most likely did it with. For me, personally, it was one of the most disappointing moments of my life. An orgasm, on the other hand, is a pleasing surprise, kind of like a cherry on top of an already-delicious ice cream sundae.”

She smiles dreamily, looking at me but not really seeing me, as she clearly recalls her own first O.

She claps her hands together so loudly Pia and I jump. “There we have it. Everyone is all set, and I am sure, dear Ava, you will write something *fabulous*, like you always do, which”—she points a finger at me, almost touching my nose—“thrills our readers and makes the magazine just fly off the newsstand shelves.”

She saunters away, as does Pia, who glances back one more time, throwing me an evil grin at having been shot down.

Fuck her.

I swallow hard, forcing yet another smile. Inside, however, I realize time is wasting. I need to get going on my mission.

My O-mission.

AVA

“DARLING, YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL.”

I take my seat at the lunch table Aunt Dede always prefers and pull my white napkin onto my lap before she tells me to.

Yes, I am a grown adult, and she still tells me to put my napkin on my lap.

Aunt Dede left the small town where my parents grew up—and where my brother and I later did—and never looked back. She worked her way into a successful journalism career, becoming a New York girl as fast as she could. In fact, I doubt she even tells anyone where she’s really from. As a result, she thinks the rest of us whom she left behind are insufferable hicks, and that it’s her mission to ‘bring us up’ in any way she can.

To a certain extent, anyway.

When I decided to come to New York and try my own hand at journalism, I arrived with two suitcases, a bunch of dreams, and a shitload of anxieties. What if I couldn’t find a job? What if I couldn’t find a place to live? What if I couldn’t make any friends?

The list goes on.

The one comfort I had was that my dear Aunt Dede was here and had been for so long she essentially considered herself a ‘native New Yorker.’ I don’t know if real New

Yorkers considered her native, but then she never cared what other people thought.

Aunt Dede provided support, but on her own terms. As she put it, I needed to ‘forge my own path,’ as she had done. When she moved here, nobody helped her. I would do well to learn the same hard lessons.

So, I crashed at a cheap Airbnb for a couple weeks before she took mercy on me.

Like all New Yorkers, my aunt developed a network over the years and always ‘knew someone who knew someone.’ And that ‘someone,’ several degrees removed from her—which doesn’t seem to matter in this city—knew of a great apartment coming available. She installed me there before anyone knew the previous tenant had passed away, so in the end, while she didn’t put me up, she sure did come through. And she never lets me forget it.

In fact, she’s pretty much the reason I ended up with my roommate, Jasper. My jerk brother Andy called Dede—not *me*, who after all, is the person *living* in the apartment—and suggested his buddy stay there too. Dede, new to the world of largesse but enjoying it immensely, enthusiastically informed me my second bedroom was to become occupied by a ‘family friend,’ and wasn’t I thrilled I could help someone new to town, like I once had been?

Can’t argue with that, right? At least I could be pretty sure he wasn’t an axe-murderer since he’s my brother’s friend, although that’s not saying much, knowing Andy.

“Thank you for inviting me to lunch, Aunt Dede. It’s so good to see you,” I say cautiously.

Cautiously because you never know what sort of backhanded compliments the woman’s going to sling your way. I don’t think she means any harm, really. She just says rude shit.

She orders a martini for herself and an iced tea for me because, apparently, she still thinks I’m underage, and gets down to business.

“Looks like you attended those sample sales I told you about,” she says, looking me up and down with approval.

That’s one thing about New York. It’s expensive as fuck, but dressing in designer duds is within reach of most any smart, well-connected shopper. Sample sales abound, and while you have to fight to get the best stuff, they’re worth the pain in the ass that they are.

She lowers her voice and moves closer. “Honey, is that dress Ralph Lauren?”

Wow. She noticed. I nod happily, feeling pretty damn good about my resourcefulness.

“So cute on you. It is a couple seasons old, but you really pull it off.”

She takes a sip of her martini.

Womp-womp.

While she chats away about her upcoming interview with Kate Middleton, I zone out on her monologue, which is about as flawless as her Chanel jacket, words flowing like a well-rehearsed script.

“The bottom line is, honey,” she somehow segues, “is that life is all about embracing our femininity. In our careers, our personal lives, our relationships, and our spirituality...”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath through her nose. She’s recently been attending Dharma talks at her neighborhood Mindfulness Center, and she’s really embracing their lessons.

Or so she says.

Her chit-chat fades into the background, and as our lunch salads arrive, my mind strays back to Cami’s insane suggestion that the answer to my problem might be addressed with a few lines of text in a Craigslist ad. Crazy idea, no doubt, but is it any more ridiculous than faking my way through a journalism career? I’m tired. Tired of being a fraud.

I wait for Aunt Dede to stop talking and take a breath. She finally does, and I grab my opportunity.

“I have a new assignment too, Aunt Dede,” I say casually. “It’s about orgasms.”

The utterance of my last word actually gets her to stop talking. She blinks, finishes off her martini, and steeples her hands together in front of her lips.

“That should be a breeze for you, Ava. I assume, at your age, that you’ve had several lovers.”

Shit. I never should have brought this up.

Lunch ends on a weird note, and I realize I’m just not cool enough to casually talk about sex. Let me hide behind a computer screen, and I can write volumes. But face to face?

I give Aunt Dede the obligatory peck on the cheek, leave our chic eatery, and stop at the first drugstore I pass. With a bag of Hershey Kisses in hand, I head back to the office.

I pop one kiss after the other into my mouth until I’m sick of the taste of milk chocolate and the surface of my desk is littered with little scraps of silver foil. I sweep them into the trash, like I wish I could sweep away lots of other things.

ETHAN

“GUYS. I’m this close to throat punching the next douche who digs into my old hoop dreams,” I grouse, my fingers measuring an invisible inch.

“I promise not to ask if you take me to the next Knicks game,” Jasper chides.

I ignore him. He knows I can’t do that. Tickets are for clients. And me, of course. Although one particular client is getting really close to not being invited anymore.

“Dude, how would you feel if someone not only inquired about the single worst thing in your life, but kept digging for more information, even when you politely tried to change the subject? No wonder I have high blood pressure. Thirty-two-year-olds are not supposed to have high blood pressure.”

“Thirty-two-year-olds are not supposed to be as highly-strung as you are, either,” Jasper says.

I flip him off.

“Isn’t this your highest-spending ad account?” Leo asks while I take out my frustration on an elevator button.

We’d been waiting on our floor for way too long.

“These elevators are the worst,” I grumble. “One of the nicest office buildings in Manhattan, and they cheap out on the elevators.”

Jesus, what's taking so damn long? Fucking lunchtime. Everyone and their brother is going in and out of the building, tying up the elevators. They should build a goddamn zipline.

Jasper knocks my hand away. "Easy, guy. If you break it, we'll really be stuck."

He and Leo laugh.

I do not.

"I'm fucking starving too," I add. Low blood sugar and I do not get along well.

"We'll get you some food momentarily," Leo chants and the elevator doors ding open.

Finally.

We're boarding, the crowd repositioning itself to make room, when I see Jasper turn to three young women. Three very attractive young women.

Probably from *Glisten Magazine*. I don't know what it is about women's fashion magazines and whether being good-looking is some sort of requirement, but that place is rife with hotties.

Stuck-up hotties, I might add.

I turn back to face the elevator door and watch the floors tick by, counting the seconds until we reach the ground floor.

Someone taps my shoulder.

"Hey, Ethan, I'd like you to meet my roommate, Ava," Jasper says.

Holy shit. The non-orgasmic sex columnist of *Glisten Magazine*? No-orgasm Ava? The woman who can't get off?

In the flesh!

I turn to say hello when my gaze, like a heat-seeking missile, locks onto a slender blonde with long, thick, wavy hair and blue eyes with irises ringed in black. The corners of her bright red lips turn up in a small but polite smile, and a dimple makes itself seen.

Stunning doesn't begin to describe her, blessed with the kind of beauty that makes men walk into street signs, crash their cars, and empty out their bank accounts.

"Holy hell," I mutter quietly enough so only Leo, whose grin I see from the corner of my eye, can hear.

Ava's perfect eyebrows arch. "So you're Jasper's friends. The guys who come over for poker. We finally meet," she says in a bored voice.

Figures.

Her tone is cool as a frosted glass, but I'm feeling some serious heat below the belt.

"Good to meet you, Ava," I say, extending my hand. "Hey, I've got Knicks tickets, if you might be interested.

Jasper clears his throat loudly.

I ignore him. He can find his own goddamn tickets.

"Oh. Is that a band?" she asks.

No. Just no.

My day is ruined. If not my entire life.

How could a woman like this have no idea who the Knicks are?

But in spite of myself, in part disbelief and part humiliation, I burst out laughing, attracting the attention of every person in the crowded elevator.

The men look down, embarrassed for me and my blatant striking out.

Thanks, brothers.

But I am not deterred. No, I am not.

"You know, Ava, the guys and I are going to a... gathering later. A party of sorts for my elderly neighbors. Former neighbors. I look out for them. Anyway, I'd love for you to join us." I'm speaking fast, way too fast, but the elevator doors will be opening in the building lobby in seconds. I'm a sales

guy and I know to ‘ask for the sale’ before the opportunity is gone.

Ava nods lightly, looking from one of us guys to the next, like she’s trying to discern whether or not I am for real, and Jasper drives a painful ‘what the hell, man?’ elbow to my ribs.

But the only person who matters at this moment is Ava, whose gaze I cannot tear myself from.

Shit. I hate when this happens.

As the elevator doors open, Ava shrugs with a small nod, her eyes wide like she’s looking for an emergency exit.

“Yeah. Sure.”

The lack of enthusiasm stings a little, but I’ll take what I can get.

We spill into the lobby as she introduces her coworkers.

“This is my friend, Cami,” she says, gesturing toward a tiny redhead.

Standing closest to her, Jasper extends a hand.

But before he can grasp hers, she blurts out, “I’m married.”

Awkward silence settles among the six of us as we each try to figure out what to say next, when Leo speaks up.

He pats Cami’s shoulder with a laugh. “Well, congratulations, then.”

Her face turns multiple shades of pink and then red, until the color of her face nearly matches that of her freckles.

Ava turns to her last friend, an Amazonian femme fatale with heels so high, she’s at eye-level with me. “Guys, this is Lana. We all work at *Glisten* together.”

But she just shoots us a frosty glare. “Don’t even think about it gentlemen.”

Wow. Nice girl.

With mumbled good-byes, the three turn, heading for their lunch spot as we turn in the opposite direction toward ours.

But their giggling is unmistakable as one of them says,
“Damn, your roommate and his friends are hot.”

I puff my chest out a little, my shit mood and growling
stomach momentarily forgotten.

ETHAN

WE'RE SETTLING into our usual lunchtime greasy spoon when Jasper lets me have it. But I'm ready. I've been waiting.

"Are you fucking kidding, dude? What the hell party did you just invite Ava to that you pulled out of your ass?" he asks, pushing up his nerd glasses.

He thinks chicks dig them. I beg to differ.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "Just be ready when I come to pick you up."

"Why the hell do I have to go?" he asks. "I am not going."

Leo starts to say something but can't because his mouth is full of grilled tuna melt. But the smirk on his face says enough.

Jasper is speaking for both guys, that much is clear.

I lean my elbows on the table, trying not to laugh at Jasper's exasperation. "If we all go together, Ava will be more comfortable."

Jasper rolls his eyes. "I can't believe you're using your elderly friends as chick-bait."

Nothing wrong with that. A man does what he needs to. I mean, inviting her to the Knicks would have been a waste of two good tickets, but when I make myself look like a hero,

involved with the senior center and all, well, there's no way a woman can say no.

Nobody, not even the stuck-up girls at *Glisten*, could turn down that offer.

“She's gorgeous, man. I'd be an idiot not to try with her. And hell, I know I can help her out with her no-O problem.”

Jasper, glaring at me, isn't letting up. “Why the hell would you get involved with a problem like hers?”

I shrug. “I always get women off. One hundred percent of the time. It's one of my best skills. I'm just naturally good at it.”

More eye rolling, this time from Leo. “I agree that she's gorgeous and personally I'd love to ‘help’ her with her problem, too”—Leo puts air quotes around ‘help’— “but Ethan, there's no way your women get off every time. It's statistically impossible.”

I hold my hand up as if in surrender. “All I can say, dude, is that I know what I have experienced. And it's a beautiful thing.”

Jasper claps me on the back. “I guess you've never heard that important little detail about how women fake getting off? Like all the freaking time?”

I clap him back. “I get it. I mean, I'd be upset too if I couldn't get women off. But it's nothing to be ashamed of, my friend. Keep at it. You'll eventually improve.”

It's all I can do not to burst out laughing. It's so freaking easy to get under Jasper's skin, and hell, what man likes his sexuality insulted?

Yeah, I can be a dick that way.

Jasper winces. “You are so full of shit, Eth, it's just sad. But I'm telling you, don't even think about getting with Ava. My best advice is to keep her in the friend zone. Her brother is a brute, and you don't want to get on his bad side.”

I throw my arms up. “What? Andy doesn't live within hundreds of miles of New York. Why would I give a shit about

him?”

Seriously. Over-protective older brother doesn't want his college buddy nor his friends hitting on his sister. Story as old as time. But he's *several states away*. I don't give a fuck about any of his hang-ups, even if he is a friend.

I continue before he can answer. “As for this shindig at the senior center, the one you *both* are attending with me, well, it's not exactly a party. It's more like one of their regular gatherings. We'll chat, play cards, or Bingo. Oh, and they always have good cookies.”

The clatter of lunch plates surrounds our table as Leo and Jasper are momentarily stunned into silence.

“You think... Eth, you seriously think we want to do something like that? What have you been smoking, dude?” Leo asks.

I turn the heat up on my earnestness. “Come on, guys, you have to come. It's a nice thing to do. These seniors are lonely and could use our company. Wouldn't you want someone to visit you when you're pushing eighty?”

Leo shakes his finger at me. “Look, just because you befriended these people when they were your neighbors does not mean you are permanently committed to visiting them in their nursing home. Eth, your job there is done.”

I look at Jasper. “Leo here clearly doesn't get the concept of charity. You know, doing something good for someone other than yourself.”

“Now wait a minute—” he starts to say.

But he's interrupted by Jasper. “Okay, okay. I'll do it. You're reminding me of my Gam-Gam and how she withered away in a nursing home. We wanted to visit, but the truth is, my dad was too busy drinking to care.”

Leo and I don't speak, like we're offering a moment of silence to Jasper's shitty childhood memory. After thirty seconds, I pick right back up.

“Okay, thanks Jas. I knew I could count on you. Now, Leo. Are you coming or not? I know you’re a nice guy. I mean, hell, look at what you’re doing for your little brother.”

Leo pays the lunch tab since it’s his turn, and I see him leave an extra-big tip for the waitress. He is a good guy. He really is.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll go. But I don’t wanna be around when crazy Andy the big brother comes to visit.”

We head out, leaving the heavy, fried, greasy smell of the diner—which I personally love—to enter the exhaust-saturated air of midday Manhattan.

“Thanks guys, I appreciate this. I think we all will. And look, Jas, it’s not like I want to marry the woman. I just want to see if I can... ya know, help the woman out a bit. And yes, to do that, she might have to be naked, but we’re all adults—”

I freeze at the curb just before crossing, a bicyclist whizzing by so fast I can smell what the jerk had for lunch.

“Hey, asshole, watch where you’re going!” I shout, shaking my fist.

Jasper and Leo sigh with a ‘here we go again’ attitude. But I don’t care, and when I see the cyclist turn around and head back, my pulse speeds. I clench my fists and flex my biceps.

You want a piece of my mind, little man?

A tall, wiry guy with zits pulls up in front of me, the rest of the crowd continuing to cross on the green light.

The guy shifts the pack on his back and, still half-seated on his bike, looks up at me. “What did you say to me, fuckface?”

I love it when assholes give me an invitation like this.

I stretch to my full height. That, combined with my standing on the curb and the biker being still on the street makes me look like a fucking giant.

“You nearly mowed down a dozen people, dude, people who had the light.”

I fucking hate guys like this, who play chicken with pedestrians.

Little man opens his mouth to say something, but when Leo and Jasper flank me, he spits at the ground, turns, and continues on his way, his last word an extended middle finger.

“You know, Ethan, someday someone’s gonna call you out on your big mouth,” Leo says. “And leave you with a big, juicy, black eye.”

I shrug, my competitive streak sated for the moment. “Bring it.”

“Fine then,” he continues, “but let’s not get arrested before your big party, okay?”

Back at the Bonded Crest building, ensconced in sterile air no doubt filtered multiple times against the unfortunate Manhattan outdoors, I look around. I’m hoping to catch a glimpse of Ava, either clicking across the lobby in her sky-high heels, or even in the elevator where she’d be trapped with me, at least for the twenty-some-odd floors we need to travel.

Only, no such luck. She’s probably back in her *Glisten* office, surrounded by beautiful creatures like herself who couldn’t be bothered with us jocks from another floor.

We might all work for the same publisher, but our daily lives couldn’t be further apart. My plan is to do something about that, though.

ETHAN

I END my fifth Zoom call of the day and get up to stretch. Down on the street, people remind me of little bugs, moving quickly and intently, the cabs adding color to the otherwise mostly grey landscape. I enjoy watching the world below from up in my office, where I can observe the craziness in complete silence.

I love New York. I do. And I'm making great fucking money. But it can be a grind, with stupid inconveniences like noise and crowds and bad smells most everywhere you go. It's worth it, most days.

I'm lucky in a lot of ways. I fell into this sales job at Sports Inc., and started kicking ass almost from day one, smiling and dialing prospective customers from a crappy cube with a crappy swivel chair, surrounded by the commotion of an office fueled with enough testosterone to power a freight train. It didn't take long for the boss to move me out of the cube from hell into my own little glass-encased oasis to get away from the noise, so I could continue to sell even more ad space. Naturally, the walls of my new home-away-from-home are decorated with covers from our swimsuit issues—probably one of the few places left where you can have hot girls on your walls without coming off as an asshole—and the rest is history. I've been outselling every other salesperson for the past couple years, and I have to admit, the money is fucking

sweet. It almost makes up for my failed basketball career. Almost.

Despite my run-in with today's crazy bicyclist, I'm in a surprisingly good mood. I had no idea Jasper's roommate was such a looker, and I'm pleased she said yes to my senior center invite, however halfhearted. I know it's a lame as hell thing to bring a woman like her to, but it was the first thing to pop into my mind in the few seconds I had in the confines of the elevator. Once I have the chance to win her over, I can upgrade. Take her to dinner at the city's hottest new restaurant.

Jasper's warning about Ava's protective big brother flits through my thoughts, but I shoo it away like the annoyance that it is. I couldn't give a shit about some guy who tries to control his sister's life from hundreds of miles away, whether he's a friend or not. What a freak. Although he sure has Jasper's knickers in a twist. Jesus Christ. If I didn't know better, I'd think Jas was afraid of him.

Or... is it that Jasper wants to have Ava to himself?

Drama aside, what's really puzzling me is how such a lovely young woman has issues with orgasming. I've heard that some women have an actual physical problem that can sometimes be addressed medically. That might be her deal. Regardless, from the texts the guys and I read between her and her friend, it sounds like she's out to remedy the problem, or at least try to. So maybe she's just been with loser guys who couldn't find her clit if there was a bullseye on it?

Damn if her half-smile isn't on repeat in my little brain, intruding on my thoughts, even as I negotiate one of the biggest ad sales the magazine has ever seen. In fact, I have to force my attention back to the call more than once, that's how distracted I am.

I close my eyes against the city skyline and her image is right there, blindingly clear as if we're back in that elevator. And instead of her half-assed enthusiasm about my lame invite to the senior center, she's happy to see me. So happy, in fact, that she wants me to help with her little 'problem,' which,

while once an inconvenience, will soon be a forgotten memory.

AVA

“SO I’VE BEEN DOING some thinking.”

Cue the warning bells.

Cami’s voice is low and conspiratorial as her eyes dart around. She’s either checking to make sure no one can hear us, or she’s afraid to look me in the eye. Or both

I’m not getting a good feeling about whatever’s coming.

“I... well, Ava, let’s hear it from you first. What are you gonna do about... you know, ‘the problem’?” She uses air quotes around ‘the problem,’ as if I won’t immediately know what she’s talking about.

In any case, her question’s a good one. I *don’t* know what to do. The only thing I do know is that if I don’t act fast, ‘the problem’ will be worse than just the boring-ass sex I had with my ex, Bran. The one of *New York Times* engagement announcement fame.

Now that I have some distance from that fiasco, I can honestly say I feel sorry for his fiancé, striving for her own Big O with his sorry little dick and frantic rabbit thrusting.

“I... I have some ideas,” I lie.

Cami might be my work bestie, but I am too embarrassed to admit, even to her, that I am falling down on this one.

I’ve tried with vibrators.

I've tried with men.

And yes, I've tried with my good old hand.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

She grimaces, pretending not to notice my lame-ass lie. "That's great, Av. But hey, I did a thing!" she exclaims, leaning closer.

"What's that?"

"I placed a Craigslist ad. You know, for a guy," she says.

My heart thumps against my chest and my morning coffee burns in my stomach. "A guy for you, Cami? Or for me?"

As if I don't know the answer.

She rolls her eyes with a big *huff* and shows me her wedding ring. "I'm married, in case you forgot, silly."

"I didn't forget, but you always *are* complaining about Steve."

You never really know about people.

She sighs impatiently, like I'm a dunce for even asking. "I did it for you, Ava. I mean, I did it a little for me too. I get to have *some* excitement in my life, right? You know, as a married woman and all."

Please, no. Just let this be a joke.

I want to be angry. I do. But I know Cami's well-intended, even if she wants to vicariously live through me and besides, I have to admit she might be on to something. But I won't let her off the hook that easily.

"I kind of can't believe you did that, Cam. I mean, I was considering your suggestion and all, but I thought I'd have input. You know, some warning, a heads up. Or something," I huff. "We should have talked about this first."

She blinks at me like she was expecting a thank you. Or a pint of blood. Or my firstborn child.

"Cam, you know what kind of people lurk on Craigslist. I mean, the dating apps are bad, but that site is even worse. Why

didn't we just try a dating site?"

She flips her hair back off her shoulders. "Couple reasons. First, time is of the essence here. You don't have time to do all that swipe right, swipe left bullshit, then chat with a guy for weeks, then maybe meet him and find out whether he's a dud or not. Second, Craigslist is free. The dating apps are not."

Ah. Cami, being practical. Don't see that every day.

She sighs. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. But don't worry. I already took the post down, after we got a bunch of responses," she says, like she's waiting for me to tell her she did good.

Before I can ramp up my scolding, because the more I think about it the more annoyed I am, Lana swans into my already crowded cube with her typical air of nonchalance.

We're so crammed in we're practically kissing each other.

"Darlings," Lana says, pushing a Marilyn Monroe style curl off her forehead, "I'm so happy with my anniversary issue column. I just had to share my joy about it, and about being so far ahead of deadline for a change."

She closes her eyes and presses her fingers together as if in prayer.

She should be praying. She's never met a deadline in her life.

Cami smirks, annoyed at the interruption. "What column? The one on bookbags or something?"

Lana sucks a long draw of air into her nose, shooting Cami the stink eye. "It's about *handbags*, Cam. For the anniversary issue all about 'firsts.' Ya know," she says, gesturing in my direction, "Ava's first O, my first designer handbag..."

Cami nods. "Right, right. So, you're done, then? It's good?"

Lana pauses for a moment to compose herself. "So. Good." She stares dreamily across the office. "This assignment has made me think back to a lover from long ago..."

Here we go.

“... he was a beautiful man. He really was, a sort of combination of James Bond mixed with Fabio. You know, tall, dark, and dangerously sexy. Rich, so very rich. And his accent, oh my! I never did find out where he was from, but oh, did he love me. He showered me with gifts, including my very first Louis Vuitton bag. And of course, many, many orgasms.”

She puts her hand over her heart and pulls the bag out from behind her, turning it so we can view it from all sides like a rotating display in a museum.

Cami and I ooh and aah, because that’s clearly what she’s shooting for, even though I’ve never understood the appeal of Louis Vuitton bags, with their poop-brown colors and plasticky feel. And yet everyone in New York has them.

“So pretty,” I say to be polite. “Sounds like a nice guy.”

Her gaze snaps in my direction, her eyes narrowing. “*Nice?* No, never use that word for a man. He was as good-looking as Adonis, and his penis was—”

I hold my hands up. “Lan, I really don’t think we need to hear about your man’s junk—”

“Nonsense!” she sings, drowning out my protest. “God, he was good, and he could last for hours. I would orgasm a dozen, even two-dozen times...”

Holy shit? Is that even possible?

What about *me*, universe? Don’t I deserve some of this pleasure?

The rapt attention we’re paying her only eggs her on. “So, we just finished the photo shoot for this little lady,” she says, caressing the curves of her poop-brown plastic bag. “They captured her perfectly. She’s still young at heart, with just a little wear and tear. Just like we will be someday, ladies, right?”

AVA

AFTER LANA WANDERS OFF, dreaming of her erstwhile lover, Cami and I get back down to business while I scroll absentmindedly through email and fight off a pang of self-pity. I wouldn't have minded getting back to work, but when Cami is focused on something, there's no redirecting her.

"You know, Av," she says slowly, "you have that handsome roommate, not to mention his friends. And did you see how the one in the white button-down, who couldn't take his eyes off you? I think his name is Ethan? God, that teeny bit of grey at his temples is so hot."

Ugh. Still kicking myself for not thinking faster and blowing him off. He caught me so off-guard when he mentioned 'elderly,' that I sort-of agreed before I could even think. I mean, how could I turn my back on getting together with elderly people? I would have come off as the world's biggest creep.

But he sure is good-looking, she's not wrong. Almost more handsome than Jasper, who seems to melt the panties off every woman he meets. And their other friend. What was his name, the one with the perfect Harry Styles hair?

Leo?

"Cam, you know those guys who work down at *Sports Inc.* are just a bunch of jocks. So not my type. And Jasper thinks

he's all that with that stupid motorcycle.”

She grabs my upper arm. Hard. “That’s just the thing, Av, they’re low-hanging fruit. Easy. You don’t have to do any work. They’re right there in front of you, ripe for the picking. You can get in and get out, and *poof!* Problem solved. Never talk to them again. You’re pretty and have a vagina. That’s all guys like that require.”

She has a point.

“If I get together with one of them and don’t get my Big O, think what a mess that will be. All awkward and stuff.”

“Nonsense,” she insists. “Times are different now. If a woman wants to get laid, she has the right to go out, pick a guy, and get her rocks off, just like men have been doing since—well, forever. See, you’re not looking to get married. You just need someone to fuck you properly.”

Right.

The ugly truth of what she’s saying is a wakeup call. No sense overthinking it. Just line up some guy and *boom*, I’m back in business. Or should be, God willing.

“And you know, those guys aren’t quite the bottom dwellers you make them out to be. They’re nice looking, have good jobs. Decent manners. The whole nine yards. I think you’re ruling them out because you’re going to rule *any* guy out.”

“That’s not true,” I say defensively. “It’s just that if I mess around with my roommate, it will be so weird. We’re not friends, and honestly, I don’t like him all that much. He’s pretty much just a big old dudebro man-whore.”

“Oh, Ava, live a little. Who knows, maybe sparks will fly. Maybe you’ll have your Big O and fall in love.”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Dating roommates, or sleeping with them, is a bad idea. It’s like playing Russian roulette with your living situation. Just what I need, a conflict with the person I share one of the best apartment deals in all of Manhattan with. I can’t jeopardize that.”

No, I don't want to be friends with Jasper, never mind getting sexy with him.

Strangely, he stayed in last night, which irritated the hell out of me. I'm used to having the apartment to myself all evening, at least until he stumbles home, usually with a woman. But I have to say, he was super nice, suggesting we order a pizza and watch a movie. He even let me pick. So, to be a brat, I chose *Eat, Pray, Love*. I am sure he hated every minute of it. In fact, he dozed off halfway through. Of course I woke him up and told him he was missing a good part.

Shitty of me, I know, but I owe him for all the times his sex noise kept me up. Watching him wince at the mushy parts, for as long as he was awake, was the highlight of my evening.

I'm not sharing this with Cami, though. She'll get the wrong idea. Not that her current ideas are all that great.

But if I'm not imagining things, Jasper was extra-attentive last night, for the first time asking me about myself and my work. It was weird. Nice, but weird. Sure, he's my big brother's college buddy, but he's never cared to inquire about me before.

What changed?

I don't have time to worry about this now, though.

"Well, you're going to that thing with your roommate's friend Ethan, so just think about it."

Goody. Can't wait.

"I have one more thing to tell you," Cami says, guilt splashed all over her face.

What now?

"So... I know I told you I took the Craigslist post down. You know, the one searching for a man to give you—"

"*Cami!*" I hiss. "Tell me you took it down."

She wrings her hands, and I have my answer. Why didn't I just keep my mouth shut about everything? I should have known better than to trust her, BFF or not.

“I saw Pain In the Ass snooping around here the other day, asking about your assignment,” she says.

“Don’t change the subject and I don’t want to talk about Pia right now. Tell me, what have you done?”

She pulls her phone out of her pocket. “Look. You have all these responses.”

No. Just no.

I don’t want to look.

I do, though.

And there before me, is the first of the dick pics. One guy apparently opened his pants in a restroom stall, pulled them just below his stuff, and shot it with the camera held as far out as he could. The angle is not good. Not at all.

I cringe. Cami cringes. And then the giggling starts. I feel shitty for laughing at some guy’s dick, but he did, after all, send it unsolicited.

The worst part is that he has about the biggest bush I’ve ever seen on a man, so big it dwarfs his circumcised penis like a little hair sweater.

I laugh until I can’t breathe, until my eyes water, and until other people in the office start looking my way. Thank goodness no one comes over to check to see what’s so funny, because there’s no way any of this can be explained.

AVA

“ETHAN! YOU HAVE A LITTLE GIRLFRIEND,” a petite white-haired lady exclaims, holding his face between her two hands and gazing at him with all the affection a grandmotherly figure does.

Holy crap. Did he tell this woman I’m his girlfriend?

I start to straighten her out, but Ethan throws an arm around my shoulder and brings his lips to my ear. “Go with it,” he whispers. “Just go with it.”

And with that, he places a big, juicy kiss on my cheek.

My first instinct is to push him away, only I don’t. I want to see what he’s up to.

Turns out our ‘gathering with elderly friends’ is some sort of game night at a senior center. The old timers look pretty psyched about it, even more so when they spot Ethan, his two work friends, and me.

Yup, he brought Jasper and Leo.

We rode together from the city to Long Island in an SUV one of the guys rented for the occasion. I was assigned the front passenger seat, spending almost the entire drive staring out my side window, wondering how the hell I got roped into an evening with three guys I barely know and their senior citizen friends.

I could be home in my plushy robe, the one I got at the Barefoot Dreams sample sale, drinking mint tea and rewatching the second season of Sex and the City.

But no. I'm wearing a cute little dress and ankle boots because I want to look nice for a bunch of old people I don't know, and who I will probably never see again.

After Ethan's spontaneous kiss, the woman turns to me—her name is Trudy, her husband George—and beams. “Aren't you just lovely. I've heard so much about you, Ava.”

My head snaps in Ethan's direction, but he just continues smiling. Jasper and Leo, slightly in the background, cover smirks with their hands.

Is this some kind of joke?

“Oh look, the cookies are out,” she exclaims. She grabs George's hand and they crowd the table with the other residents.

I turn to Ethan and give him my best death glare.

He raises his hands in protest. “Look, Ava, don't knock it 'til you've tried it. These old timers have really good cookies.”

“What about the girlfriend part, where your little friend Trudy says you ‘told her all about me’?” I snap, using air quotes.

He waves away my concern like it's an annoying fly. “Oh, she just has an active imagination. I never said any such thing.”

I glare harder, but when I see the excitement on the seniors' faces, it's hard to stay pissed.

“Hey, they have some killer fruit punch over there. Can I get you guys one? Jas? Eth?” Leo asks.

“Dude, when have you ever had fruit punch in your life?” Jasper asks.

“I haven't. But this stuff is great,” he says, raising a dainty cup to his lips, which he holds by the tiny handle between his giant fingers.

He looks ridiculous. He really does. But I've never been one to turn away sweets, so I head over to the table.

"Honey." There's a tap at my elbow, causing me to dribble the punch down my chin. I wipe up with the back of my hand while I turn to see Trudy.

"Oh, hello there." I might be annoyed with Ethan into tricking me into coming here, but I can't take it out on Trudy, whose kind, wrinkled face is nothing less than completely adorable.

She reaches for my hand with her crooked, slightly shaking one. "Come sit over here, dear, so we can chat."

We settle in on a bench against the wall, and I chug the rest of my punch, hoping I don't have one of those Kool-Aid mustaches you get when you're a kid.

"Thank you for coming with Ethan," she says, looking adoringly in his direction. "He's such a nice boy."

It occurs to me she probably knows more about him than I do. So I play along.

"Yes, he is," I say, looking over to him and the guys chatting up Trudy's husband George. He's holding them rapt, sharing a story.

Something about sports, I imagine.

"How do you know him, Trudy?" I ask.

She settles in like she's gearing up for a long story, which is not good because I'm starting to have to pee. "He was our neighbor in the city. We met him on his first day in New York. George took him out to his favorite bar for a beer while I made a roast for dinner."

Oh my god. I didn't know people like this existed in New York.

"We hit it off, of course. He told us about the failure of his athletic career, and that he's made the most of it."

Athletic career? What athletic career?

“You see Ava, when George and I started having trouble getting around, Ethan took us to visit places like this all over the tri-state area. We drove around for weeks, trying to make a decision. He never got frustrated or anything,” she says with a grateful sigh.

Holy crap. And I thought this guy was nothing more than a bottom-dweller.

“Honey, what do you do? You know, for work?” Trudy asks, her eyes wide with interest.

Shit. I’m normally open about what I do. But can this sweet old lady handle the truth?

Oh, fuck it. “I... I write the sex column for *Glisten Magazine*.”

She bends closer to me, tilting an ear in my direction. “Speak up, honey, my hearing isn’t what it used to be.”

Ugh.

I lean closer. “I am a journalist, Trudy. I write a sex column.”

She stays bent in her position for a moment, and I wait for her to call me a Jezebel and kick my ass out of her party. But when she straightens back up, she has a naughty glint in her eye.

“A sex column,” she exclaims. “Oh, I should read that. It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks, but I’d like to spice things up with George a little, although he’s still an animal in bed. Say, if you’re ever doing a story on octogenarian sex, I’m happy to be your interview subject.”

For a moment I can’t say anything, and when I do gather my thoughts, it’s still hard to speak.

“Of course. What a great idea, Trudy.”

LEO

“WHERE’S AVA TONIGHT?” I ask, looking around Jasper’s apartment as if his assuring me she’s out for the evening is not good enough. I don’t want to full-on snoop, but from where I am in his kitchen, with a decent view to most corners of the place save for the bedrooms, the coast looks clear, as I’m hoping.

Call me paranoid, but I know we’ll be talking about her, and I need to make sure she’s nowhere nearby.

“Relax, Leo, she’s at the ballet with her aunt. The one who hooked me up with this place.”

Ethan looks over his shoulder from where he’s sitting on the sofa, surfing TV channels, looking for something sports, even though Jas and I already told him there’s nothing on. “I thought it was Ava’s brother who got you into this place.”

Whatever method Jasper used to land this apartment, he got a sweet deal. The place is sprawling, at least by New York standards. Each bedroom has its own bath, which would sell me right there. Sharing bathrooms is a dealbreaker for me, especially if you have to with someone of the opposite sex.

I have big apartment envy, especially as compared to the tiny fourth-floor walkup I live in. Jasper’s place has hardwood floors, well-maintained and polished, and a fairly modern kitchen, with the exception of an avocado green refrigerator no

one wants to replace. As Jasper points out, the color is so old, so sixties and seventies, it will probably be 'in' again someday.

But the best part of the apartment is the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the street. They are majestic, curved at the top, and open in the middle, just enough to let in a nice breeze.

"Ava's brother did help me get this place," Jasper said, "by connecting me with his aunt who moved Ava in. The woman seems to have connections all over the city."

Ethan nods, his attention already back on the TV. "Gotcha."

Yeah, he couldn't give a shit.

"Guys, can we get the party started here? I gotta get back to work in a bit."

Both Jasper and Ethan shake their heads. They don't get it.

Whatever.

"Dude, the work will be there tomorrow," Ethan says, gaze glued to the TV.

Of course it will be there tomorrow. But what will also be there tomorrow are new and better opportunities to prove myself as a top photographer for *Sports, Inc.* if I get ahead on today's work.

Then there are the new-to-the-city bastards clamoring for my job.

These guys don't know what it's like to have few opportunities in life. When you finally get yours, you hang onto them for dear life.

"Hey!" Ethan yells as Jasper clicks off the TV.

"Watch TV at home, Eth. We're here for something important."

Beers in hand, we settle into our usual living room spots.

I can't help but think it's crazy the guys feel compelled to get involved with Ava's little 'problem.' Out of some weird loyalty to his college roommate, Jasper feels protective of Ava and is convinced we guys can save her from all of New York's lowlife.

Even though she won't give him the time of day.

She can't stand him, from what I can tell. They are total opposites, with Ava being quiet and refined, and Jasper's balls-out approach to life.

It *is* said that opposites attract.

I will say one thing. There is no question that Ava is a beauty, with her long, curly blonde hair, one-sided dimple, and peachy complexion. The couple times I've seen her, not only in the elevator with the guys but also across the lobby in our building, I've found she dresses sexy but tasteful. Not every woman can pull that off without looking like she's trying too hard.

I'm not saying anything to the guys, but Ava's just the type of girl I go for. In different circumstances, I might actually reach out to her, see if there's any interest on her part, even though Ethan dragged her to his senior center shindig, and now has some delusional idea he has a claim on her.

And the way Jasper talks about her, you'd think she walks on water. Sure, he acts like he's looking after her for no reason other than loyalty to her brother, but the truth can't be denied. Why else would he be all about 'protecting her?' A less-appealing woman, he wouldn't think twice about, regardless of whether her brother is his buddy. He's always liked her, he just doesn't know it.

Or won't admit it.

I'd like to see if she's interested in *me*. Spend a little time with her. But this shit we have going on now? Way too complicated, especially with Ethan and Jasper sweet on her as they are.

"Okay," Jasper starts off, "we all agree that we can't let Ava just hop into bed with any old asshole, right?"

We nod.

“She deserves better than that,” Ethan adds.

Yeah, these guys are really helping her out of the goodness of their own hearts.

“My question is,” I start to say, “is whether we should let her know we’re aware of her... issue? And that we want to help. Isn’t honesty the best policy?”

I’ve been dishonest before. It doesn’t feel good. But from the looks on Ethan and Jasper’s faces, they are not as conflicted as I am.

Jasper takes a deep breath, then hangs his head.

What has he done?

“Look guys, I’m not proud of this, but I looked at her laptop again, before you came over. It looks like she placed an ad on Craigslist. She has a shit-ton of emails from the site, all creeps and lowlifes who want to help her with her ‘problem’.”

Good God.

I can’t blame her for taking the bull by the horns, but for Christ’s sake, Craigslist?

I’m now on board. I will do what I can to help this woman at the very least stay far away from Craigslist randos.

LEO

WE RECONVENE at Jasper's the next night with a plan in place. Or at least a semblance of a plan. We don't yet have any kind of consensus on Ava's bigger issue, but we do know that, in the short term, we will do anything we can to stop her from going on any online dates she might have set up.

And according to Jasper's reconnaissance, there are quite a few.

We're standing around the kitchen in our basketball clothes, Ethan holding a ball under his arm like a damn prop, when Ava comes out of her room in slim, skinny jeans, high-heeled boots, and a leather jacket over a plain T-shirt. She looks like almost any other girl in Manhattan, clad in her casual 'going out outfit,' but so much more.

Classy. Smart. Exceptionally beautiful.

Shit, I'm as attracted to her as the other guys. I don't see how this can end well.

But first things first. We need to save this lovely lady from disaster, from spending any amount of time with a stranger from Craigslist, most likely one who doesn't deserve her.

"Hey guys," she says, putting in an earring, "thought you were going out to play basketball or something."

Ethan switches arms holding the basketball as a polite way to correct her, but she makes no notice.

Jasper scrapes his fingers through his hair and gives a big, fake yawn. Ethan follows him with his own, both the worst acting jobs I've ever seen.

So, I jump in before we completely give our lame selves away. "You know, Ava, we were about to head out, but Jasper's tired. Ethan, too. You know, working really hard."

Just now realizing how shitty our script is. But too late to stop.

Jasper shuffles his feet, all casual and shit. "Yeah, I think we're gonna get some eats from a food truck and head over for a walk on the High Line."

The funny thing is, none of us guys would probably ever do something like this. Not that Ava is aware of that.

"Sounds nice," she says, scrolling through her phone, completely uninterested in our plans.

"Hey, Ava!" Ethan says with so much enthusiasm it scares us all. "Join us. It'd be great to spend time with someone from one of our sister magazines."

Fuck me. He did not just say that. He couldn't give a shit about *Glisten* or any other Bonded Crest publication. He only cares about *Sports Inc.* because he makes so much fucking money off it.

She finally looks up from her phone and hoists her purse over her shoulder. "Sorry, can't, I have plans. But you have fun. See ya later."

Jasper jumps in front of her before she can reach the door.

This is so not going to work.

But when I picture her spending time with some lowlife from Craigslist, I kick my ass in gear too.

"Yo, Ava," I call. "Come with us, it will be awesome. You know, hanging out in the city, doing all the city shit."

And... I sound like an idiot.

"Cancel your plans, Ava. We're way more fun than anything else you've got going on," Ethan says flirtatiously.

Maybe that will work?

“Sorry, guys, but I’m gonna be late.”

Jasper puts his hands on his hips and does his best to look insulted beyond reason. This slows her down.

“Seriously, Ava. Go put on some more practical shoes and join us. It’ll be so much fun,” he insists.

She looks from one of us to the next, her expression part confusion, part pity.

Yeah, I love it when women feel sorry for me.

But if it does the job, I can handle some unearned compassion.

“All right,” she shrugs. “Let me reschedule my plans and put on some sneakers. Hold on.”

Yes.

She goes back to her room with her phone in her face, and as soon as she turns the corner, we guys engage in silent high-fives.

It’s funny when you have an impression of people that turns out to be wrong. I thought Ava was some snooty New York chick, but the minute we hit the street, she’s the one to drag us to her favorite hot dog vendor.

Ava has a favorite hot dog vendor?

I can’t deny that we watch her in awe as she loads up her dog with all the fixings, including enough relish and chopped onions that they spill out of her bun to the sidewalk below, splashing on my sneaker. I don’t even care.

Myself, I’m a ketchup guy, which isn’t lost on her.

“Isn’t it interesting to see what each person puts on their hotdog?” she asks, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Is this really *Ava*? Ava of the high heels and tight skirts, who works for the highfalutin *Glisten Magazine*?

I shrug. “Never thought about it.”

“Let me enlighten you. If you go ketchup only, you’re considered a simple, dependable person.”

I hang my head dramatically. “Just what I wanted to hear. I’m boring as fuck.”

She laughs. “Okay, if you go with mustard, like Jasper here, you’re slightly unpredictable, adventurous, and bold.”

Jasper beams. Of course he gets the cool reading.

“And Ethan here, with the hot peppers, functions well in high-pressure situations.”

Jesus. She’s pretty spot on with us.

“And what does that mess you’re eating say about you?” I ask.

Saving the best for last.

“If you opt for ‘the works’, like I do, it means you’re a go-with-the-flow versatile thinker. You can handle anything that comes your way,” she says, holding her chin up with pride.

“Where’d you get this information, Ava?” I ask, laughing.

She rolls her eyes. “It was a story in *Glisten*. Couple months back. You guys should really read all the Bonded Crest mags. I mean, it’s part of our jobs, right?”

“I call bullshit,” I smirk.

She frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Ava, how many issues of *Sports Inc.* have you read? Please, enlighten me,” I tease.

A bright red blush explodes across her face. “Oh you know, I flip through the pages. To see what you’re covering and stuff.”

We guys look at each other, then back at Ava.

“That is one of the lamest lies I think I’ve ever heard,” Ethan laughs. “You wouldn’t read *Sports Inc.* if your life depended on it.”

Her mouth drops open in pretend indignation, then she doubles over laughing. “Oh my God. You got me. Okay, I take

back my criticism of your not reading *Glisten*. But really, guys, it's a great way to learn about women."

She thinks we need to learn about women?

She's about to learn something about guys.

LEO

AFTER MEANDERING along the one-and-a-half mile long High Line, stopping to admire the views as well as sneak looks into all the apartment windows a stone's throw away, we start to go our separate ways.

“See you guys at work tomorrow,” Ethan says, heading for the closest subway station. “And thanks for joining, Ava.” He waves over his shoulder and is gone.

Jasper, Ava, and I head back toward their apartment, which I only live a few blocks away from, the streets quiet and peaceful thanks to the late hour. I love the city like this.

“So, Ava, I’m guessing this is better than anything else you had planned today, eh?” asks Jasper.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says.

Jasper stops in his tracks. “*What?*”

The smirk on her face reveals she’s joking, but she continues with it. “Hotdogs and the High Line are fine. Ya know, a way to pass the day,” she says in a bored tone.

Jasper is on to her and continues playing along. “Hotdogs and the High Line are awesome. As is hanging out with me and my boys.”

He bangs his chest.

I jump in. “Ava, if it was so bad, we just won’t ever invite you again. No problem.”

She pouts, her lower lip extended in the most adorable way, and opens her eyes wide. “Really, Leo? You’d do that?”

Holy shit. Is she flirting?

I keep walking and shrug. “There are lots of women in New York who would love to spend the day with three dates, eating hotdogs, and walking the High Line. But if that’s not your thing, I get it. I mean, I’ll be sad, but I get it.”

Okay, I’m throwing the flirt back at her. See if she catches it. “Just tell me this was more fun than your other plans. The ones we talked you into cancelling.”

She wrinkles her brow, and I wonder if I’ve tipped her off. Said too much.

No. Impossible. No way would she think we’ve gone through her laptop and know about her... issue.

I’m not sure how we can help her without letting on what we know. As it is, I’m feeling kind of like a dick for being so disingenuous. I’m not a deceitful kind of guy. I wonder if we’ve entered territory we have no business being in.

We get to the corner where I peel off for my place, and the three of us stand there for a moment, while I figure out how to say goodbye to Ava.

Do I just walk away? Shake her hand? Hug her?

What am I to her, anyway? What are any of us guys to her?

Friends? Not exactly.

Coworkers? Not exactly.

So, I puss out with the most non-goodbye I can think of.

“See you later,” I say, and turn to go.

But before I can, she plants a fast kiss on my cheek. “Thank you for a fun day, Leo. I have a feeling this was all your idea.”

Gulp.

“We’ll do it again, won’t we, Jasper?” I say, hoping he’ll save me.

He throws his hands up like he’s exasperated. “Geez. You give Leo a kiss on the cheek, and I don’t get shit?” he says with a mischievous smile.

Ava laughs. “You’re my roommate. I think it’s against all the laws of nature for me to kiss you. Or you to kiss me back.”

Jesus, she’s flirting again. And I am so here for this.

Jasper puts his hands up. “Oh, that is so wrong. Roommates around the world kiss each other all the time.”

He looks at the two of us, serious as a heart attack. Then, a slow grin creeps across his face, as it does my own. I can’t help it.

Ava joins us and we all double over laughing.

She throws her hands up. “Okay. Fine. If you’re gonna be a pouty baby about it.”

She leans his way and gives him the same kiss she gave me.

Jasper smiles with exaggerated satisfaction. “That’s better. Thank you.”

We head in our different directions. I don’t know about Jasper, but if it wasn’t so goddamn corny, I’d touch the spot where she kissed me.

I touch it anyway. What a goddam pussy I am.

And if I’m honest, a pang of jealousy clawed at me when Ava kissed Jasper, even though it was in jest.

Which is beyond fucked up.

I have no claim over this woman. No right to feel like a possessive little bitch.

And now is she going to think we like her? I mean, *like her-like her?*

Which is ironic, because I know we’re all starting to have a thing for her. So maybe we’re not such a bunch of phony

assholes, pretending to like her in order to keep her out of the clutches of strangers.

I turn to watch Ava and Jasper, her light laughter bouncing through the evening air. To her, this is a fun little adventure. We're her buddies. And she's part of our gang.

To us? Well, I'm not sure I can answer that yet.

I keep walking and the streetlights come on, bathing the sidewalks in their yellow glow.

I doubt Ava is reading anything into our invitation today. And yet, I have this weird little hope, nagging the back of my mind, that she sees what nice guys we are and that, somehow, we could be more than friends.

AVA

“CAMI, I KISSED THEM.”

TV blaring on her end of the line, I hear her hoist herself out of her seat, where she’s probably watching a true crime story with Steve, and pad down a hallway. A door clicks and she’s in silence, the sound of the TV now barely audible.

“Kissed *who*?” she demands. “The Craigslist guy? Tell me everything! See, I knew my brilliant idea would work for you.”

I only have a couple minutes to talk since Jasper is out picking up Chinese food. I lower my voice anyway, even though he’s not here. He asked me if I wanted anything, but I opted not to join him for dinner. I... need some time to myself and besides, have to get back to filtering out my Craigslist dates. So far, with the number of dick pics I’ve gotten, it’s not been too hard. Those get immediately deleted, even though it doesn’t leave many to choose from. But hell, I only need one orgasm, right?

“No, Cam. I didn’t kiss the online guy. I never went out with him.”

“Huh? Then who are you talking about? Who did you kiss? You had a coffee date set up. What happened?”

I peek out my bedroom door to make sure I’m still alone, and decide to stand in the doorway so I can hear him coming.

I can't risk him hearing any of this. It would be disastrous if, one, he knew my terrible secret, and two, he knew the way I am attempting to solve it.

Or, the way Cami is attempting to solve it.

"Jasper—" I start to say.

A shriek flies from the other end of the line, momentarily deafening me. "No. Fucking. Way. I told you he was hot, Ava. Your roommate! Now that is fucking hot."

I take a breath to start when she interrupts me again.

"Holy shit, did you sleep with him too? Does he have a big dick?" she asks, her excitement growing.

"Cam, I'm trying to fill you in. Just listen."

Bedsprings squeak in the background, and I know she's sat her ass down. Now, hopefully, she'll be quiet and let me speak.

"As I was saying, I kissed Jasper and Leo, and Ethan kissed me at the senior center party he took me to. Just pecks on the cheek, but still. All three of them."

What I don't share with Cami is how freaking thrilling it was, and how that night I lay in bed, unable to sleep, wondering if I should pull out the new vibrator from Cool Vibes, a shop for adult toys and generally any 'pleasure product' you can imagine, where, coincidentally, I've been invited to speak.

That's right, me the sexpert, living for the big ruse.

When the clerk saw the name on my credit card, she about peed herself. She summoned over the manager and everyone else in the store and proudly introduced me. They were honored I was patronizing their store, looking for toys to get my groove on. I didn't have the heart to tell them I get tons at work for free, but that I can't bring myself to use them. It feels like someone is watching me.

Crazy, I know.

My new vibrator, however, remains in my nightstand in the bag I brought it home in. I suppose buying it was pretty much

an exercise in futility, anyway. I don't want Jasper to hear me buzzing away and besides, vibrators make me sore. Although that doesn't mean I'm not willing to try this one.

Hope springs eternal, yo.

Cami gasps. "Av, I have a good feeling about this. And you know how I get feelings about things."

I sure do. I remember well the first time she was convinced her husband was cheating and made me come with her to follow him all over town on errands. Turned out he was picking up flowers and food for a nice dinner—for *her*.

"Nothing will come of it, Cam. I just wanted to tell someone. It feels so... reckless."

"Oh my god, it's about time you let your hair down and live a little. You need to get your ho-bag on, girl. 'Cuz believe me, once you're married, there's no going back..."

She drones on about all she gave up to get married, while I organize my things for the next day. I go to put my laptop in my tote, but it's not on my bed where I left it. I look around and find it on a pile of books on my dresser.

That's funny. I could swear I left it on my bed.

Cripes. The pressure of my situation is getting to me. I can't even remember the smallest things.

"Hey, Cam, I think I hear Jasper returning—"

"Okay, okay, I just want to say, you're on a roll. A juicy roll, I should say."

She cackles at her own joke.

"I'm gonna run, Cam. Have a good night and thank you for listening."

"Oh, honey, I am here for you always. I'm gonna make sure you are well-taken care of if it's the last thing I do. In fact, one of Steve's cousins is coming to town next week and he's a nice enough guy..."

"Um, didn't I meet him recently?"

Cami pauses. “Oh. Yes, you did. Look I know he’s no Prince Charming, but he’s a nice man and you could give him a shot. Just don’t tell Steve because he gets weird about this kind of thing. I think his cousin has come to town before and hit on some of Steve’s female friends and then turned into a bit of a stalker. But just this once shouldn’t be so bad. Know what I mean?”

This is what I’m reduced to? A stalking cousin?

I had no idea I was this badly off, but if Cami’s pushing that loser cousin on me, well, times are truly desperate.

AVA

NEXT DAY AT WORK, Pain in the Ass stops by my cube. Again.

“Morning Pia,” I say.

“Hey, Ava. How’s everything going?” she asks like we’re best friends.

As if the time she showed photos of me drunk, making out with some stranger in a club, around the office, was a totally cool thing to do.

I look up, keeping my fingers poised over my keyboard as a hint that I’m busy.

It doesn’t work.

“All’s well, Pia.”

I don’t ask how she is. One, I’m not really interested, and two, I want to focus on my work.

She shrugs while her eyes scan everything on my desk, from my notes from our latest staff meeting to my calendar, to a draft of a future column I’m working on while I get my Big O problem straightened out. I have no doubt she’d try to read whatever’s on my computer screen if only she could sneak into my cube behind me.

She’s always been nosy and intrusive, but I get the feeling she’s looking for something in particular. And it’s leaving my

stomach unsettled. The woman is trouble, no two ways about it. She's not stopping by my desk to be nice. Of that, I'm sure.

And while her visit is unwelcome, it's also a sharp reminder that I'm on a mission, and there's no time to lose.

"Any updates on your assignment, Ava? The one on your first orgasm?" she asks in a sweet voice.

A fake-ass sweet voice.

Why the hell does she need to know, anyway? But I'm not going to poke a bear.

I force a smile. "Working on it, Pia. In fact, when I do have my first draft, maybe you could be the first to read it."

Over my dead body.

But they say to keep your enemies close and all that.

Again, her eyes dart between the things on my desk, and me.

A tremor runs up my spine. Does she know something she shouldn't? Why do her prying questions sound so suspicious?

Only one way to find out.

"Pia, can I ask why you keep checking in with me on this? I mean, you've never been this interested in any of my other assignments before."

The smile melts off her face at being put on the spot. "Oh, um, I just want to see... how you're approaching the subject. It's kind of intimate and personal and well, it will be interesting to read about your experience."

An idea pops into my head. Fight fire with fire.

"Tell me, Pia, what was your first orgasm like?"

Her eyes widen. "Oh, um, I think I hear my phone ringing. Gotta go."

Damn right.

"Hey, gorgeous."

Pia's spot is replaced by Lana, with Cami right behind.

“Hey guys.”

Lana leans over my cube wall, her blood-red nails perfectly manicured. “What was Pain in the Ass doing? Being her usual nosy self?”

I shake my head. “You know it. And her questions are making me very uneasy. It’s almost like she knows... something,” I say, looking around to make sure we aren’t overheard.

The nightmare of everyone knowing what a fraud I am churns in my stomach. I’m close to being exposed. I know it. The funny thing is, I love doling out advice and pretending I have it all figured out. But I’m as lost as anyone, and if anyone figures this out who shouldn’t, I’m in deep shit.

Danny-level deep shit. Bankers’ box and security guards level deep shit.

“Look, Ava. We all have our moments of self-doubt,” Lana says breezily.

Not true. Lana has not had a moment of self-doubt in her entire life.

“But don’t sell yourself short, honey. You’re amazing at what you do, and you’ve helped so many people.”

If only I could help myself.

“Thank you, Lana. Thank you to both of you. I am so lucky to have your support.”

Shit. And now I’m getting choked up.

“It’s true, Av,” Cami adds.

It may be true today, but if I’m found out, that I’ve been making up my ‘sexpertise’ all this time, I’m screwed.

Pursing her lips, Lana taps her nails on the cube wall. “You know, if you want to divert any attention from yourself, you could always shine the spotlight... elsewhere.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

She looks between Cami and me like she owns the world, which she kind of does. The woman has no end of confidence, as well as no end of I-don't-give-a-fucks.

“Let’s just say, I have some dirt on Pia. If she gets any closer, I can always put her in her place.”

Cami jumps up and down a little, straining to see over my cube wall. “Lana, spill it. What do you have on her? Oh my god, tell us.”

She’s almost frothing at the mouth.

Lana looks around like she’s sharing the recipe for a nuclear weapon. “Let’s just say her online dating history is... colorful. Now you know I’m the last person in the world to slut-shame anyone, but I have some incriminating screenshots that could put her in her place if they ever see the light of day.”

Cami slaps Lana on the arm. Hard.

“Ow, bitch,” she says, rubbing the spot where Cami hit her.

I have to hand it to Lana. She always knows what to do in a pinch. Freaking genius, she is.

“Well then, let’s keep her in check, shall we?” I say, the knots in my stomach beginning to unfurl.

I raise my cup of coffee to Lana as if in a toast and gulp the last swallow even though it’s now lukewarm. Determination surges through me. I can do this. I can handle this. And I’ll keep my career. No one can take it from me.

I’m not going to let the deadline of my article dampen my spirits, and if Pia gets too close to my secrets, I have a weapon to fend her off with. Yes, I am a hypocrite, but with the support of my girls, who without question have my back, I won’t be for much longer. My secret will be behind me, part of my past, no longer hanging over my head.

AVA

I POWER through the rest of the day like a boss, getting shit done and even outlining my first O column, leaving spots where I can fill in the detail—when I have the detail, that is. But even though I am laser-focused, I can't deny that the faces of Jasper, Ethan, and Leo keep interrupting my thoughts.

I had such a magical time with them, eating hotdogs and hanging out on the High Line. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun, laughing and just generally being goofy. And to think I was in the company of three of the most gorgeous men I'd ever met.

Who I initially I didn't even like.

Holy crap.

You'd never guess from looking at me that I had a little... problem.

Every time I stop to think about it, the cursor on my laptop blinks back at me like a laughing clown, mocking my lack of focus.

While I certainly liked kissing the guys, I can't help but wonder whether I am misleading them by returning their friendly overtures. Am I the kind of person to do this, use someone else for my own benefit?

And yet, I have so much at stake.

The doubts swirl around me like unwelcome guests. I have my desires. And I have my principles. Do the two have to be in conflict?

The guys are cool, no doubt about it. I enjoyed their attention—any woman would. And they enjoyed the attention I paid them. It was easy to see.

Fuck all.

I rest my elbow on my desk, dropping my head into my hand, while a headache circles like plane looking for a place to land. My thoughts are not only spinning, but also colliding like bumper cars, each pushing on each other to see which might win.

Could the guys help me with my problem? Would it be wrong to have them do so when I'm not really interested?

Am I really not interested?

“Hey, Ava. Finish your column yet?”

Jesus. Pia again. She's obsessed.

Guilt mingles with my frustration, but I smile like I don't have a care in the world. “Working on it, Pia.”

Her eyes glint with smug satisfaction. Something is definitely going on. “You'd better hurry then. We know how Glenda feels about people who miss their deadlines.”

“Actually, I don't, because I don't miss deadlines.”

“Well, you better get on it. I wouldn't want to see you miss out on yet another opportunity to prove yourself.”

Wait. *What?*

Did she just say what I thought she did?

What the fucking fuck?

My jaw clenches as I fight to urge to snap back at her or even better, wipe the smug off her face with my open palm. Instead, I take a deep breath and pretend I didn't notice the insult.

“Thank you for the reminder, Pia. Don’t know what I’d do without you. But hey, I gotta get back to work. Do you mind?” I chirp.

Her eyes widen at my polite blow-off. “Oh. Yeah. See ya.”

That night at home, the apartment’s quiet for a change. For some reason, Jasper has been home a lot lately, which is unusual for him. I don’t know where he is right now—out with his buddies, I assume—so I make a cup of mint tea and sit by the huge windows in front of our apartment, watching the street below.

The more I think about it, the more I think maybe, just maybe there was a spark between the guys and me. Could we all be more than friends? Could they be more than just solutions to my problem?

Then, the story of my ex rears its ugly head, highlighting my fear of another disastrous relationship. Wouldn’t it just be easier to stay friends with the guys?

The warmth of my tea works its way through me, and I promise myself to tread carefully through the challenges ahead.

As I hear Jasper return home on his roaring motorcycle, I take one more look at the sky, where the moon is the tiniest sliver. In the middle of a crazy place like New York, there is still beauty to appreciate, just like in the midst of uncertainty, I know I can keep my balance. For the longest time I’ve thought I just needed good sex.

Now I’m beginning to see I need much more.

JASPER

I'M PRETTY sure I'm coming down with the flu. Or something.

Try hot and feverish, add the ants that seem to be creeping up and down my arms, and I'm about to go out of my mind. I drive off the sensation by jogging in place, probably annoying the shit out of my downstairs neighbors, shaking my arms like I'm conducting a freaking orchestra or something. It's not working.

This is not good. The next couple weeks at work will be very, very busy. I have no time to be sick. No time for distractions.

And yet I can't get Ava's face out of my mind.

Dammit.

Here I am, the man-whore of all man-whores, the king of booty calls—with the exception of my horn-dog college buddy, Andy—and I want to spend an *evening at home*.

If he gets wind of this, he'll demand I have my head examined.

There's been a shift in recent weeks for me, a gradual change in my interests and priorities. A new outlook. It hasn't happened overnight, but rather crept up on me, unexpectedly. Sometimes it feels okay, like an old pillow you can't sleep without, and sometimes it's so damn uncomfortable I want to

tear my hair out. Like I'm hanging upside down. Like everything is backward. Like I have the flu. Or something.

Almost since I reached puberty, my name has been synonymous, at least among my friends, with hook-ups and other shenanigans involving women. The contact list in my phone is full of lovely ladies who I've met once or twice, had a great time with, and will likely never call again.

Why would I, especially in a place like Manhattan? There is no end to the supply of women to spend time with. I'm basically a kid in a candy shop.

And a bit of an asshole. I'll admit it.

It all started the day the guys and I spent with Ava. I still can't get over the light I saw her in that day, all chill and cute as shit, when previously I thought she was some buttoned up corporate climber who did nothing but work all the time.

Leo and Ethan were on the same page too. I could see it in their faces. So goddamn obvious.

Who would have thought a desire to help my buddy's little sister would get so... complicated? I mean, maybe it's not actually complicated, but there's something going on that I'm not sure I like. One bit.

Is this what shrinks call self-discovery or something? Not that I know about that crap. It's just that I picked up a copy of Ava's *Glisten* the other day and read some woo-woo garbage about changing your priorities from the person you are, to the one you want to be.

Or some shit like that.

I think I've stepped into a parallel universe where I've been reprogrammed to lose interest in the allure of my usual escapades. I'm not saying I've been reborn as a saint or anything—that's just not possible—but the appeal of my wild nights out on the town, the endless conquests, the challenge of getting into some girl's pants, is fading.

Which is why I think there may be something wrong with me.

I first noticed, as my coworkers undoubtedly did, when some of the guys in the office were tossing around stupid jokes about women's sports. I used to be one of the loudest voices, cracking jokes without a second thought. But this time, for some inexplicable reason, my coworkers' smug faces irritated the shit out of me, rubbing me the wrong way until I didn't see a damn thing funny about what they were saying.

It was like a switch flipped in my brain, and I shut all those loud mouths down, telling them to back off with their shit talk.

Yeah, me, the guy who's the worst of them, who used to laugh as if dumping on women's sports was no big deal, suddenly standing up for women athletes and the issues they face, not least of which is their shitty and inequitable pay.

I don't know who was more shocked, the guys at the magazine, or me. They immediately stopped flapping their gums and returned to their desks, mumbling what I can only imagine under their breaths.

A week ago, I would have done the same.

Leo came up to me afterwards. "You feeling okay, man?" he asked, patting my shoulder.

I put my head in my hands, confused as anyone by my behavior. "I... I think I need some time, Leo. Thanks for asking."

Dammit, Ava.

She's like a goddamn magnet sucking at my soul and the crazy thing is, she doesn't even try. She's not even aware.

Completely oblivious.

She kills me with the way she glows when she talks about her work, rambling on about *Glisten*, which I once made the mistake of making fun of. What an ass I was, to crap on someone's passion.

And when I stuck my foot in my mouth, do you think she kicked my ass, like she probably should have? No, she just smiled quietly and explained I should spend some time reading the magazine before I jump in with my put-downs. After all,

it's the top-earning publication at Bonded Crest and the number one women's magazine in the U.S., so what the fuck do I know.

Not a goddamn thing, it seems.

I'd been called out without being called out. That takes skill.

The lamest of clichés is running through my head, but could she possibly be making me a better person?

They said it couldn't be done. That I was an unapologetic womanizer, man about town, and that the only way I'd change is if one of the babes I spent time with finally got under my skin.

Has that happened? And I haven't even slept with Ava.

Not that I would. Big brother Andy and all.

I've never been one to crave the comfort of home, a place that meant nothing more to me than somewhere to keep my shit and rest my head at night. I've never owned a fork or knife or even a bowl, because I didn't need them. On any night I wasn't eating out, I'd get carry out. Problem solved.

I can barely boil fucking water.

Anything more adult, requiring more responsibility, is a foreign concept, locked away in a vault that may never be opened. But those late nights out, all those seductions—what were they for? Sure, I got off, but half the time I had no idea of the girl's name, nor where she was from, nor what she did for a living.

Is Ava responsible for this, a silent, stealthy wrecking ball breaking down the world I've so carefully constructed, and everything that's so ingrained in my identity? The thought of my former self seeping away, like a handful of sand slipping through fingers, terrifies me.

I'm fucking freaking out here.

Is this what I want, some new version of myself, which I seem to be heading toward? Or will I slip back into my old, comfortable ways?

It would be easy, so easy to just go back.

The crazy thing is that while I want to help Ava with her uncharted territory, it's like I've been dragged into my own.

JASPER

“HEY, AVA, HOW’S IT GOING?” Ethan calls from the sofa where we’re both settled in with beers and spicy chicken wings, watching a college game neither of us is very interested in.

It’s not lost on me that the moment we hear her key in the lock, Ethan straightens up his posture, pushes his hair back out of his face, and plasters on a shit-eating grin.

If he thinks he can cock-block me, he needs to think again.

“Yo, Av, how’s it hanging?” I call, trying to sound all casual and shit but probably coming off as a major douchebag.

“Oh, hi guys,” she says, barely looking our way. “I have some work to do. I’ll be back in my room, okay?”

And she’s gone.

Womp-womp.

I’m not taking this sitting down. Literally.

I pop to my feet and head down the hall toward her room, where I lightly rap my knuckles on the door.

“Av, we have some chicken wings left. Why don’t you have a few before you settle into work. You know you need to eat, right?”

Fuck, that sounds desperate.

But her door flies open anyway, and there she stands, already changed into some tattered yellow gym shorts and a skimpy little tank top. “Sure, let me just get my robe.”

Hmmm. I have always wondered what she has on under that robe she wears around the house.

Moments later, she takes a seat across from Ethan and me and dives into the wings like a starving man. Seriously. In seconds, her hands and face are covered with the spicy barbeque sauce that makes most people’s eyes water.

“Oh my god, this is so good. And the spice level is perfect,” she moans, licking her fingers clean.

I’ll be damned. I did not see that coming.

I head to the kitchen and return with a damp paper towel for her hands. But instead of giving it to her, I take her fingers and wipe them clean myself.

She goes silent, an incredulous stare on her face.

Just what I wanted. Catch her off guard.

Fuck, I’m an asshole.

When her hands are clean, I let my touch linger on her arm, our gazes meeting. There’s no doubt I’m making a move on her. It couldn’t be more obvious.

I glance over at Ethan, who gives me a nearly-imperceptible nod, daring me to keep going. Not that I need any encouragement.

The surprise on Ava’s face is not unexpected, not at all. I can see the wheels turning in a war between her possible interest, and messing around—whatever that means—with me, her roommate.

Not to mention his buddy over on the sofa watching.

To be fair, I’m conflicted too. On one hand, I can barely stop thinking about the woman. I can’t deny or ignore that. But on the other, I value our developing friendship and don’t want to piss off her older brother, especially on an uncertain course of action like this.

But something about her makes me want to take that risk, and not only because I know she's never had an orgasm.

"Such a beautiful woman," I say quietly, dragging a rough thumb up her inner arm.

When I reach the sensitive part just before her elbow crease, she gasps, her skin exploding into goose bumps. Her lips part slightly as I place my free hand on her inner thigh where her robe has fallen open. She's warm and soft and I'm a liar if I don't admit things are waking up below the belt for me.

Down, boy.

"Ethan," I say in a low growl, "get over here and help make Ava feel good."

Her eyes open wide as Ethan takes her other arm and mirrors my movement. Then she drops her head back just enough to expose her long, lush neck.

I jump at the opportunity to brush my lips over her gorgeous skin, and when I reach the shell of her ear, she sighs, almost imperceptibly, and fuck, now I'm so hard it's painful.

Ethan moves in on her other side, our eyes meeting briefly. I have no doubt he's wondering the same thing I am... is she going to send us packing, and if so, when. But so far, so good.

She looks at Ethan and me, and then I do something stupid. Really stupid.

I fall in *like*.

I could say love. But I won't. I don't fall in love. It's not my thing.

There's an openness in her eyes I don't think I've seen in any of the women I've been with, and when she bites her bottom lip, just enough to drive me over the top insane, I take her mouth in a hard kiss.

She wraps one hand around my neck and keeps her other in Ethan's grasp. Her fingers weave through the mess that is my hair and I inhale her scent, clean and fresh just like the body wash she keeps in her shower, which I smelled one day

when I was snooping. Under other circumstances, I might be taking a woman like this to my bedroom right now.

But there's nothing normal about this, not least of which is that it's not just the two of us, but rather three.

Sorry, Leo.

I press her to me and her heart is beating so hard I can feel it against my own chest, and her curious tongue is exploring mine. Fuck, I want to take off her clothes and properly see her in all her glory.

But there's time for that.

I gently pull back from our kiss and cup her face. "Pretty girl. We can't be leaving Ethan out in the dark now, can we?"

I figure she'll either slap me—or both of us—across the face and bail, or she'll realize she's with two guys who worship her.

And want to do naughty things to her.

I'm betting on the latter.

AVA

HOLY SHIT.

I'm making out with two guys.

Two.

At work, Lana brags about her threesomes—and moresomes—but I've never really considered something like that for myself. While it seems sexy and all, it also sounds like a lot of work, and I've never been convinced the payoff would be there. Like, is it worth the trouble? All those dicks and just one vagina.

So clinical.

Maybe that attitude's my problem. One of several.

I haven't kissed anyone since I was dumped. It's kind of unbelievable, because it's been a few months now, but there's been no one. Big fat zero love life, and I've been fine with it. Funny for a sex and relationship columnist, but that's me.

Not that anyone is aware of that. Of course, thanks to my last column, everyone in the world knows about my 'placeholder' story, and no one has seen me with a guy since. But they are blissfully unaware that's how I plan to keep it for the foreseeable future.

It's kind of like everything below the belt had gone on strike and just ain't coming back anytime soon.

Not that any of that had worked that well for me, anyway. Some might think it's sad, but I'm okay with it. I have my friends, career, a fabulous apartment in Manhattan, and lots to keep me busy.

But now, kissing these two guys, as bad an idea as it probably is, is waking up something inside me. There are no fireworks, nothing like that. But the tingling in my stomach, which I haven't felt in a long, long, time, is emerging like a bear after its winter slumber.

And it's growing stronger. With a fistful of my hair in his grip, Ethan tilts my head and slides his tongue into my mouth. I lean back into Jasper for balance, and when his hands move up to my breasts, I don't stop him. I know I should. Nothing good can come of this.

I don't, though, because it feels so damn nice.

"Fuck..." Ethan moans into my mouth.

While I realize I only just started kissing these guys, I can already say it was never as hot as this with my ex. Sure, we did everything, but it was rote. He'd go down on me for a couple minutes, I'd suck his dick for a couple, then he'd get on top of me and pump away in his frantic-rabbit fashion. He'd finish, go shower, and that was that.

Somehow, I don't think these guys operate that way. Not that I'll ever know. We're just playing around with some harmless kissing. No big deal. No opportunity for regrets or anything like that.

Small fry stuff.

But the longer Ethan kisses me, the harder my heart thumps in my chest, and when I weave my fingers through his hair, my nails lightly scratching the base of his scalp, a low rumble vibrates in his throat. He's soft but greedy at the same time, and I am fucking loving it.

He stops for a breath, and I turn back to Jasper. This time, I remove his glasses, because the first time I kissed him the damn things fogged up. Now that I can see his eyes without obstruction, I'm struck by their piercing beauty. I put one hand

behind his neck and another on his chest, and behind me Ethan not only continues gripping my hair, but also places his fingers gently but firmly around my throat, pushing me further into Jasper. Nudging my hair aside, he brushes his lips against the back of my neck.

Holy fucking shit.

The stubble on Jasper's face scrapes my sensitive skin, but in a good way, waking up my too-long dead sensuality. The wetness between my legs is making its way to my PJ shorts, begging for some kind of relief.

The kind of relief I never get.

So while I am sandwiched between two of the most beautiful men I've ever known, sinking into the heady luxury of it, there is that nasty, nagging voice in the back of my head warning me... slow down, take it easy.

Are you a goddamn idiot?

And when someone's—I'm not sure whose—fingers reach the inside of my upper thigh on the way to wetsville, that voice, the one I really wish would leave me the hell alone, screams from the top of its lungs into my sensitive ears, *cut this shit out*.

I abruptly stand, almost knocking Jasper off his chair, and gather my robe around me. I wipe their touch off me like they'd left invisible slime and step out of their reach.

"I... I need to get back. Um, bye..." I say, and speed walk to my room, looking over my shoulder to see them thrown off by my hasty exit.

I lean my back against my bedroom door after locking it like some sort of criminal is chasing me. The truth is, I can't risk one of the guys trying to talk me out of my departure. I'm not sure I'll be able to stick to my guns at cutting off our little play session. The locked door may make me think before I pull it open and welcome them to my bed.

But I don't have to worry about that. No one comes to my door. In fact, I hear the TV shut off, muffled voices, and then the front door open and close. Standing behind my bedroom

curtains, I watch the guys' backs as they walk down the street, hands in pockets, like nothing ever happened.

It was probably nothing to them.

I need it to be nothing to me too. But I'm afraid it might not be.

AVA

“AVA, HOW ARE YOU?” Leo asks, joining me in the elevator.

“Oh hey, Leo.”

Shit. Did the guys tell him about me? About what we did?

If so, he isn't letting on.

“You have a good day?” he asks, facing forward, watching the illuminated numbers above the doors go from twenty to nineteen to eighteen...

I face forward after a courteous glance in his direction.

Elevator rules, you know.

“Oh yeah. Great. And you?”

No one else is speaking. They're just looking ahead, pretending not to hear us.

“Yeah. Real good. Just taking a little dinner break right now. I have to get back to work later, got a ton of stuff to do,” he says.

The elevator doors finally open and the humanity that had been bottled up inside the stifling little car explodes into the lobby of the building, scattering in every direction.

Leo and I move toward the building's side exit, my usual door.

Is it his too? Or is he just politely walking me out?

Before we reach it, he stops and puts his hands on his slim waist. Tilting his head, he furrows his brow like he's thinking very hard about something very serious.

“Say, Ava, want to join me in a beer?”

Oh. Well.

“I... I, um, okay,” I fumble.

Why did I just say yes? I don't want to join him for a beer. I just want to go home and drown in a bucket of ice cream.

Yes, I am still freaking over my little make out session with Ethan and Jasper. I know we're all consenting adults and stuff, but I really should not have done that.

Funny, a sex columnist feeling shame for messing around with two hot guys.

That's how freaking lame I am.

At our usual daily gripe session, I filled Cami and Lana in on my news. They were so excited you'd think I'd won the lottery. Maybe in some ways I had.

“Your first threesome,” Lana said proudly. “The first of many.”

I shook my head. “Oh, I don't think so—”

“Don't be stupid, Ava. This is the chance of a lifetime. You don't have to freaking marry them,” Cami added.

Her words echo in my brain as I follow Leo several blocks to an old Irish bar that, in spite of myself, has me charmed from the moment we walk in.

The odor of old stale beer and long-ago smoked cigarettes is steeped in the seams of the bar, and instead of being grossed out, something about it is quaint. Settling onto a barstool, I look around while my eyes adjust to the dim light. Everything is dark polished wood, and the walls are hung with illuminated signs for various beers. An old timer, seated at the end of the bar, nods in our direction, and the bartender greets us by

tossing a couple paper coasters on the nicked-up wood we're resting our elbows on.

"Hey, Leo," he says. "The usual?"

"Please. And what would you like, Ava?" he asks, turning to me.

I look over at what seems like a hundred bottles of liquor on the wall and decide to keep it simple. "White wine, please."

"Love this place," Leo says, looking around fondly.

"Do you come here a lot?" I ask. "Is that how the bartender knows you?"

He nods. "Yeah. I work late a lot so often come here for a beer and burger break. Then I go back. My apartment is only about five blocks in the other direction, so when I have nothing going on, I often end up here, anyway."

It's so funny. New York is full of Irish bars. But I never go in them. I figured they're for an older, crustier clientele. But it's clear that in looking around, nothing could be further from the truth.

First chance I get, I'm dragging Cami and Lana here. They'll protest at first, because places like this aren't chic, but I don't care. We could all broaden our horizons.

"You should get a burger. They're killer here," he says, pointing at one fresh out of the kitchen on its way to some lucky customer.

God, he's not kidding. Cheddar cheese drips off the meat onto the bun and plate below it, and my stomach growls, protesting the lonely little side salad I had for lunch.

"Are you getting one?" I tease.

He looks at me, eyebrows raised, like I'm crazy for even asking.

Enough said.

Not ten minutes later, our own steaming burgers and fries are delivered before us. First thing I do is pop a fry in my

mouth and while it's hot as hell, I can't help but moan over its salty, greasy deliciousness.

"So, Leo," I ask after we've had a few bites each—that's how good these damn things are— "why do you work so much? It seems you're always there late and stuff."

He thinks for a moment, not saying anything. Did I pry too deeply?

He shrugs. "Guess I'm a bit of a workaholic."

Sounds like there's a story there.

"Okay," I ask, washing down a bite of my burger with a swing of white wine. "Why are you a workaholic? I mean, no one loves their work that much."

"How do you know I don't?" he asks, laughing.

I roll my eyes at him. "C'mon. You can't fool me."

Holy shit. Am I flirting with this guy?

"There's a story behind that perfectly coiffed hair. I know it," I say.

Shit. I'm definitely flirting.

Smirking, he runs his fingers through his hair. "My hair's never been called 'coiffed' before. I must be dining with someone from a famous fashion magazine."

And... he's flirting back.

"Why, yes, you are. I am a famous someone from a famous magazine. It's nice to meet you."

Leo looks at me, like *really* looks at me, and while I don't know what's running through his mind, I know it's something good, and that he's enjoying my company.

For the second day in a row, my heart thumps against my chest as I sit next to one of the best-looking men I've ever met, from his Harry Styles' perfect hair to his chiseled cheekbones.

Hell, he's so good-looking, he's almost pretty.

He slides his empty plate back and swivels his bar stool to face me. "I am what's known as a 'scholarship kid.' Ever

heard of that?”

“Yeah. Sure. Lots of kids get scholarships,” I say.

He nods. “True. True. And not everyone takes advantage of the incredible opportunities the scholarship world provides.”

Getting the picture here.

“I take it you did?”

He gives a small laugh, looking down on his hands. “You’re damn right I did. Still am. When you get opportunities like I’ve gotten, only a fool would throw them away. It’s ingrained in me now. I’ve worked so hard to get where I am, I don’t know how to stop.”

Admiration swells through me. I place my hand on his and squeeze lightly. I can’t help myself.

His palm turns and he slowly weaves his fingers through mine, and all of a sudden, the tingly feeling of the night before, when I kissed Ethan and Jasper, is back.

Cripes. What am I doing, messing around with these guys?

The tingling increases when Leo inches closer to me and I know in a split second, there’s no way in hell I’m going to make him stop.

He takes a deep breath, hesitating before speaking, like he’s about to share something really important. “A teacher, who I’ll never forget, told me education is the best way out of poverty. I’d never been much interested in school up to that point—I wasn’t a bad kid, just into low-level mischief, going nowhere fast. But this teacher’s words, well, they changed me. I buckled down and never looked back. Stopped hanging around with my trouble-making friends. They didn’t like that and I got beaten up a couple times, which made me that much more determined. I had a mission and was obsessed with it. I got into photography. Now I’m saving to put my little brother through college.”

Goosebumps float up my spine as Leo’s story unfolds, and I hold his hand, like really hold it, that’s how honored I am

he's sharing with me. "So that's why you work all the time. You don't want to lose what you labored so hard for."

"Exactly," he says, staring at our intertwined fingers. "Although... right now, I don't much feel like going back to work." He looks from my eyes to my lips and back.

I take a shallow inhale, because that's all I am capable of in this moment. "What *do* you feel like doing?"

AVA

“YOU KNOW HOW TO *PAINT*?” I gasp, looking around Leo’s apartment, a combination bachelor pad, art gallery, and fine arts studio.

I’m stunned. That’s the only way I can describe it.

He smiles proudly and even puffs his chest out a little. He’s *different* in this space. Lighter, somehow. Happier too, I think. The hard-driving workaholic photographer I’m getting to know seems not to exist here.

“It’s my guilty pleasure. When I was studying photography, I also took a couple art classes and fell in love with painting. I don’t have much time to do it these days, but I still take classes once a week.”

More I don’t know about this man.

“Do the guys know, Ethan and Jasper?” I ask, taking in the giant canvases covering almost every inch of his walls.

They’re seriously amazing, these paintings, brilliant colors splashed on the canvases in seemingly random patterns, that all make sense when you stand back for a moment and just look.

He laughs, glancing down at his shuffling feet. I love that he’s modest, so unlike other guys in the city. “Nah. They don’t know. This is just for me, really. Well, I guess you know now too.”

I take a step closer to him. “What’s it worth to you, my keeping your secret?”

He pushes a coil of hair behind my right ear and leans to brush his lips just under it. “A lot. You wanna know how much?” he whispers.

Oh god. My eyes fall closed, and I am melting into a continuation of the previous night’s lust. Once again, an annoying voice in the back of my mind admonishes me for going home with Leo, as if I didn’t know exactly what was going to happen.

But this time, I am ignoring it.

What changed between last night and this evening? I’m not sure I can say, except I had all day to realize I wasn’t sorry I kissed the guys. For heaven’s sake, I’m a grown-ass woman and write about sex and relationships every day. If I can’t take a risk, how can I expect anyone else to?

I am on a mission, it’s true, and why not try to reverse my lousy fortune with a nice guy I know rather than some rando from the internet? Yeah, I’m taking a chance here, but I take a freaking chance every time I cross a New York street.

Armed with a sudden burst of conviction, I run my fingers over Leo’s chest. The mountains and valleys of his hard muscles expand when he takes a deep breath in between the kisses he’s showering my neck with, and when my hand ventures lower, to the waistband of his jeans, he moans quietly.

This is crazy. I’m getting cozy—well, more than cozy—with someone I’ve only recently met, who’s friends with my roommate, and who also happens to work for the same parent company I do, naturally in the same building.

If this goes south, will I be embarrassed to see him for all eternity? Will I need to pretend I don’t know him in the elevator, and cross to the other side of the lobby when he comes to work in the morning?

Fuck that. Not going there. At least not right now.

No, right now is about feeling good with this man who trusts me enough to share his personal story.

I tuck my fingertips into the waistband of his jeans, using them as leverage to pull myself closer. That's when our lips meet, and for a moment I am soaring on a cloud where everything is beautiful and perfect, and life exists without a worry or concern.

I'm not letting that go, dammit.

He tastes my lips, his tongue sliding between them, slowly and seductively, like time doesn't exist, like he no longer has to go back to work, tonight or maybe ever.

I am falling, losing myself in his smell, the way he feels, even the sound of his breath. I don't think I've ever been this turned on. I know for sure I never was with my ex.

This is rich and luxurious and I deserve it.

"C'mon," Leo says, taking me by the hand. He kicks aside a couple socks on the floor, and we step over paint brushes and canvases to get to his bedroom, a tiny box of a room filled by his large bed. The saving grace is that it's in the corner of the building and is full of huge windows.

"The light in here is amazing," I breathe.

"Yeah. That's why I chose the place. I knew it would be great for my painting," he says, unzipping the back of my shift dress and letting it fall to the ground.

There I am, standing in front of him, in my heels, bra, and panties. His eyes rove unabashedly over my body as he takes me in, a small smile on his lips.

"Wow," he says, shaking his head.

He reaches for my hand and I swear, I've never felt so beautiful or desired. I have a good feeling about this, not least of which may be the solution to my longstanding problem.

He lays me back on the bed, pushing my knees apart, then up and over his shoulders. My heels come down on his back and he doesn't seem to notice, so intent he is on the pink lace between my legs, barely concealing the throbbing wetness he's about to discover.

He presses his face there and takes a long inhale, groaning lightly as he does it again. His tongue laps against the thin fabric, and I want to tear it off so he can get to my bare flesh, my flesh that is begging for attention and the release that might follow.

Please. Please let this be the night.

“Goddamn, you smell good, pretty girl. I think I’m gonna slide these down rather than rip them off, which I’d really like to do, but they’re just too pretty. You okay with that, Ava?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Once I’m bare, he runs his tongue along the groove between my lips, from top to bottom and back, settling on the bud of my clit. I reach my arms to gather fistfuls of his comforter for something to hold onto. I would slide right off the end of the bed if he weren’t right there.

Pressure builds between my legs in a way it never has before, like all the blood’s rushing to my sex, igniting every nerve down there with tiny explosions. I know this is what happens when an orgasm is building, I know about all the sex stuff, for cripe’s sake and I try not to hope too hard that the big one is on the horizon for me. I’m not sure why tonight of all nights, with this man of all men, things are different, but they are.

I’m not complaining.

I lift my hips to grind into Leo’s face, and he moans into me, the vibrations adding to the excitement. I look down to watch and his eyes meet mine. I know what’s happening, or what is about to happen, as I begin to pound my fists on the bed, my head thrashing, it takes a second to realize it’s my voice I’m hearing, the boisterous sounds of great sex. That’s me, dammit, and an unfamiliar wave washes over me, followed by another, and another, and my mind goes blank, my body nothing more than my exploding sex, and that’s when I realize I’m having my first Big O.

AVA

HOLY SHIT. It was all they said it would be and more. I like this orgasm thing. I want to do it again.

And again.

Right now.

Holy fuck. Now I know why people scream ‘God’ during sex.

I am cured! My problems are gone. I can breathe again. My life is back on track, I’m no longer a big old fake, and my career and reputation are no longer in danger.

And best of all, I have confirmation there’s nothing wrong with me.

Now for the awkward part. I mean, do I thank Leo? Praise him? Or pretend this is business as usual for me?

I choose the latter.

Leo gently removes my heels and eases me up on the bed until my head hits a pillow. He strips down to his boxers and stretches out next to me, putting an arm around me and hoisting my head onto his chest.

Holy mother of God this feels good.

He doesn’t have to do any of this faux-romance stuff, though. I mean, I’m under no illusion that we’re some sort of

couple, where he eats my pussy every day until I can't speak any more.

I'm not sure how to tell him this, so I don't. Which is just as well because I can't speak yet anyway. I just wrap my arms around his hard body and inhale his warm, spicy scent, feeling like I won a billion-dollar lottery, as if for a moment in time, he is mine and I am his, we're in love, and it will last forever and ever.

Just to pretend, because sometimes pretending is fun.

I'm part of the club now, the club I could never get into. I've joined the ranks of women who have hot sex that culminates in mind-blowing orgasms.

Turns out, maybe there is a God, after all. Or should I say goddess?

Leo taps my shoulder with his fingers. Crap. Do we have to talk now?

"Hey, Ava, there's something I need to tell you."

Talk about snapping someone right out of their post-orgasmic bliss, although I'm not sure there's anything Leo could say to spoil the moment.

But there's something hesitant in his voice that's setting off a warning bell or two.

Nah. Can't be anything big. Or can it?

Is he married?

Engaged?

Secretly gay and just wanted to try out a walk on the wild side?

I clear my throat. "Uh huh. Sure. Let me have it," I say all cool and casual, hoping he doesn't sense the adrenaline coursing through me that's insisting it's time to get dressed and get the hell out.

He pauses, then sighs. "The guys and I, you know, Jasper and Ethan, um, well, I feel I should tell you that we know... well, we know."

Know *what*? What the hell is he talking about?

I push myself up on an elbow to see him. “What do you mean? What do you *know*?”

My stomach sinks when I find him avoiding my eyes.

What the fuck?

“We... well, we accidentally saw on your computer some emails or something about not being able to have an orgasm, and how distressing that is. We wanted to help, so that’s why we’ve been, you know, coming around.”

The earth stops moving and the air is gone out of the room. I am paralyzed, and I want to give back the stupid orgasm he just gave me. I want to pretend I never met him, or Ethan, or Jasper. That I never moved to New York and took a job as a sex and relationship columnist, and that I stayed behind in the small town where I grew up instead of being too big for my britches and thinking I could make my mark on the Big City.

I *am* a fraud.

And if these guys know, who else does?

I twist out of his embrace and with my back to him, pull my panties on and climb into my dress.

He is still speaking, but his voice is like a mosquito buzzing in the background because I don’t really hear what he is saying, except for the word ‘sorry,’ and something about feeling it’s best to be ‘honest.’

I’d rather he and the guys be dead, given the choice.

I stumble toward the door, Leo calling after me, and pull it closed. When I get to the street, I put my sunglasses on even though it’s dark outside because I desperately need some sort of shield, some sort of protection against the outside world, and I don’t know any other way to find it.

ETHAN

I GET to work and find Jasper and Leo in my office, kicking back like they often do.

“Guys, my day is busy as fuck. While I enjoy a welcoming committee, it’s time to hit the road.”

Groaning, they push themselves to their feet and make for the door.

I stop them at the last minute. “Hey, hold up for a sec,” I call.

“Yeah?” Jasper asks. “What’s up?”

“Guys, I just saw Ava in the elevator, and the look she gave me, well, let’s just say a lesser man would have run away screaming. She seriously looked at me like if we were in the elevator alone and she had a weapon, I’d be taking my last breaths. What the hell is up with her?”

“No idea. I left the apartment before she did this morning so I didn’t see her,” Jasper says.

We look at Leo.

Shit. He knows something.

Leo would be the world’s worst poker player. The guy is just too goddamn honest, and his expression gives away almost every thought he has.

Shuffling his feet, he looks down. If this weren't serious shit, I'd laugh—he looks like a kid about to get in trouble.

“Um, well, I was gonna tell you guys over lunch, but, um, Ava and I, you know, did some stuff yesterday. Last night, actually.”

Jasper's eyes widen. “Seriously? Way to go, man. But why would she be giving Ethan the stink eye? What's up with that?”

I'm happy for Leo, the guy hardly ever lets loose, he works so much. But by the way he's avoiding our gaze, and I have a feeling something didn't go according to plan.

“Leo?” I say, drawing out each letter of his name. “Do you have something to tell us?”

He mumbles under his breath.

“Can't hear you, Leo,” Jasper says.

“I told her we know. You know, about her... problem.”

Oh fuck.

Not good.

“Guessing she didn't take it well?” I ask.

Just a guess.

Leo rubs his hands over his face. “Yeah, no. She left without a word. Like she was freaking catatonic or something.”

Jasper looks out my window like he either might jump, or jump and take Leo with him. Fortunately, neither is possible, only because the windows don't open.

I check the time on my computer. I have a call, a very important call in five minutes. I need to prepare. But all I can think about now is what must have been running through Ava's head in the elevator earlier.

Like what a fucking asshole I am.

Jasper and Leo too.

“Well,” I say slowly, falling into my ‘corporate speak,’ like I do when the stress is building and I need to get it under control. “I want to say we can remedy this so everyone walks away happy. But we’re going to have to reconvene later because I have a meeting *now*.”

Jasper and Leo look at me like I’m a total douche, but I wave them out the door of my office so I can do some of my famous wheeling and dealing that brings in money and keeps these guys—and me—employed.

A few hours later, I’m leading the guys on a long walk to a new lunch place. It’s my turn to choose and I’m on a mission.

We settle into a booth at a Brazilian steakhouse, and the servers surround us with their skewers of meat.

I point to some tasty-looking rare steak, and in moments, my plate is piled high with it.

“Eth, this place is great, but why did you drag us all the way here?” Leo asks. “There’s a Brazilian place much closer to work.”

“Yeah, man,” Jasper adds, “I’m taking a cab back to the office after this.”

“Guys, we had to come to a place where neither Ava nor any of her *Glisten* coworkers would ever come,” I say.

Most of the women at *Glisten* eat carrot sticks for lunch, maybe springing for something crazy like a Cobb salad when they’re celebrating their birthday. The chance of any of them ever stepping foot in a Brazilian steakhouse was pretty freaking slim. Still, I couldn’t risk it.

“The way I see it is that we have to act fast. Since big-mouth Leo here spilled the beans—”

“Hey that’s not fair. I did the right thing—” he protests.

Jasper holds his hands up. “I don’t know, Leo. The bottom line is that Ava is hurting right now, and she wouldn’t be if you’d kept your mouth shut.”

Leo presses his lips together, his face getting red. “That’s bullshit. I like her, and I’m not being dishonest with her from

the start.”

We’re silent for a moment. Leo got right to the crux of the matter. If we’d let Ava know we were in on her secret, but didn’t give a damn about her, we wouldn’t care how she’s feeling today. We wouldn’t care that she probably wishes a hole in the ground would open up and swallow us whole.

But we *do* care, and it’s high time we had a conversation about it.

I get it. I do. Ava’s humiliated, pissed, and exposed. Maybe even deceived. If I were her, I might feel the same. But what she doesn’t know is that we acted out of genuine concern. And speaking for myself, genuine interest, as well.

How do you communicate that to someone who looks at you like they want to stab you in the eye?

ETHAN

“HEY, AVA,” Jasper says, rapping his knuckles on her bedroom door, “Ethan, Leo, and I would like to talk to you.”

Nothing.

I step up to the closed door, but Leo pushes me aside.

Damn.

“Ava,” he says quietly, “I know I hurt you with what I told you the other night. I’m sorry. We all are and would like to talk to you about it.”

Still no response.

And then I lose it. I slam my open palm on Ava’s door. “Goddammit, Ava, open the door so we can have a conversation like grownups!” I yell.

Leo’s eyes are wide, and Jasper’s looking down at his feet, shaking his head like I really just messed up.

But I haven’t. Look, I’m in sales, and am damn good at what I do. I know people, I understand them, and I know how to handle them.

A few seconds later, in the silence, I hear bare feet padding toward the other side of the door. The lock clicks and Ava eases it open just enough to see a sliver of her face.

“What, Ethan?” she snaps.

“We need to talk,” I say, tempted to wedge my foot into the door opening.

She closes her eyes and sighs. “Why can’t you guys just leave me alone. I had my orgasm, which I’m sure Leo here told you all about. His big conquest. So, I’m good. Don’t need you anymore.”

Holy crap. What an asshole I am. It never occurred to me that *she* was using *us*.

I respect that.

Jasper inserts himself. “Please come talk to us. Look, we’re roommates, for cripe’s sake. We gotta clear the air. I don’t want to be afraid to come home because you’re going to stab me to death in my sleep. You know?”

Okay, that got her. The tiniest sliver of a smile crooks up one corner of her mouth, revealing that damn adorable dimple. She pulls the door open all the way.

“Just so you know, talking about this does not mean I won’t stab you in your sleep,” she says, chin up.

We follow her to the living room, and damn if she doesn’t take the same chair she was in the other night when Jasper and I kissed her.

And now it’s hard to think, goddammit.

“I’m not gonna beat around the bush, Ava. What we learned about you was an accident, but we took that information to heart. We wanted to protect you. We saw you were considering Craigslist hook-ups and, well, your big brother is my best friend. I couldn’t let you do that to yourself. If you needed help with a certain... issue, we had to see what we could do,” Jasper says.

“And from the sounds of it, Leo... made it all happen,” I add.

Leo smiles proudly, but Ava’s glare wipes it right off his face.

Yeah, not out of the doghouse yet.

“Ava, we’d like to start over with you. We want to get to know you better and for you to know us better. We’re good guys, we are, truly,” Jasper says.

Never thought I’d see him eat humble pie. Or any of us, really. This woman’s made quite the impact on us.

It would probably be better to let sleeping dogs lie. Like, just forget any of this ever happened, that we discovered Ava’s issue, that we ever kissed her, and more. In time, we’d forget the whole thing, which would blow over and maybe even provide a few laughs down the road. Or, maybe Ava will hate us forever. It’s up to her if she wants to do that. We can only apologize so many times.

But I have to say, the hurt on her face is twisting my insides. I’m a crusty bastard, short tempered and quick to draw, but even I am hurt for Ava. No one could look at her face and feel otherwise, even a grumpy jerk like myself.

She looks at her nails. “It’s not a big deal. Just forget it.”

Her tone says anything but.

Jasper leans closer like he’s going to take her hand, or at least try to, but thinks better of it at the last moment. He may need those fingers someday. “Hey,” he says quietly, “it *is* a big deal. And we think you’ll feel better if you—”

“I’m *fine*,” she snaps, leaning back and staring at the ceiling.

Well, shit. I’m not sure where to go from here. Neither are the guys. I mean, if someone is bound and determined to hate your guts, there’s only so much a guy can do about it.

A big truck rumbles down the street, shaking the apartment’s large glass windows, and somewhere in the building a door slams.

And right here, in this very place, is a woman whose heart is hurt in a way she may not recover from.

Ava heads for the kitchen. “Anyone want anything?” she asks.

“Water for me, please,” I say.

She returns with a glass, but when she hands it to me, she doesn't meet my gaze.

The awkwardness is loud and painful and is shining more light on all that's gone down than if we were actually having a conversation about it.

Fuck.

I have questions. A lot of them. Like how does a woman like Ava get to this stage in life without ever having the kind of sex that culminates in the explosive release that the rest of us know and love?

I just don't get it. But I also know this is not the time to ask. We have to get her to trust us again.

"I... I get bitchy when I'm embarrassed," she says quietly.

Now we're getting somewhere.

ETHAN

“I GUESS it’s been pretty... shitty for you,” I say.

She’s quiet for an awkward minute or two, staring out the front windows. Finally, she speaks. “I... I haven’t discussed this with many people. Just... Cami and Lana.”

“Ava, can I ask, why is this such a big deal? It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” I say.

She looks at me like she wants to tear my head off. “Ethan, I am the sex and relationship columnist for the top women’s magazine in the U.S. People think I know shit. But I don’t. I’m a big fraud. Hell, until the other night, I’d never had an orgasm.”

She looks Leo’s way. This time, instead of looking like a fucking hero, he nods sympathetically.

“You don’t understand. If the magazine found out I was ‘faking’ all this, they’d fire my ass. And if you guys know, I have to wonder who else does.”

As Ava shares her story, I feel some clarity coming on. I want to be someone she can rely on, someone she can trust. I know Jasper and Leo feel the same. And yet, we embarrassed her about her deepest, darkest secret. Intentional or not, how could we be so clueless?

We have only one chance to make things right with Ava. If we blow this, I have no doubt there’ll never be another. We

have to let her know our intentions were pure, even if our execution was a mess.

“This is what I propose, Ava. Go get dressed and let’s all go have dinner. It’s early yet, too early for you to be holed up in your room in your PJs avoiding us like the assholes that we are,” I say with a half-grin, hoping my lame attempt at charm might wear away some of her armor. Give us a chance to redeem ourselves.

Her eyes divulge a mix of uncertainly and hope. She doesn’t want to hate us, not really. She just needed to be mad for a while.

Without a word, she gets up and disappears into her room, returning five minutes later in a form-fitting dress and little boots. In that short span of time, she’s gone from sad girl to freaking gorgeous, smiling, confident, and back on top. I could learn from this woman, not dwell on the disappointments of my own past, and maybe even calm my hot-headed temper, as well.

The restaurant we choose is a cozy rooftop place, not much to look at, but full of old-school New York charm and inventive dishes from an up-and-coming chef new to the city. The amazing view of the skyline as well as the dulled street noise, thanks to being several stories up, eases the evening’s tension, and I, for one, can finally breathe with ease. Drinks are ordered, and the camaraderie we guys are hoping for begins to return.

“Never thought I’d see us together like this,” she says, shaking her head.

Jasper slings an arm over the back of her chair where she’s seated right next to him. “Maybe not, Ava, but I’m damn glad we are.”

She looks around the table once our drinks are delivered and holds up her glass. “I want to toast the three of you for not running away from an awkward situation, and for not letting me avoid it, either. Sometimes adulting is painful. But it’s worth it in the end.”

Cheers sound all around the table.

I'm not sure I've ever eaten dinner so fast. Everyone is still picking away at their plates, and mine is nearly empty.

"Wow. Guess you liked your scallops, Ethan," she says.

"Pure heaven," I say. "I needed something really delicious like that. Thinking about dessert."

"Oh yeah. What're you gonna get?" Ava asks.

Jasper and Leo look at me, and I take my chance. "Why don't we go back to your place and find out?"

AVA

I STUDY Ethan's chiseled face, and it's so kind and apologetic, I can't stay mad. I have to hand it to him and the other guys, they really stepped up to the plate like grown-up men rather than running away like other assholes would have.

My ex comes to mind.

After the turmoil of the day, calmed by the guys' efforts as well as an amazing dinner, a weight lifts from my shoulders and for the first time in weeks, the future is something I'm looking forward to. Excited about, even.

I am breathing again. I can write my damn article and stop stressing over it. Rinse, repeat.

And when Ethan drops his flirtatious suggestion, that we have dessert at home, it dawns on me that I don't want to be alone tonight. I want our boundaries to blur, and I want the electricity that sort of tension brings.

I don't know why, and I'm not going to question it. It is what it is.

In fact, before we even left the restaurant, a familiar ache spurred me to hurry and finish my dinner, and even call for the check before Jasper and Leo were completely done with theirs.

If anyone noticed my impatience, they're not complaining.

On the walk back to Jasper's and my apartment, my fingers brush with the guys', depending on who's walking next to me at that moment. The attraction, while it might be ill-advised—I'll worry about that later—is undeniable, magnetic, and what we all want, at least in this moment.

When we get home, as Jasper's sliding his key into the lock, Ethan brushes his lips across my neck, his lips firm and breath hot, and Leo takes me in a kiss so heady I have to lean against the wall to remain upright. We duck inside the apartment just as someone down the hall opens their door, and as soon as we close ours, I start to giggle. Would it have mattered if I'm caught kissing two guys while the other is frantically trying to get his door open as fast as he can?

Who cares what the neighbors think?

I don't have time for that shit.

It might just be the lovely evening and delicious wine, but I'm pretty sure the chemistry between the guys and me isn't just physical. No, it's something more than that given how we have been pretty vulnerable with each other in the last few hours.

Was I reading too much into my desire, a desire so strong I cut dinner short? Sure, maybe. But I'm a big girl and can deal with any fallout. I want to be touched, touched by these guys, all over, and I want to touch them back.

It seems my wish is being fulfilled.

We stumble inside and I come face-to-face with my roommate, Jasper. I put one hand on either side of his head, and our mouths crash together, greedy and forceful with a touch of curiosity, a contrast to Leo's soft lips in the hallway. Jasper's tongue searches between my lips and we taste each other like we're still hungry. When he pulls back for a second, his glasses are fogged over. He laughs, taking them off and stuffing them in a pocket.

“Are you good, Ava? You feeling all right?” he asks.

I'm both surprised and touched that he's essentially checking in for my consent. I never figured him for that sort of

guy, given how many women he's bedded in the time we've shared our apartment.

"Yeah. I'm good. I'm really good," I murmur as someone presses into me from behind, catching me around the waist with one arm, the other falling around the front of my neck, rendering me immobile.

I know it's Ethan, thanks to the sleeves of his white shirt, but also from the unmistakable force of his touch. He nuzzles through my hair until he reaches the back of my neck and takes a small nip with his teeth. I squeal with surprise.

"Pull her dress up, Jas," he says.

In front of me, Jasper slowly shimmies my dress up my hips, and when he sees my silky white panties, he lets out a low whistle.

"Look at these beauties," he breathes.

He falls to his knees like he's worshipping me, running his fingers from my hips to my thighs and back, and damn, it feels so nice and tingly.

In spite of being in the middle of an Ethan and Jasper sandwich, I swivel my head toward Leo. He immediately knows what I want. As his lips fall on mine again, I let my eyes close, ensconced in a cocoon of male touch, the scent of clean soap mixed with a little pine, and the sound of deep and heavy breaths.

It's like a dream, a dream where I'm the most beautiful girl in the world and these three men have no end of adoration for me. They see me as a rare gift and treat me accordingly.

Ethan plays with my tits while I kiss Leo. Jasper thumbs me between my legs on the outside of my panties, driving me absolutely crazy because through the fabric his touch isn't much more than a light tickle. I want more, goddammit, and I press into him like a dog in heat. I grind until he chuckles and slips a finger inside the leg of my panties, touching the sopping mess that is my sex, leaving the room to spin around me.

Still on his knees, he yanks the thin silk to the side and slips his tongue between my folds. I moan into Leo's mouth, and Ethan grips me tighter when he feels my knees buckle and I start to sway.

My God, Jasper's tongue on my pussy is everything, everything in the whole world, and if I die right now I might be okay with that, even though I want to come, and am hoping I can like I did the other night with Leo.

I don't have to wonder for long.

"Come here, beautiful," Jasper says, freeing me from all the hands and lips wandering over my body. "Come to the sofa."

Jasper takes one hand and Ethan the other, and they position me facing the couch. They pull my dress over my head—they may have ripped it, I'm not sure and don't care—and toss it aside, leaving me in my panties and bra.

"Look at these tits," Ethan murmurs as my bra is removed. He pushes me forward so I'm bent in a ninety-degree angle, hands on the back of the sofa, breasts swinging free. He takes a seat on the sofa back, facing me, and with a fistful of my hair, leads me towards his erection. He rubs his hard cock against my cheek, marking me with a trail of precum.

Behind me, Leo or Jasper—not sure which—has pulled my panties just below my ass. A hand presses the center of my back and bends me further, leaving my bum exposed in the air. Someone kicks my feet further apart, and my most private parts are bared to not only the night air, but also my voyeurs. While Ethan continues to rub the head of his cock over my face and across my lips, the two behind me are quietly commenting on their unobstructed view of me.

"Fuck man, look at that juicy pussy," Jasper says.

Leo chuckles. "Well, not to be a total dick and brag about my shit but wait till you get your face in there. Pure heaven."

I want to laugh or at least tell them to calm down, but I have better things to do with my mouth at the moment.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Jasper says. “You still good, darling?” he asks over my shoulder.

“Mmmm,” is all I can say since I’m slowly taking Ethan’s cockhead.

I wrap my lips around his hard ridge and create a light suction. He groans out loud and pushes deeper into my mouth, thankfully slowly, giving me the chance to adjust to his girth. When he finally hits the back of my throat, I gag a little, and he growls loudly enough to be heard down the hall. I look up and catch him watching me as he disappears into my mouth and pulls back out.

Meanwhile, Jasper is on his knees again licking my pussy from behind, back and forth, sliding from one end to the other, somehow covering every inch. And when I say every inch, I mean it. I’ve never had anyone get this close to my ass before, never mind actually *lick* it, and the sensation is insane. Like a little piggy, I want more. I wriggle against his face, almost losing my mind when he slips one finger and then another in my pussy while he teases me with his tongue.

Suddenly, Ethan pops out of my mouth and before I can even think, I’m flipped over and seated, my ass balanced on the edge of the sofa seat. I’d slide down to the ground if Jasper weren’t there like a sexy man blockade.

He parts my pussy lips and notches himself at my opening, pulsing there for a moment.

“Ready for me, baby?” he asks.

I take my time answering so I can savor the moment and just stare into his gorgeous eyes. Then I nod, very slowly. “I am so good, right now, you don’t even know.”

He laughs, then rubs my hard clit with his cock. I dig my fingernails into his arms for purchase and he grunts his approval. As soon as he’s pushed the head of his dick inside me, I start to pant like I did the night I was with Leo.

God, I hope I come again. I want it. I need it. Badly.

He plunges into me and then back out, over and over, and it’s like he’s scratching my itch, but it’s still not enough.

“Fuck me, Jasper,” I whisper.

His gaze is locked on mine, and he’s concentrating with everything he has, picking up speed until he’s ramming me so hard the sofa starts to slide across the floor. We laugh when it gives way several inches, but he doesn’t stop or even hesitate.

My head falls back, my breasts bouncing with every stroke. “God yes, please,” I whimper. “Please fuck me.”

And he does, his face screwed up in beautiful concentration, pounding my pussy again and again. Droplets of perspiration run down his temples and when he strokes particularly hard, they bounce off in every direction including on me, and I don’t care at all.

It was never like this with my ex-boyfriend, not for a single second, and God knows I had no idea it *could* ever be like this, at least for me.

A mind-blowing shiver passes through me and I explode, my pussy contracting like it has a mind of its own.

Now I know why the women Jasper brings home scream the way they do. I am about to join them.

He fucks me like the expert he is, closely attuned to my reaction because he wants me to come as badly as I do. With a shift of his hips, he reaches some ultra-sensitive spot, the spot I’d always heard about and even written about, but never managed to find on my own. But this guy, my freaking roommate and brother’s best friend, locates it within a minute of being inside me. I go rigid while every morsel of my being is focused on nothing but the business going on between my legs.

I hold onto Jasper for dear life while I arch from my neck to my lower back, stiffening so every bit of my energy pours into an explosion that has me shaking so hard I might fall off the sofa.

“More,” I beg in a hoarse whisper, “more please.”

With his eyes closed and his jaw clenched, he thrusts inside me one more time and I gasp, the wind knocked out of me by an orgasm that is, at last, rolling over me like a tidal

wave, flipping me end over end until I can't see or hear, or even breathe.

AVA

“HOLY SHIT,” Jasper bellows, and I cling to him as he begins to come.

I’m vaguely aware of the other two guys in the room, and when I glance their way I see Ethan stroking his dick, wearing a big smile, and Leo kicking back in an easy chair, shaking his head at the show Jasper and I just put on.

He props me back onto the couch so I’m no longer in danger of falling off, and I catch my breath quickly because I’m not done for the night. No, far from it.

Even though my legs are still wobbly, I get to my knees on the sofa and gesture for Ethan to get back in position. I have a job to finish.

He smiles, his eyes twinkling, returns to the sofa back, holding his dick to me like it’s a gift. And it really is. I take it in hand before returning to suck him, admiring its weightiness and the way it throbs in my fingers.

I run my tongue over his head and catch the precum that has been leaking since before Jasper diverted my attention, and as I circle his ridge, he grits his teeth and groans loudly.

“Goddamn, baby, I’m not gonna last long like this.”

I smile to myself and take him as deep as I can, letting him bottom out against the back of my throat, while I do my best to

calm my gag reflex. Tears are running from my eyes and I know the lower half of my face is covered in saliva.

Ethan doesn't seem to mind.

Meanwhile, Leo is pressed against my backside, massaging my breasts and alternately pulling my nipples. *Hard.*

And, surprisingly, I love it. Something I never enjoyed in the past, the pain I'm feeling now is strangely delicious, sending an electrifying jolt through my abdomen and right to my sex. I wiggle my breasts against his hands and would laugh out loud if my mouth weren't occupied.

Ethan fucks my face harder and faster, and I can feel him expand. I know he's getting close, so I reach for his balls with a small tweak, and right away my mouth starts to fill with salty cum.

I try to swallow it all, I really do, but it dribbles down my chin and just generally gets all over my face. I glance up as he pulls out of my mouth, and see him looking over my shoulder at Leo right behind me. Just as I turn to look too, Leo presses his cock against my sopping pussy and eases his way in.

I am already ultra-sensitive and another orgasm builds right away. I know it won't be long, and Leo seems to know too because he reaches under me for my clit and makes circles that are nothing short of magic. I pound my fist on the sofa back, my head bucking, and start to come again.

"That's right, baby," Leo says, "come for me while you take my dick, baby."

As my orgasm hits, I push back against Leo, meeting his thrusts with all the force I can muster. He bellows, sinking into me one more time and holding himself there as he empties his balls inside me.

When he pulls out, one of the guys helps me to my feet and brings me to my room, where he pulls back my comforter and climbs in after me. I start to doze off right away, and my last thought is that I am full of cum, from all three guys.

AVA

I'LL BE DAMNED if life isn't one crazy, unpredictable beast. One minute you're down and the next you're freshly fucked, heading to work with a big-ass smile on your face, planning how to start a column about a first orgasm.

My career is saved, thanks to the guys. I, of course, can take a little credit for becoming explosively orgasmic. In fact, I woke up when Ethan was leaving this morning, apparently having put me to bed the night before, and after he left, gave myself another orgasm.

I feel like a kid with a new toy—an orgasmic pussy that I don't want to stop playing with.

I'm no longer a fraud.

I don't have to pretend.

I won't be carrying a bankers' box out of the building because I lost my job.

I have my shit together, but good.

Well, sort of.

There could be a complication. *Could* be.

Their names are Jasper, Ethan, and Leo.

The yin and yang of life, I suppose.

I swear, it always seems that as soon as one thing gets straightened out, another falls off the tracks.

I mean, what am I going to do with these guys now? I can't date them. It's simply not possible. Have I solved one problem only to create another freaking mess?

Can I have a break, oh universe? Please? Just one day without something going sideways, getting complicated, or stressing me the hell out?

I know I shouldn't complain. I might have a mess on my hands, but it's really a nice mess to have, when it comes down to it. Each of the guys is great. Unique in his own way.

I can't deny there's serious chemistry between Jasper and me, but hell, he's a notorious playboy famous for his one-nighters, walks of shame, and booty calls. How the hell could I ever trust someone like him when in the back of my mind I'm wondering if I'm just another notch on his bedpost?

Then there's Ethan, the moody grump, with his roller coaster of emotions. I can just see him showering me with affection one moment, and the next, lost in his brooding thoughts. I'd never know what to expect and hell, who needs that kind of stress?

Leo is so sweet and sincere, I could get lost in his embrace for days. But the man is a workaholic for his own reasons and could I expect someone like him to change for me? There's no way to compete with that level of dedication, nor would I, given Leo's past and current circumstances. It just wouldn't be fair.

But the more time I spend with these guys, the more I realize they are so much more than the one-dimensional characters I initially judged them to be. How much of an idiot was I to assume they were a bunch of bottom-dwelling dumb jocks?

Bitchy much?

Sure, each has his flaws and quirks but then, so do I.

And if I'm honest with myself, I'll admit I'd like to see where things could go with them.

But even if they were on board, which they probably aren't, in what world does something crazy like that work? Further, I sure as hell am not about to pick one out of the trio and be responsible for coming between any of them and flushing their friendship down the shitter.

Is it time for things to go back to platonic, or is it okay to keep playing around with them for a bit longer? I wonder if Lana still has her Magic 8 Ball.

I arrive at work, the huge *Glisten* sign greeting me as I exit the elevator on my floor. While I have a lot on my mind, I'm enjoying the spring in my step, and smile at everyone I pass while working my way through the office.

When I get to my desk, Cami and Lana are hovering.

My stomach drops. "What's going on?" I ask, my alarm ratcheting up before I can squash it down.

So much for that short-lived spring in my step.

They each raise their eyebrows and point at a dozen roses. On my desk.

And they're not just any dozen roses. There are four each of three different colors—white, pink, and yellow.

As if three different guys were each sending me their own individual message. Go figure.

Not good. I can't have this seeping into my office. Flowers attract an immense amount of attention from coworkers and the fact that Cami and Lana are already standing here, waiting to know who they are from and any related juicy news, is only the tip of the iceberg.

I guess the chat I was imagining having with the guys is going to happen sooner rather than later.

AVA

I GET Lana and Cami out of my cube by pretending to be on a deadline for something Glenda needs from me *stat*. When they want to know more, I dig myself in even deeper and say it's confidential. They both know I'm full of shit just like I know I am, and they slink back to their own cubes, rolling their eyes, intending to continue their third degree later.

I can't focus. The flowers smell so good and are so pretty I can't stop looking at them, stroking their velvety petals, and marveling at their perfect shapes. I finally place them and their vase under my desk so that, first, no one else will ask me about them and second, I can *maybe* take my mind off them long enough to do some work.

While I try to talk myself into working, I log into the Bonded Crest corporate site. I poke around at all the magazines we publish... but who am I fooling? I navigate right to *Sports, Inc.* to see what's been completed for the upcoming issue.

And the first thing I come across? An article by one Jasper Russo titled 'When your girl hates sports.'

No. Way.

He wrote a goddamn article about *me*.

Sports, Inc.

Caught Off-Guard: When Your Girl Hates Sports

By Jasper Russo

(names have been changed to protect the innocent and some details are, obviously, exaggerated for entertainment purposes)

Not long ago, I was riding an elevator with a woman about my age. Single, attractive, professional. For the sake of anonymity, let's call her Eve. Now, Eve's no ordinary girl. She's smart, funny, and beautiful, but she holds a dark secret. A secret so shocking it could cause a grown man to drop the remote control while watching the NBA playoffs.

Eve doesn't know who the New York Knicks are.

I hear your gasps, and I know that you, my brothers, feel my pain. I, too, was once an innocent, unscarred soul, blissfully unaware that such a creature existed.

Eve dropped the bombshell casually when one of my friends mentioned he had Knicks tickets. As if it were nothing more than a minor detail, like announcing a dislike for anchovies on pizza or having a preference for dogs over cats, she made it known she doesn't just not like the Knicks, which are words painful enough for any New York man to hear.

She plain old just doesn't know who they are.

As the reality of the situation sunk in, I stared at her in disbelief. I half expected Ashton Kutcher to pop out from behind something, announcing I'd been 'Punk'd'. But there was no hidden camera and no celebrity prankster. Just Eve, staring at the elevator floor numbers as they lit up, one by one.

I know what you are thinking. Help the woman. Educate her. If you find yourself in a similar

situation, you may want to fight the good fight. You could attempt to explain the offside rule, show her highlights from last year's season, and even try to make her understand the emotional rollercoaster of the playoffs.

I did none of this.

I bravely navigated the minefield of non-sports conversations. I learned about the intricacies of kombucha brewing, engaged in animated discussions about art house cinema, and even considered watching 'The Bachelor' which, in my opinion, is much scarier than the current price of said Knicks tickets.

I won't lie. It was rough. There were moments of despair when I yearned for the comforting sight of an ESPN notification popping up on my phone. The lack of sports banter felt like a slap shot to the face. The struggle was real.

But gentlemen, I stand before you as a testament that it is truly possible to survive a sports-free zone. Give it a shot. You will never share all interests with your woman. These differences, while they may be hard to understand and accept, are all about stepping out of comfort zones and sometimes even sacrificing your spot on the couch during March Madness.

Your woman might not know the difference between a touchdown and a home run. She still refers to the Super Bowl as "that big football thingy." And she certainly will not understand your need for a separate fridge dedicated solely to game day beverages. But she'll make up for that. Maybe laugh at your terrible jokes, help shave your back, and make sure you never run out of man wipes.

If you're really lucky, maybe you'll get some of her incredible guacamole dip just in time for game

day.

Progress, am I right?

So, if you ever find yourself falling for someone who thinks LeBron James is a type of coffee, you're not alone. Take a deep breath, brace yourself for a world without sports references in everyday conversation, and hold onto your seat. It's going to be a bumpy ride. But at the end of the day, it will probably be worth it.

Hell, who needs the thrill of a last-minute field goal?

Okay. Don't answer that one.

Until next month...

I STARE AT THE SCREEN. Just stare, flexing my fists, my irritation threatening to turn full-on pissed. The nerve, to use me for some laughs, and seriously, calling my disinterest in sports a 'dark secret,' especially when I just purged a *real* dark secret?

Does he really look at me like I'm some kind of out-of-touch imbecile?

And for the record I do not, I repeat, do not, watch *The Bachelor*.

Nor do I make guacamole.

I make sour cream onion dip, for God's sake.

His over-the-top dramatic tone hit a nerve—actually, several nerves—but I have to admit, I did finish the article with a smirk on my face. It's endearing in a way, and funny to see his perspective on something I think is completely normal.

But even as my irritation dwindles away, I have this nagging little voice that's calling Jasper and really, all the guys, a bunch of sports-obsessed muscle-brained jocks. Sure, that's a stereotype, but hell if he didn't reduce me to one also.

My ambivalence, coupled with the push and pull of should-I or should-I-not, just multiplied. I'm not sure if I

should be annoyed or tickled he wrote a barely-disguised article about me.

I mean, I guess there is a genuine warmth in the way he guides his readers through the landmine of dating a woman who doesn't know diddly about sports. It's not like he is describing my type as a lost cause. He's capable of looking at the positive side of knowing someone like me, and wraps his article up on a note of hopefulness.

I'm clearly on his mind, at least enough to pen an article about me, which is flattering. But on the other hand, he's mocking me if only just a little bit, which I take as a challenge.

I would bet he figured I'd never see his article—given my disinterest in sports, why would I waste my time reading *Sports, Inc.*?

Little does he know. And little does he know that if he wants to start a war, I will proudly take my place on the opposing team.

Game on, my friends.

LEO

“JAS, I told you not to write that article,” Ethan says, staring him down.

Jasper leans back in Ethan’s swanky office chair like he owns the place, putting his feet on the desk and his hands behind his head like a real pain in the ass. He makes himself at home in Leo’s office every chance he gets, imagining the day when he’ll be moved from cube-life to his own private spot complete with a kick-ass view of the city. Problem is, that will never happen. Only the rain-making sales guys at *Sports, Inc.* get offices.

Jasper’s not on track for that, just like I am not.

We could win Pulitzer prizes and still be stuck with cubes.

And Ethan clearly wants his seat back.

Jasper throws his hands up like it’s no big deal. “Look, how the hell was I to know Ava would see it? Why would a woman who doesn’t even know who the New York Knicks are read *Sports, Inc.*?”

In an effort to get his seat back, Ethan places his hands on the chair back and shoves it forward, nearly spilling Jasper to the ground.

I try not to laugh.

Several times a week, Jasper sits his ass in Ethan's office, and Ethan boots him right back out.

"I don't know, man, but maybe, just maybe, she read it because she works for the same company that publishes it, and is hanging out with three guys who work there?" I say.

He shrugs. "Okay, fine Leo. I get that. But it's not like any of the three of us are rushing to read *Glisten*, right? I mean, that would be a bridge too far."

Ethan clears his throat loudly while he reclaims his seat.

"You did not," Jasper guffaws.

"Well, we are, um, sleeping with her, Jas. Aren't you a little curious about her? And her work?"

His eyes widen. "You too, Leo? Holy shit, both you losers are reading *Glisten* now. You'll have to report back to me on the 'best tampons' and 'how to get your guy'," he laughs.

"Whatever, dude," I say. "Look, you got yourself into the dog house and getting back out is not my problem. She asked us not to send any more flowers to her office, so you can't fall back on that for your *mea culpa*."

Jasper stares out Ethan's office windows, generally looking anywhere but at the two of us, denying to himself what I've known all along.

He likes Ava. Always has. He tried to fuck his crush on her out of his system by bedding every beautiful woman in New York. Didn't work. He pretended she was just some uppity, annoying chick with too many scented candles and pillows. He's bitched endlessly about the ugly green easy chair in the corner of the living room she likes to read in, but I think he was just upset she pays more attention to her books than him.

Truth is, he normally would not even have noticed an ugly green chair unless it caught on fire. The man has terrible taste and wouldn't know a decent piece of furniture if it bit him in the ass.

No. I can see right through my friend. Unfortunately, what I see, he doesn't. After all this time, he still has no freaking

idea about his feelings for her.

I'm not exactly mister sensitive guy or some sort of relationship expert. I just know what I know. And I'm not nearly the Neanderthal Jasper is.

I say that with great affection. The man's my buddy.

Ethan pinches the bridge of his nose like a headache is coming on. "Jas, just pick up some of her favorite ice cream. Fill the freezer with it. It's not that hard. Start thinking with something other than your little head for a change. She'll love you forever."

Oh shit. The 'L' word.

That word is forbidden, dangerous and toxic as it is. Hey, we might be trying not to be complete assholes, but with do have our limits.

And Ethan just slipped past one of them.

But Jasper chooses to ignore it. "I guess I could do that. But I'm not sure what kind of ice cream she likes."

Ethan throws his hands up at the hopeless case before us. "Jesus, man. How long have you lived with her? Girls eat ice cream all the time. You're telling me you never saw the ice cream she eats? You never even stole a little of it out of the freezer? Man, I always knew you were hopeless but not *this* hopeless." He turns to his computer screen. "I gotta get back to work. You guys need to skedaddle. Stop stinking up my office."

Whether Jasper's still in the dog house or not, the three of us are on a group text from Ava a couple hours later, with an invitation to trivia night at some bar across town. I don't have anything else going on, so I immediately say yes. If the others can't make it, all the more for me.

Unfortunately, they accept her invite nearly as fast as I do. It's all good.

The three of us arrive at seven p.m., just like she told us to. She already has seats for us, close to the table where the quiz master is set up. To our utter delight, tonight's trivia game is

featuring sports. Personally, I couldn't be happier to have the opportunity to show off and look smart for my girl.

Shit. I just called her 'my girl.'

We settle in and Ethan heads to the bar to get us beers.

Did I mention how nice it was to see the lovely Ava? I haven't spotted her in the elevator or building lobby for a couple days, and I can swear she's more beautiful today than the last time I saw her.

Ugh. I am so fucked.

"Ava, before we get started, I want to say I didn't mean to insult you with my article. It was just tongue-in-cheek fun, ya know?" Jasper says sheepishly.

She waves away his concerns. "Oh, Jas, that's so not a big deal. It was quite clever. Let's just move past it and have fun tonight." Her eyes twinkle.

Jasper's shoulders drop with relief at her magnanimous answer, and I'm pretty sure no man has ever been so happy to be let off the hook so easily.

"All right, guys. Here we go."

LEO

THE QUIZ MASTER, who looks like he's not old enough to be in a bar, clears his throat right into his microphone to get our attention. Satisfied that all chatter has been reduced to a minimum, he looks over the crowd as he reads us the evening's rules, with special emphasis on not cheating with our phones.

"For God's sake, this is a freaking game," someone in the back calls out, and the crowd snickers.

The Quiz Master throws a stink eye in the direction of his heckler and, satisfied everyone knows the rules, reads his first question.

Which country won the first-ever World Cup in the sport of Kabaddi?

Ethan furrows his brow and Jasper wrinkles his nose. Ava just smiles like the freaking Mona Lisa.

"What the fuck is *Kabaddi*?" Jasper asks.

"I've heard of it..." Ethan says, scratching his head and looking around the room to assess the other teams' Kabaddi acumen. Some looked as confused as us, and another smugly scribbles down an answer.

I know a little about the sport but not enough to answer the trivia question. “Guys, I heard some other photographers talk about it at a shoot last year. It’s weird as hell. Kind of like tag on steroids. And the players have to hold hands and shit.”

Jasper and Ethan cast me a horrified *what the fuck* look.

“Where do they play it?” Ava asks, as if we might actually know.

I shrug. “Middle East and Asia, I think.”

Ethan shrugs. “That covers a lot of territory.”

We’re interrupted by a loud *buzz*.

Shit.

“Time’s up, ladies and gentlemen,” the quiz master says happily, collecting everyone’s responses. That is, everyone who managed to come up with an answer, or at least a guess. And that does not include the four of us.

“I’m sure the next question won’t be as weird,” Ava says hopefully.

The Quiz Master reviews the submitted answers. The correct one turns out to be India.

“Oh, India,” we all say simultaneously.

Time for question number two.

What is the maximum weight for a javelin in the men’s Olympics?

“*What?*” Jasper blurts out. “Who the hell cares?”

The quiz master throws us a stern stink eye and there are several laughs from throughout the bar.

“Chill out, Jas,” I say.

“Do *you* know the answer to this, Leo?” he huffs.

“Of course, I don’t. Do any of the other teams?” I ask, scanning the room to check out the competition.

Ava points discreetly. “Hey, that table over there looks pretty happy. Bet they have the answer.”

She might be mocking us. *Might*.

Throwing her hands up as if in surrender, she shrugs. “Guys, don’t look so glum. You can’t expect to know everything about sports.”

Whoa. Did she really just say that? Does she have no idea that we *are* expected to know everything about sports? We work for *Sports, Inc.*, after all.

Whatever. With my sleeve, I wipe up the condensation ring left on the table by my beer, and brace myself for the next question, which I’m sure will be about something more familiar.

Question number three is announced.

In the sport of cricket, what is a ‘duck’?

What the fuck? What kind of sports questions are these? Has this quiz master dude never heard of baseball or basketball?

A duck? Another question we can’t answer. This is messed up.

“Why is he asking about cricket? We don’t play that in the U.S.” sighs Ethan.

Ignoring his question, Ava leans closer. “I thought you guys worked for the biggest sports magazine in the country. Why can’t you answer any of these questions?”

She did not just ask that.

“Because, Ava,” I answer, “these are not normal sports questions.”

“What?” she asks, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t know. I mean, sports are sports. Ya know?”

Jasper downs the rest of his beer. “Dude,” he calls to the quiz master, “can you ask a normal sports question? Maybe

about football? Even track and field will do,” he calls.

Glaring, Quiz Master slowly raises his mic to his lips. “These *are* ‘normal’ sports, sir.”

“Oh, come on—” Jasper starts to say.

But the Man in Charge wants none of it. “Sir, I’m sorry if you are not enjoying trivia night, but please don’t spoil the fun of the other players.”

Jasper’s head snaps back on his shoulders and I wait for his next smart-assed remark. But he just waves his hand in surrender. Guess he doesn’t want to be too aggro in front of Ava, especially since she invited us to this fiasco.

I glance at Ethan, who has a shorter fuse than I’ve ever seen on any man. If he loses his shit, things will really not end well.

Jasper forces a conciliatory smile. “No worries, man. Let’s get on with question four.”

Yes. Question four. Surely the others were just throwaway practice.

Quiz Man clears his throat for question four.

I can’t lie. I am holding my breath. Something about the last few questions has made me feel like a dunce. I could have stayed home tonight for that shit.

What is the sport Pelota, popular in the Basque region?

I snort, Ethan slams his beer glass down on our small table, and Jasper groans loudly enough that all heads turn in our direction.

While I don’t get why the other players are taking this bullshit laying down, Quiz Master’s nostrils are flaring and he narrows his eyes at us.

In the meantime, Ava has her hand over her mouth and her shoulders are quietly shaking.

Great. Love being laughed at by the very woman I'm trying to impress.

I'll admit it.

Quiz Master clears his throat, clearly desperate to get rid of us, and proceeds with question five.

What is the national sport of Bhutan?

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"Ava, what the hell did you invite us to?" I ask.

She presses her lips together, presumably to avoid laughing in our faces, while she blushes hard. "Gosh. I thought you guys would really like a sports trivia night. Sorry," she says sheepishly, and clearly not at all sorry.

Ethan jumps to his feet. "I'm outta here."

Jasper follows. "Me too."

Ava and I sit there, glancing at each other. Jasper and Ethan get the message.

When they're gone, I turn to Ava. "Maybe it's time for us to leave too."

She answers me with a huge smile.

LEO

I DON'T EVEN HAVE to ask Ava to come back to my place. We just started walking in that direction without any discussion. And the closer we get, the faster we walk.

I like the way this evening is turning out.

“Ava, that was a weird fucking trivia game,” I say.

“Really?” she asks, all wide-eyed and innocent. “Seemed like something you guys would really ace.”

Yeah. Rub it in, why don't you?

My bruised ego is forgotten when we get to my apartment. Ava and I take one look at each other and our lips crash together, like we've been waiting for this moment all night. I know I have. Seems like she was too.

Another thing to make me very happy.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” I breathe in her ear on my way to kissing her neck.

She giggles, something I don't expect from some big magazine columnist, and I make a note to see if at some point I can get her to talk to me about her... former problem.

The former problem that was remedied by me. Not to brag and shit...

I lead her by the hand away from my front door, past a soaking jar of paint brushes and paint-stained rags, to my bedroom.

“Come,” I say, leading her to stand in front of a window.

I ignore her puzzled expression while I take a few steps back to enjoy the view, that of a beautiful woman in my window, the streetlights illuminating her like she’s some kind of angel.

Takes my breath away.

“Promise me you’ll let me paint you some day.”

She wrinkles her face. “What? Why?”

I roll my eyes. I can’t help it. Is she that clueless?

Oh where to start? How do you tell a woman how wonderful she is, especially when she has no goddamn clue? Has she been treated so poorly by other men she has no idea of the effect she has on us?

I keep it simple. “Because you are... someone very nice to look at.”

She squirms, shuffling her feet. “Okay. I guess. If you really want to.”

“Now, Ava...” I say slowly.

She looks back at me, hands clasped behind her back, still squirming a little.

I continue, my boxers getting a little tight below the belt. “Take off your dress.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Really? Well, okay.”

She reaches for the side zip on the red, swingy dress I’ve been admiring all night. Once she’s got it open, she wriggles out of the sleeves, and lets it drop to the floor.

And behold my lovely Ava. She’s wearing silky blue panties and a matching bra, her figure long and lean with just enough curves to give her an hourglass shape. My gaze travels down her toned legs, resting on her high-heeled platform

shoes, revealing just enough of her toes to see her nails painted light pink.

Holy crap. I am so fucked.

I cross the room in a couple long steps and pull her into my arms. She's soft and compliant and she smells so damn good that for a moment, I almost forget what to do.

"Are you holding your breath, baby?"

She pulls back to see me and smiles bashfully. "Yeah, I guess I am. Or was."

"Relax, pretty girl," I murmur.

Fuck, I haven't been this turned on in... well, I can't remember when. The truth is, I haven't been able to get Ava off my mind since our first kiss, not to mention my vision of her naked, sweating, and writhing under me and the guys, making all the sound effects a man wants to hear. Hell, yesterday I had to take a break at work and hide in the goddamn bathroom while I jerked myself to relief.

I sit Ava on the edge of my bed and unbuckle her shoes. When those are tossed to the side, I lay her back and crawl on top of her, straddling her hips. We kiss some more, her sweet sighs and moans tormenting my poor constrained dick. I jump off the bed for a second to remove my shirt and jeans and with my hard cock nearly popping out of my boxers, I return to her cleavage, practically spilling out of her sweet little bra, and pull her tits out so I can get my mouth on them.

I tease her with licks and nibbles, and she squirms under me, begging for more, but probably still a little too bashful to come right out and ask for what she wants.

I'm just here to serve.

I look her in the eye. "Tell me what you want, baby."

As if I don't know. I just want to hear her say it.

"I..." she starts to say, "I want to come again, Leo. Like I did the other day."

Okay. We're getting somewhere.

I smile at her. “Of course you do, darling. And I want to see you come.”

And feel her come, taste her come, and hear her come.

All in due time.

That’s when Ava shimmies her panties down, depositing them somewhere on the bed, and helps herself to my underwear.

Before I realize what she’s doing, she wriggles out from under me, kneeling on the bed and looking down at me. Her tummy is flat and smooth, and I can’t help but look at the pretty, shaved cleft between her legs.

I reach for it but she pushes me onto my back.

“Damn.”

I’m not used to women taking the lead, but this I don’t mind. Not one goddamn bit.

And while I can’t wait to see what she has in mind, I know where we’re going and I couldn’t be more thrilled. I grab my cock at the base and aim it straight up while she climbs on top.

“Open yourself, baby. Open those lips for me so I can watch myself fuck you. I need to see my cock in that pretty pussy of yours.”

She shivers at my dirty words but obeys, balancing on her knees on either side of my hips. With one hand on my chest for balance, she parts her lips with her other hand using two fingers, and her beautiful little button of a clit pops out like it was waiting for an invitation to party.

Fuck *me*, this woman.

“More. Open more,” I say, my voice low and guttural.

As soon as she does, I aim my dripping cockhead at the slit of her opening and she slowly lowers herself, engulfing my erection like I’ve been dreaming about all freaking day.

“Fuck, baby,” I holler, grabbing her hips and grinding up into her.

Her eyes close and her mouth forms a little circle as she puts both hands on my pecs and grinds back into me. Her movements quicken until she's panting, barely able to catch her breath, and I swear to God, this is one of the most beautiful things I've seen in my life. She bounces on my cock, her tits swinging back and forth, and a few seconds later arches her neck and her mouth falls open.

"That's it, baby," I groan, the pressure in my balls building, nearly to pain. "Come on my cock with that pretty pussy."

"Ugh... ugh..." she starts to grunt-moan, and when I press my thumb to her clit, she loses it completely, digging her nails into my chest, throwing her head around, and fucking me so hard I'm afraid she's going to break my dick.

I reach a hand up and slide my thumb into her mouth, and to my delight she accepts it, sucking like the world is about to end, moaning, and finally releasing me to scream.

"Tell me, baby, tell me. I want to hear it," I groan.

She takes a deep breath, still riding my ready-to-explode dick. "I'm coming, Leo, God, yes, I'm coming," she says in a broken, breathy voice.

Well, that's all I need to hear. My balls fill to the point of pain and moments later I feel like I'm splitting in two, ruined by an orgasm that is partly killing me and partly giving me life. I'm not sure which it is, but it doesn't matter because Ava has come again and she's now in my arms, trying to catch her breath like I'm the only one who can save her.

AVA

“HE’S AT IT AGAIN.”

I sigh inwardly because I don’t want to offend Cami, and take a long draw on my bright orange Aperol spritz.

She waits for me to finish before she continues, because when she’s being neurotic, like she often is, she needs my full attention. I’ve been her emotional support human for so long, I know exactly what I’m doing. “Did you hear me, Ava? I’m really upset about this.”

As if writing about sex and relationship problems all day isn’t draining enough, counseling Cami sure is.

“Cam, your husband joined a *gym*. That absolutely, unequivocally, does not mean he’s doing it to attract another woman,” I say for the tenth time that night.

She sips her espresso martini and waves the waiter over for another. This has the potential to be a long night.

She takes a nibble on her already-bitten nails. “No. No, I’m sure I’m right. It’s over between us. He didn’t even notice my haircut last week.”

Oh *God*. This again.

“That’s because you only *got your bangs trimmed*.”

She avoids my gaze so she doesn’t have to admit I might be right. At times like this, Cami wants to be right, and it

doesn't matter what anyone else says. "Maybe. But that's not all."

"What do you mean?" I ask, grimacing when she chugs the rest of her first martini so she can get going on the second.

Never a good idea.

She leans closer and lowers her voice. "He's started... cooking."

Huh?

The confusion on my face must be saying it all because she immediately jumps on the defensive.

"Ava, you know how he likes to eat out. Why would he be learning to cook? Unless it's to impress another woman."

This time I roll my eyes. I don't care if I piss her off.

"Cam," I say carefully, "you know I love you. But I think you are being ridiculous and you have to let this paranoia go. I mean, have you discussed any of this with him?"

She looks around sheepishly. "I have... brought it up."

"And what did he say?" I ask.

"Pretty much the same as you," she says after a long sigh. "He swears he loves me more than the day we got married and says he'll do anything I want to prove it to me."

And there we have it. The man is madly in love, for some reason, with his crazy wife, and not even her paranoid suspicions can drive him away.

Why do the lucky people not know how good they have it? What I wouldn't give for a guy who worships the ground I walk on like Cami's husband does her.

Maybe my own luck is changing?

Even so, it sure was fun setting the guys up with that obscure sports trivia night. Sort of got even with Jasper for writing that article about the Knicks and me. Sort of.

On one hand, I'm sleeping with—dare I say dating?—the three most gorgeous men I've ever laid eyes on. For some

inexplicable reason, they want to hang out with me even beyond the pity fucks they'd planned so I could actually, finally, have my Big O. I mean, it's kind of remarkable these guys are still coming around, even after they accomplished their goal.

So, that's all good.

But the truth is, as hard as it is to ignore the sparks, I can't get involved with these guys, at least not any more than I already have, and in fact need to bring a halt to where things are right now.

First off, I can't date three guys. That just doesn't happen.

Second, if I choose one, what does that mean for the others? And their friendship?

And last, not to say that I'm perfect or anything, but each guy has some sort of issue that will certainly keep him from being the kind of partner I need. There's Jasper and his man-whore tendencies, even if he has temporarily cleaned it up, Ethan's grumpy moodiness, and Leo's never-ending need to prove himself through work.

These guys are not available for what I want, and if there's one thing I learned from the loser ex, it's that if you're not getting what you want from the get-go, then waste no time and cut those damn ties.

Bottom line is, I can't let this go any further.

But how do I ease my way out?

Cami's finishing up her second martini. If I don't call it a night, a third martini will be ordered, the night will go super-late, I'll have to listen to Cami bitch about her husband even more, and we'll both feel like shit at work tomorrow.

"Hey, before we go, what's up with you?" she asks.

I've been wanting to tell her so badly. So I do. Sort of.

"I... have had an interesting last couple weeks."

She slaps her hand on the table. "Oh my God. Which Craigslist guy did you get together with? Is that who sent you

the flowers?”

Her eyes are wide, begging for the story.

I decide to keep details to a minimum. “Well... I’ve actually been with *three* guys.”

“No. Fucking. Way.”

I nod.

“And... the results?” she demands.

I give her a thumbs up. “Victory.”

She screams so loudly the entire bar looks our way. “That’s... oh my God! You’re going to fall in love. Mark my words.”

Her crazy theory aside, I nod proudly. It *is* a relief. Seriously. Now all I have to do is put the finishing touches on my column. No one will ever know my first Big O was had only a couple weeks ago. The world will continue to believe I am the orgasmic creature I’ve always pretended to be.

Cami grabs my hands. “Was it everything you hoped it would be?”

Where to begin?

I just smile. There really are no words. Well, aside from the words I put on the page for *Glisten* magazine.

“It was freaking awesome,” I finally say.

“Are you gonna see them again? Oh my God, I’m so jealous. Why did I get married?” she whines.

Here comes the sticky part. The less she knows, the better it will be for everyone.

“Um, I might see them again. You never know,” I lie.

Of course, I will see them again. We work for the same parent company, and I freaking live with one of them. But, will I *really* see them again? Like naked? Erect? Sweating? Groaning? Calling my name...?

AVA

I DON'T KNOW how to break up with someone.

I've never done it before.

Some street cred I've got, being a sex and relationship guru. God, I'm just as much a phony as Danny was.

At least he landed a job, I heard through the grapevine. Martha Stewart's team was so flattered he was stealing their shit that they hired him. Guess there's no one left to copy once you're working for her.

So while I don't know *precisely* how to proceed, I'm figuring it out on the fly. Or trying to.

I'm not exactly trying to break up with the guys, because there is nothing to break. We're not in any sort of committed relationships. I'm not their girlfriend, and they are not my boyfriends.

So far as I can tell, we're really just doing the deed. Of course, I have noticed each of them at different times giving me the sort of look every woman hopes she'll get from a guy. And I can't deny my heart does a little flip when I run into one of them at work. Leo passed through my floor the other day to meet with one of the *Glisten* photographers, and I almost had a heart attack when he winked, passing my cube.

But all that doesn't amount to a hill of beans. It's immaterial. I got what I wanted, and so did they. Time to move

on.

So while I'm no expert, or even an amateur, I started casting the seeds of doubt just last night, when I went home with Leo.

After our crazy sex session, I must have conked out for a while. When I woke up, our fingers were intertwined.

So I unwound them and scooted out of his reach. Once out of bed, I got dressed in minutes, making my excuses to leave. While it was all for the best, the look on his face about killed me. In fact, I cried the whole way home.

It had to be done, though. The only thing bigger than the guilt washing over me was the unexpected sense of loss.

How could I be feeling a loss? You can't lose something you never had, can you? Leo's not my boyfriend. We are not romantically linked.

And yet.

I must do the same with Jasper and Ethan.

Before I do, however, I get a message from my brother, Andy.

Yo little sis. Thinking of coming to town.

Great. That will be fun. When?

This weekend. Will be nice to see you, Jasper, run around the city...

Oh shit. Oh no. He can't come this weekend. I'm still working on dumping the guys. Well, not really dumping them, but putting an end to our... whatever it is. Without them realizing it, of course. I'll just slither away and they won't know it until I'm gone.

This weekend not good. Sorry.

Okay. How about the next?

I can't put him off for too long. He'll know something is up. And the last thing he needs to know is I'm sleeping with three guys, one of whom is his best buddy from college. I'm going to have to work fast. Really fast.

Sounds good. Let me know your travel details.

Meet me at the train station?

No way. No one meets anyone at the train station here. Take a cab.

Still a brat, I see...

Next day, Ethan and I head out to the senior center to see his gray-haired friends.

Trudy clasps my hands as soon as she sees me and gives me a peck on the cheek. "My dear, you are more beautiful than ever. Ethan, you landed a good one here. You're such a lovely couple."

Her husband George nods enthusiastically.

I chuckle. "Oh, Trudy, we're not a couple," I say with a wave of my hand.

The smile falls off her face and she looks at Ethan, then back to me. "What?"

I answer before Ethan can say anything. "We're friends, Trudy. That's it," I say with special emphasis on *it*.

I try not to look at Ethan. I'm scared shitless of what his expression might be. But he throws an arm around my shoulders, anyway.

Time for the big guns.

"You know, Ethan has been such a good friend to me while I'm figuring things out," I say.

George tilts his head. "What sorts of things, dear?"

I put my hands together. "Well, I feel I can tell you guys, you're so kind and open-minded. It's just that... I might like women."

Boom.

Ethan stiffens. Trudy and George nod politely.

Trudy puts a hand on my arm. “Oh, honey, it’s so good that in this day and age people can be who they truly are.”

Ethan tightens his arm around me. “Trudy, George, we’re going to get some punch. Be right back, okay?”

He directs me away and as soon as we’re out of their earshot, gets in my face, as I thought he might. “What’s this about your being *gay*?” he asks, his wrinkled brow so cute under his perfect hair.

Dammit.

“It’s hard to explain. Ya know.”

He hands me a paper cup of punch, some horrible pink liquid. “You’re an odd one, Ava Sterling.”

I smile and shrug. “Well, like Trudy says, how fortunate is it that we can be ourselves these days.”

I beam at his confused face.

Two down.

One to go.

AVA

THE FRONT DOOR SLAMS.

“Ava? Ava, are you home?”

I’m home. Oh yeah. And I’m ready.

“Be right there, Jasper,” I call, strolling out of my room to greet him.

I’m home from work before him, like always, because I go in earlier than he does. It’s like we’re on two different shifts. By the time he gets home, I’m already here, unless I have plans to go out, which is not often.

I rarely stay late at the magazine because if I have work to do, I just do it from home. I can only stand so much time in cube-ville, with coworkers constantly stopping by to gossip. In fact, at the moment, I am working up what I think will be a great column since our anniversary issue, the one that includes my first O story, doesn’t publish for another couple weeks. I’ll get back to it soon as I finish my business with Jasper.

“Hey, Jas,” I say, basically ignoring him while I scroll through the news on my phone.

He grumbles, then pulls a cold beer from the fridge, opens it, and takes a swig. “Av, what did you say to the interns today?”

We’re on our way.

I glance up and scratch my head, trying but failing to ignore the piercing blue eyes behind his heavy black glasses. “What interns?” I ask, plastering my face with bewilderment before turning back to the news.

He sighs loudly, rubbing the back of his neck like a headache is circling.

Which is pretty much the plan.

“The interns at *Glisten*. What other interns are there?” His face dissolves into irritation.

For a moment, I feel guilty. But just for a moment.

I struggle to keep from laughing. “All the magazines have interns, don’t they?”

I’m going to rot in hell, giving this guy the run-around the way I am.

But it’s all for a good cause.

He looks up at the ceiling, losing patience with me. I’ve never seen this side of him before. It’s usually Ethan who’s getting pissed over little things. I kind of like it.

“Only *Glisten* has interns these days. Last time *Sports, Inc.* did, one of them superimposed the head of his cat on the faces of the Olympians he was supposed to be posting about on social media. Figured no one would notice,” he explains

And now I’m trying not to laugh.

As far as I know, the worst any of our interns has done is steal nail polish samples sent over by OPI. But that may be about to change.

“Why are you asking about our interns, Jasper? Has a pretty young thing caught your fancy?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah. I love twenty-year-old college girls who think they’re going to be the next Anna Wintour. Seriously Av, these kids were swarming me today. They said you suggested they introduce themselves to me. Care to explain?”

I take a seat in my green chair and slowly set aside my phone. “Oh, that,” I say breezily. “You should have seen them, Jasper. Guess they saw you in the lobby or something. They couldn’t stop talking about ‘that guy in the glasses from *Sports, Inc.*’ It was hilarious, like you were some sort of celebrity.”

A flattered expression crosses his face because, of course, but then he narrows his eyes, the compliment already forgotten. “Okay. So they were asking about me. What was it that prompted them to invade my cube area, asking questions, and giggling?”

Ugh. Why is he asking all this? He already knows the answer, for heaven’s sake.

“I told them you were single and that you liked pretty girls. I suggested they go meet you. Some of them are only in town for a month or two, you know.”

He presses his lips together and as he takes a deep inhale, his nostrils flare.

So far, so good.

“Well, did you like any of them?” I ask, all chipper and happy.

He looks at me, his face a huge question mark, and for a moment I’m afraid he’s going to ask what’s really going on here.

But he doesn’t.

He just shakes his head and retreats to his room with a fresh beer, and my work is nearly done.

JASPER

“JAS, GREAT TO SEE YOU,” Andy says when I meet him at his favorite dive bar not far from Penn Station.

We do the half-shake half-hug thing that guys do, and he moves his only piece of luggage, a leather backpack, off the stool so I can sit.

It’s funny. Now that I’ve spent so much time with Ava, I can see the resemblance between the siblings. It’s not a strong one, but it’s there in the eyes and smile.

Andy Sterling’s always been a hit with the ladies, in part because he’s charming as hell but also a generally nice-looking guy. He doesn’t come close in the looks department to his younger sister, though.

His sister who seems to be trying to fix me up with her college interns.

What the fucking fuck?

On one hand, I can see why she might try something like this. She knows as well as anyone how I like a beautiful woman. Hell, I’ve brought enough of them home with me in the time we’ve lived together that she knows my habits well. My Achilles heel. My kryptonite.

But I’ve cut that shit out. Fucking some girl whose name I’m not even sure of, no matter how hot she is, has lost its luster. I think it happened gradually, although I’m not sure. It’s

not like I woke up one morning done with trolling for a lay. It just kind of crept up on me.

And if I'm honest with myself, Ava might have something to do with it. I repeat, *might*.

Now that her brother's here, I'm kind of screwed, because there is no bigger man-whore on the face of the earth than this man. We've been each other's wingmen for so long I'm not sure how we'll hang together this weekend, given my lack of interest in bedding hot New York chicks, the real reason he's here.

He might say he came to visit me or his sis, but we all know better.

One thing I do know is that there will be no fun time with Ava while Andy's around. All that shit is off the table for a few days.

If not permanently.

Ava's attempts to set me up with her giggling interns has my head spinning. It just doesn't... make sense. I could be wrong—I can be a total dumbass in these matters—but I thought she was into me. Me and the other guys. And yet she throws these girls at me?

What's even weirder is that Leo and Ethan are getting the same vibe from her. I guess Leo bedded her and she couldn't get out fast enough, hightailing it back home, after that weird-ass trivia night she brought us to. And then Ethan said something about her, mentioning she might be into women. Didn't see that one coming.

Which is all fine and good. I want Ava to be happy. But these recent developments are quite the departure from the track I thought we were on. If we actually *were* on a track.

Did I miss something? Am I that freaking clueless?

I'm glad Ava had her Big O and all, but does that mean she's done with us? Like, she's moving on to whatever sort of guy she had in mind from the beginning, which maybe is not one of us guys? I know a lot of those women at *Glisten* think

those of us at *Sports, Inc.*, are dumb jocks. It's no secret. But Ava sees beyond that. At least I thought she did.

Andy snaps me out of my reverie. "Thanks for meeting me here, Jas." He cranes his neck to study the yellowed business cards pinned and stapled to the walls of the bar, and to inhale the stale beer and old cigarette scent that give the place a down-home feel. "I love that this is my first stop here. Get off the train, head right across the street for a beer."

It's a great ritual, one I'm glad we have, and it's just generally good to have my old buddy here. It really is. Although I'm having some serious trepidation about keeping up with Andy's antics this weekend.

"So tell me, how's my little sister?" he asks, almost dutifully. He's never been that interested in what she's up to, so I figure the question is more obligatory than anything. I know her parents don't like their daughter in the big city, so Andy's probably charged with making sure she hasn't been abducted by some sort of sex cult or something.

"Fine, I guess," I say with a shrug.

He looks at me for a second, which might be nothing, but of course I'm paranoid the man is reading my mind and knows that my friends and I have been fucking her.

He looks back at his beer, satisfied he's done his due diligence. Or is he? "I haven't seen her since that douchebag dumped her for some chick he'd been pining away for. I'd like to fuck that asshole up. But it would be too easy. He's a little weasel."

I fumble my words, turning my nervousness into a yawn for cover. He's more invested in his sister's well-being than I thought. I remember when she visited him at college for a football game or something way back when. She was this skinny, quiet little thing. Surrounded by beautiful college coeds, I paid her no attention. There were too many distractions, like there were right here in New York up until a few weeks ago.

I nod, sharing disgust at her misfortune. “Oh yeah. I heard something about that. Happened right before I moved in with her, so I wasn’t around when it all went down. Guess it got kind of ugly.”

“You win some, you lose some. That’s love. But my sister is a nice woman and beautiful to boot. Anyone else fucks with her, they’ll have to answer to me.” He slams a fist into his open palm.

“Yup, agree,” I choke.

“She wrote all about it for that weird column she has at that chick magazine, the one about sex and shit. Bared her soul. Guess she got a lot of kudos for it. She did a good job, but I personally prefer to keep my relationship stuff private. Ya know?”

I drum my fingers on the bar, certain I won’t survive Andy’s visit. I’m not afraid of him, certainly not, but I also know what a freak he can be when he’s pissed off. Usually, we’re on the same side of any conflict, the two of us against the world. But if he finds out about Ava, all bets are off. I prefer to keep my friendships, not to mention, my life.

“Yeah. I know what you mean. I... haven’t read her article. Don’t usually pay too much attention to *Glisten*,” I say with a laugh. “Not my thing.”

Hi shrugs. “Yeah, I’d normally never touch that girl boss stuff with a ten-foot pole. But, you know, my sister. I read her shit from time to time. She sends it to our parents and they send it on to me.”

“Oh. That’s cool,” I say, wanting to talk about anything other than Ava.

“Dude, did you read her latest thing, how to handle men who are obsessed with sports? Like, for girls who don’t get into that stuff? Funny as hell, I have to hand it to her.”

Um, no. Ava wrote an article about men obsessed with sports? Is this retaliation for my article about dealing with women who aren’t into sports?

“No. Nope, haven’t seen it,” I say, glancing at my watch.

“It’s not published yet. I guess she just sent a proof or whatever you call it.” He reaches for his phone and starts scrolling. “Here. Check it out,” he says, thrusting it at me.

Glisten Magazine

Surviving Man-Sports

by Ava Sterling

Final Draft, May issue

Dear Reader,

We all know this guy, the one who lives in a world where sports is religion, athletes are gods, and ESPN the Bible. What happens when you, a sports skeptic or maybe even full-on misanthrope, fall for a man whose religion of choice is the NFL, NBA, MLB or, God forbid, all three, including any other acronyms I’ve missed? Do you find yourself, a self-proclaimed sports-averse woman, thrust into a world of obscure stats, referee call debates, and fantasy leagues? Well, don’t despair. Ava is here to help you navigate the pain of dealing with something foreign, and if I may say so, uninteresting.

Now, I’m throwing no shade on you sports-loving gals. Get your game on, honeys. But for those of us who don’t dig the field, court, pitch, or whatever they call that stuff, read on.

Balance, darling

Just because he’s hosting the Super Bowl Sunday doesn’t mean your living room has to transform into a sports bar, not unless he’s okay with it doubling as a sex toy party for the girls on Saturdays. It’s all about balance, darling. If he gets the big TV for the playoffs, you get it for the ‘Sex and the City’ reunion. Or ‘60 Minutes.’ Take your pick.

Choose your own sport

Let's not stereotype here, friends. Not all sports involve burly men crashing into each other. There's track and field, gymnastics, tennis, women's basketball, and soccer, all filled with as much drama and passion as any Knicks game. Find yourself a sport you love and turn those tables. Enjoy watching him trying to keep up with our incredible women athletes.

Own the menu

If you have to suffer through a four-hour game, you should not be subjected to a sportsman's idea of fine dining. No, let someone else serve those buffalo chicken wings, chip 'n dip, and craft beers. Feel free to set out a nice 'girl dinner' of charcuterie, cheeses, and for heaven's sake, don't forget the quince spread. Who knows, you might get so immersed in the culinary side of things that you won't even notice that the game's gone into overtime... again.

Redirect

Don't want to learn the difference between a three-pointer and a field goal? Neither do I. Use game time as your 'you time.' That's right. If you feel so inclined, you can sit with your sports lover, but read that new book, polish those nails, or start your online Christmas shopping. If he notices you're there (and some dudes won't) he'll be glad for your company.

Find your favorite player

Not all athletes are created equal. Some have the charisma and human-interest storylines that can make even the sports-averse take notice. From handsome quarterbacks with hearts of gold to scandal-ridden power forwards, there's a player out there who's more *People Magazine* than

Sports, Inc. Find your athlete crush and it might just make watching a tad bit more enjoyable.

Join the Sports Squad

Listen, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Start learning about his favorite sport, just enough to pretend you know what's going on. Maybe even throw in some random stats at dinner like, "Did you know the average life span of a football is only about 3,000 kicks? That's less than my patience with football."

Trade-off Time

Encourage mutual respect. Tell him, "For every hour you watch sports, I get to choose an activity we do together. Let's start with knitting. Don't worry, it's competitive too, you know."

Just remember, love is like a game of tennis, it requires service, a good return, and lots of love (pun intended). Just make sure you're not always the one doing the serving. At the end of the day, remember that we all have our quirks, hobbies, and obsessions. So, even if you never understand the thrill he gets when his team scores, remember the excitement you felt when that limited edition designer handbag finally went on sale. We all have our sports; some just involve fewer balls.

May the odds, and the remote control, be ever in your favor!

XOXO

Ava

I LAUGH WEAKLY and hand Andy his phone back. "Good one!" I say with too much enthusiasm, sweat dripping down the back of my neck.

I need to have a talk with Ava, and I need it now. Problem is, I will have no alone time with her until her brother leaves. Which means my stomach is going to be churning acid nonstop for the next several days.

This is so not cool. She did it on purpose, first to send us guys a middle-finger sort of message, and then to fuck with us because there's nothing we can do about it as long as Andy is hovering over us all.

Holy crap, did she get one over on us. I have to hand it to her.

Andy takes a final swig of his beer and calls the bartender over for the check. "Let's get out of here, man. I gotta see that sister of mine. My parents want to make sure New York hasn't eaten her alive. As soon as I can inform them she's alive and kicking, you and I can start painting the town red."

Um, yeah.

We head out to the street, our eyes adjusting to the light after leaving the dim bar. "Andy, if you love it so much here in New York, why don't you just move here?"

He slings his backpack over his shoulder. "Eh. I do love it here, but at home, I'm a big swinging dick. In New York, I'm a nobody. Why the hell would I start over like that? I'd be giving up too much. Plus, I don't want to become my sister's babysitter, which my parents would love. Not that she's going to get into any trouble here. Hell, she probably hasn't even gotten laid since the last guy dumped her, that's how much of a prude she is."

We stop at a corner, waiting for the *walk* signal, and I'm wishing a car would mow me down right now.

JASPER

“MY LITTLE SIS!” Andy says, pulling Ava into a bear hug.

“Hey, stinky,” she says, pushing him away. “What’s with all the affection? I thought I was nothing more than a pain in your ass.”

Andy walks around the living room, touching things like he lives there. “I don’t know. Guess I’m glad to see you have a life of your own. Ya know, that you’re doing so well. Staying out of trouble. Not being on a man hunt like the other girls in this town.”

She avoids my gaze, but when she shuffles her feet, I know she’s... unsettled. “How do you know I’m not getting into trouble?” she asks with a laugh and a hasty glance my way.

He shrugs. “Because I know you,” he says, ruffling her hair. “You’re just not like that.”

She pulls her shoulders back. “Like *what?*”

Andy plops down on Ava’s ugly green chair. “I can’t believe you still have this thing,” he says, his hands running over its worn arms. “It’s comfortable, though,” he says, bouncing up and down, his bulk straining its springs.

“Andy, what do you mean, I’m not ‘like that’? Like *what?*”

He rolls his eyes. “Look, we know you’re not out there getting laid and shit, like most women your age. You’re not

like that. You like a relationship. One man. You just gotta learn to pick ‘em better.”

She forces a smile, and then a scoff. There’s going to be a lot of pretending this weekend. “Okay, Andy. Whatever you say.”

He leans forward, elbows on knees. “Look. I don’t mean to piss you off. It’s just that you’ve never... had much success with men. I don’t have to worry about you whoring around.”

His obliviousness, while probably offensive to Ava, is a relief to me. Ava looks like she wants to kill him, but I want to give him a big kiss for being so far down the wrong freaking track.

“Now, your roommate Jasper and I... we’re a different story. Dude, you ready to hit the streets? Av, we’ve got dinner reservations at the hottest resto in town, and after, we’re going for bottle service at the SkyLounge. Got a kick-ass table reserved on the roof.”

“That’s nice,” Ava says weakly.

“Hey Av, if you want to join—” I start to ask.

But Andy cuts me off. “Sorry, dude. No little sisters on this outing. We can’t have anyone cockblocking us. We’re gonna roll all night, yo.”

Ava’s lips are pressed together and she nods like *yup, this is what these horndogs are all about*. I want to tell her she’s wrong, that we’re not all like Andy, but I can’t without giving myself away. While she’s pretending not to care, the disheartened look on her face says it all. I feel like shit and am aching to put my arms around her.

Fuck all.

But hell, she’s not interested in us guys anyway, so what’s with the jerking us around? She might not like her brother and me going out picking up chicks, but she’s the one who was pushing interns on me, leaving Leo high and dry, and telling Ethan she liked girls.

What's with the conflicting messages? This woman is going to push me right over the edge.

And I can't talk to her about it.

Less than an hour later, Andy and I are at dinner, and he's ordering just about every fancy tapas the menu offers. Normally, I'd chow down but something has stifled my appetite tonight. Pretty sure I know what it is.

He leans across the table. "Check out those women over there. The three of them. Fucking gorgeous. What do you say we send them a round of drinks, see if we can get them to talk to us?" He sits back in his chair, tapping his stomach. "We don't have food like this at home, and we certainly don't have pussy like this."

Even though it's unintentional, I wince at his words. The unfortunate part is that he notices.

"What the fuck, dude? You're not down with those chicks? You see anything better?"

I shrug, picking at a dish of *patatas bravas*. "No, Andy, it's all good. But I don't know. I mean, maybe we should leave them alone. They look very involved in their conversation."

He slaps the table with his hand and downs his beer. "Are you fucking kidding me? They keep looking over here. They totally want to meet us."

I make a discreet glance in the direction of the women. I see no such thing.

Have I been like Andy in the past, so delusional about my prowess I imagined women wanted me to chat them up when they hadn't even noticed me? Had I bothered them when they were out, enjoying their evenings with friends?

Holy shit. Hanging out with Andy is like looking in a mirror for the first time.

I don't like what I'm seeing. Not at all.

Another glance shows the women paying their bill and getting ready to leave.

“Fuck, dude, they’re out of here. Come on, this is our chance.” He pushes his chair back and starts to stand, like he’s going after them.

No wonder women complain bitterly about men.

I stay in my seat and keep picking at the greasy, salty potatoes, which I usually love, and which I would love more if Andy would just calm the fuck down.

“Oh. Okay. I see what’s going on here,” he says, giving up on the women and returning to his seat, disappointment written all over his face.

“Andy, man, I’m just not up for chasing down women like I used to, I guess—”

“No. You are but you just don’t know it. And you know why?” he asks, smug written all over his face.

He’s really starting to get on my nerves.

I stare back at him. This is going to be a long fucking weekend.

“You’re in *love*,” he sings, pointing a finger in my face. “Yup. I see it all over your ugly mug. Jesus,” he spits, like he’d just tasted something really disgusting.

In love?

A hammer hitting the side of my face would have been less impactful than his accusation. But with the way it hit me, does he have a point? Is my lug-headed buddy seeing something I’m too stupid to?

JASPER

IN A SENSE, everyone got what they wanted tonight. More or less, anyway.

Andy went home with a beautiful woman.

I came home alone.

And when I do, I make as much noise as possible. I want Ava to hear that I'm home, and that I am alone. I even turn on the TV to watch a bit of sports to prove to her I haven't brought anyone with me.

But she stays in her room, even when I knock softly before going to bed. She and I, we have a lot to talk about, but I realize when she won't respond to me, that I can't force it. If she's going to believe I'm just like her brother, I can only do my best to prove her wrong. If she doesn't want to hear it, then that's her choice.

No doubt, Andy was getting on my last nerve tonight with his obsessive need to bed a beautiful woman. But, in his bone-headedness, he made me realize how I'd changed in recent weeks. I think that's thanks to Ava. Even if our little trysts go nowhere, which is what it looks like, I found out how much nicer it is to be with someone you respect and actually have something to talk about with. It may not have been a good idea to get involved with her, but hell, she got what she needed and

I got something along the way, too. It's a win-win, if you ask me.

The bottom line is, as much as I would like to get to know her better and spend more time with her, it's just not meant to be. It would never work out. I suppose I'll always have some sort of affection for her, as beautiful, sexy, and smart as she is, and I'll always feel a little protective too, but no good could possibly come of our continued playing around. And the same goes for the other guys. We're just not what she's looking for. Sure, she got her Big O and all, but she doesn't want to be with a bunch of jocks from *Sports, Inc.*

Problem is, I have a feeling *she* might be what *we* guys are looking for.

AVA

Guys:

Jasper, Ethan, and Leo. I imagine you guys, on this Sunday morning, either sleeping in or in varying stages of whatever it is you do on a normal Sunday—Jasper, recovering from a night of drinking with my crazy brother; Ethan, taking Trudy and George out for their weekend errands; and Leo, editing and perfecting the magazine's photos because five days in a workweek are never enough.

Myself, I am writing this in bed instead of sitting by the front window in my infamous green easy chair because I need some privacy, which is not available at the moment with my brother and Jasper lurking around the kitchen, burning toast and recapping their night out on the town. They'll be going out soon enough to brunch or something, and I'll have the apartment to myself again.

I've had some time to think these last days, and by think, I mean really dig into the depths of where I think my place in this universe is, as opposed to where I want it to be. I'm too young for a mid-life crisis, so maybe this is a young-life crisis?

As you might imagine, I've been thinking about us and our little posse... and that we're less Four Musketeers and more mismatched Ben & Jerry's flavors that never managed to make the supermarket shelves.

I'm not saying you guys aren't the best—you truly are. You've done so much for me, not least of which is restore my confidence in my sexuality. At the risk of sounding cheesy, I not only feel like a new woman, I am one. For the longest time I was afraid an orgasm was an elusive fantasy for me, something that happened for other women that wasn't quite within my reach. Odd, I know, given my profession. Yet here I am.

While I wasn't happy to find you'd learned my darkest, most personal secret, I do respect and appreciate how you went about making sure I was able to tackle it in the safest, sanest way possible. God knows who I would have ended up with had I followed Cami's suggestion to just pursue a Craigslist hookup. Yikes.

You've shown me that being with three guys can be sexy, fun, and at times, like playing a game of four-person Twister. But I've come to realize it's time to put our little game on pause, as much as I hate to say it.

Jasper, I can't keep you from being the New York master of the universe you are. There are so many women in New York ready and waiting to steal your heart, you mustn't waste your time on me. Ethan, you have been beyond lovely, but your moodiness is not something I want to deal with on a regular basis. It's just too stressful for sensitive me, and you deserve a girl who knows who the Knicks are, anyway. And Leo, sweet Leo, I totally get your motivations for working day and night, but with a schedule like that, you surely don't have time for anyone else, much less me.

So, my dear boys, it's time we all fly solo. Know that each of you holds a special place in my heart. This decision wasn't made lightly and surely wasn't

influenced by the hot UPS guy who visits the Glisten office every day (kidding!).

My final hope is that just because our play sessions are coming to an end, it doesn't mean we can't still be friends, share a laugh or a beer, and attend the occasional trivia night where you get your asses whooped by the real sports experts. Sorry, couldn't resist that!

In the end, remember, it's me. Not you.

With all the affection I can cram in a too-long email.

Your girl,

Ava

UGH. This is the lamest Dear John letter in the history of Dear Johns. On the other hand, I'm not ending anything that ever really got started, so calling it a Dear John is kind of flattering myself, and not in a good way.

And the situation I've gotten myself into with the guys is hardly anything to create drama around, anyway. I mean, we all got what we wanted, right? Some sexy time for all of us, and many nice orgasms for me. They got off, I got off, end of story. No harm, no foul, to use one of the only sports sayings I know.

All that's left for me now is to find a way to spin my story into an article about my first Big O without letting on that my true sexual 'initiation' happened only recently. *Very* recently. Doing that should be easy, but that's probably what Danny thought when he was stealing Martha Stewart's recipes and passing them off as his own.

Gulp.

I have considered, for a moment, just telling the truth to my *Glisten* readers. But then how would that go over for someone (me) who's been positioned as an expert on all things relationship and sexual? I'd think, and surely the rest of the world would agree, that one can't be any kind of expert when

she can't achieve her own climax, the ultimate end goal of a sexual encounter.

I click *print* so I can look over a hard copy of my letter before sending it into the email inboxes of my three lovers.

Former lovers.

I poke my head out my bedroom door. The guys left a while ago, but don't want to take any chances on running into either of them. I don't need my brother to distract me, nor Jasper's piercing blue eyes to weaken me to the point where I lose all resolve.

While the printer is click-clicking in my room, I peek out the front window behind my green chair, where I wish I'd been sitting all along. It's a gorgeous Sunday morning, so I throw on my sweats and sneakers and head out for a coffee and the couple errands I can carry out today, on a day when a lot of things in the city are closed.

AVA

WHEN I GET BACK to the apartment, the guys are there and their voices are loud.

Ugh. I just cannot deal with more of their drunken obnoxiousness. It's barely noon. I'll bet anything they went to one of those brunches that offer 'bottomless bloody Marys' or something like that.

I should have stayed on that park bench where I'd been enjoying my coffee, but when a large blob of bird poop landed right next to my thigh, I figured that's when I needed to get moving.

The few blocks back to my apartment were lovely and peaceful. The city was surprisingly quiet, probably because people were gone for the weekend. I wandered along, something I never allow myself to do because I'm always in too much of a hurry, or otherwise tell myself no self-respecting New Yorker ever would meander, enjoying the pre-war architecture like a silly out-of-town tourist.

That's just stupid.

But my peace is shattered when the guys' booming voices greet me before I even get to our door.

"Hey, what's all the noise—" I start to say once inside.

The guys immediately silence themselves, surprise covering their faces. Which makes no sense because, after all,

I live here.

“What is this?” Andy booms, waving around a piece of paper like a maniac.

Jasper just looks like he’s in shock.

Ugh. What the hell are they up to and why is my brother shouting?

Boneheads, both of them. They need to realize they’re not in college anymore and grow the hell up.

I shake my head in his face. “Andy, shut it. There are other people in this building who don’t want to hear your big mouth.” I push past them and head to my room to finish my letter.

But when I get there, it’s not on the printer where I left it.

Oh.

Fear and shame wash over me. Have I been discovered? Does Andy have my letter, confessing my most personal thoughts, meant only to be shared with Jasper, Ethan, and Leo?

How did he get it? What was he doing in my room? He spent the weekend on the living room sofa. He had no reason to go in my room. But he is my brother, and still seems to think what’s mine is his, just like he did when we were growing up.

Asshole.

He’s mad I got together with Jasper, not to mention the other guys. I know it. He always told his friends to stay away from me, which is stupid in itself, but was maybe acceptable when we were in high school. But we’re adults now, so he can suck it.

Still, I don’t want to deal with him and his rage, so I consider locking my bedroom door and leaving via the fire escape. But when I look out my window, I realize I have no idea how to operate it and am not about to jump four stories down, no matter how my brother is banging outside my door.

As he continues to roar unintelligible words, which I am not sure are directed at me or Jasper, I clench my fists hard, hard enough to dig my nails into my palms until it hurts. I tense as my heart booms in my ears, and realize I am not down with Andy's bullshit.

Not one bit.

I fling my bedroom door open and charge at him.

"Hey, asshole, my life is none of your business," I holler back, snatching the paper out of his hand, now crumpled and smeared.

His mouth drops open in surprise, only for a moment though.

Jasper's eye glasses are on the ground, one side of them shattered, and his fists are balled, ready to strike Andy for what I guess is not the first time, given the drop of blood under his nose.

Really? Fucking Neanderthal meat heads.

I get up in Andy's face, and he really, truly, takes a step back. I've never done this before and am not sure who's more surprised, him or me.

"What I do is none of your business!" I scream.

He sputters before gathering himself. "Y... you fucked my best friend, and it looks like some of his friends too. What's wrong with you? You're *disgusting*," he sneers at me.

Oh no he didn't.

I step toward him and push him in the shoulders as hard as I can. It barely impacts him, and he shifts only enough to offset my shove. Neither the gravity of my effort, nor my anger, are lost on him, though.

"I'm disgusting? *Me*? What about you, running around New York like a goddamn pig, sleeping with any woman who parts her legs for you? You think that's respectable? You think that's classy? Just because you're a guy?"

His open mouth slowly closes. While he's taken aback, I continue my tirade.

“*You're* the disgusting one, talking about women like they're nothing but objects, like they have nothing to offer you beyond their vaginas and mouths—”

Andy cuts me off with a booming laugh so unexpected I halt my outburst. Now recovered, he takes a step back toward me and looms over me with a finger in my face. Jasper is somewhere to our side, waving his arms and saying something, but nothing is registering. I am solely focused on my brother and his asshole-ness.

“You,” he laughs again, spittle flying from his mouth, “have a lot of nerve talking about the other girls in New York. They aren't *fucking three guys*. You're the biggest whore of all.”

I raise my arm to slap him across the face, but of course he catches it, pulling me into a painful twist.

“And you know what, my trampy little sister, your buddy over there is not as innocent as you might think. He got a little action last night, himself.”

Oh.

Of all the things Andy spews in my face, this is the only one that knocks me off my feet. And I have no idea why.

But he sees this and capitalizes on it.

“Tell her, Jas. Tell her what your night was like, why don't you?” he scoffs.

“Quit being an asshole, Andy. You know I didn't do anything. I'm not like you—”

Andy's head snaps in Jasper's direction, and I wonder if they're going to start fighting again. “Like *me*? What the hell does that mean?”

With Andy focused on Jasper, I shove him again, so hard he backs up against the front door. Then, I run and grab his duffel bag, shove anything in it I can see is his, and jam it into his stomach.

“Get out!” I scream. “Get the fuck out!”

He looks at Jasper like he expects to be defended, but then it dawns on him that ship has sailed.

“You know what?” he hisses, throwing his duffel over his shoulder, “you two deserve each other. Couple of losers, you are.”

He slams the door so hard a picture falls off the wall, and I don't care. I don't care about anything, and run back to my room and lock my door.

AVA

“GLENDA WOULD LIKE to see you in her office.”

I look up to see Pain in the Ass jeering over the wall of my cube, looking like she just won the lottery.

Just what I need.

“Seems like she wants to talk to you about something *important*,” she sing-songs.

I stand, gathering a notebook and pen. Glenda likes us to be prepared. “Thanks, Pia,” I chirp. “Now why don’t you get back to your desk and pretend to do some work?”

Her face turns pink, and her hand rises to touch it.

I don’t wait for her comeback. If she even has one.

She’s not used to me talking to her like that but after yesterday and the huge blow-out with my brother, I have no fucks left to give.

“Morning, Glenda,” I say, settling into the chair opposite her desk, where I have so many times before. “I think my sports boyfriend piece is gonna hit big. What do you think?”

Instead of gushing over my latest brainchild, she places her elbows on her desk, steeples her fingers like she does when she’s thinking, and stares at me intently.

“Ava, have you been truthful with me?”

Something flutters in my stomach, then turns into a tumbling boulder, and the coffee I just finished turns into a bad taste in my mouth. I wish I had a mint. I have some at my desk, but I don't suppose I could excuse myself... and never come back.

Just saying.

I swallow, but damn if my throat isn't suddenly parched like the desert. "What do you mean, Glenda? What are you getting at?"

She sits back in her chair and throws me a half-smile. "You know I'm all about having work friends. They're very important, and if I think about it, some of my closest friends are people I've met at my various jobs."

I nod. "Okay."

What the hell?

"I'm gonna get right to the point. It seems your work bestie, Cami, left her DMs open, and someone—I can't tell you who—saw your correspondence with her about an... orgasm problem."

No.

I'm suddenly dizzy and even though I'm seated, the room starts to move around me, agonizingly slowly, but enough to threaten me with vomiting.

God no. Just no. I begin an inventory of the personal items in my cube. Will they fit in a banker's box, like Danny's did? Will people stare as the security guards march me out the door?

Will Cool Vibes still want me to be part of their speaker series?

"I see," I say quietly because there's nothing else to say.

"So, my first point is be careful in the workplace with your personal info. But more importantly, I want to know if there's anything you want to tell me."

I don't know if I am desperate to get something off my chest, or if I'm just comforted by the kindness in her eyes, but I start to spew my story. While the unburdening riddles me with both relief and agony, there's no stopping. She's going to hear it all, the whole damn drama. I might not have a job at the end of this, but at least I can say I was honest. For once.

"Oh Glenda..." I recap everything, from the orgasm problem, to my fears of being a fake like Danny, to the guys. I address it all.

Yes, I really do tell her about Jasper, Ethan, and Leo.

Her eyes are wide at my confession, but hell, she's been in New York a long time. She's heard it all and I doubt my story about getting involved with three guys phases her. If it does, I'll take comfort in knowing I widened her horizons.

Just like I did mine.

She scratches her head, something I've never seen her do. Maybe I *have* thrown her off, after all. "Okay, Ava. And these three guys work at *Sports, Inc?*"

I nod. "Yes. But I've broken it off with them, Glenda. I can't date three guys. Hell, I can barely date one," I laugh weakly.

But the guys are the least of my worries, at least at the moment.

I press my fingers over my mouth, as if that will slow my verbal diarrhea. "Glenda, I'm sorry. I did deceive you, the magazine, and all my readers. I feel awful about it." My voice cracks. "What kind of sex columnist can't have an orgasm?"

She studies me, saying nothing. I generally know her well enough to intuit what she's thinking. But this time, I can't read her.

I let her down. This woman gave me a chance at a terrific career, supported me every step of the way, and I repay her by being a fake-ass idiot.

I get to my feet. "I'm so sorry, Glenda. I'll go put together my resignation letter right now."

She frowns, waving at me to sit back down. I do so, bracing myself for what is sure to be a dressing down before I leave the premises of *Glisten* forever.

“Ava, you have just shed light on something very important, something that probably plagues a good percentage of our readers. You were ashamed of not orgasming, and so you hid it. How many other women are just like you?” she asks.

I look down at her gleaming desk, where not a speck of dust can be seen, to avoid her gaze. The shame is real. And it’s unfair. “I don’t know... I mean, I *do* know. A lot. A lot of women can’t orgasm.”

“And if a woman like you can’t talk about it, think how it is for others.”

She’s right. I get mail every day from women who confide in me because they don’t have anyone else.

“Ava, you have some big thinking to do. Please do not go back to your desk to pen your resignation letter. Take it easy today. Head home if you want. You have some decisions to make not only about your professional life, but also your personal one.”

Tears sting my eyes. Dammit, I hate crying at work.

Glenda stands, signaling it’s time for me to leave. “And for heavens’ sake, Ava, tell Cami not to leave her DMs open for the world to see.”

AVA

“ARE you gonna tell me what happened?” Aunt Dede asks, pressing her perfectly outlined lips into a thin line.

God, I hope I look like her when I’m in my seventies, with her coiffed silver bob and tight jawline.

Thanks to Manhattan’s best hairdressers and plastic surgeons. But still.

I sigh. No use beating around the bush. “What did Andy tell you?”

I don’t really need to ask. I’m just stalling for time. When I kicked my brother out of Jasper’s and my apartment, he went running to Aunt Dede’s like the bitch he is. No doubt he told her everything.

I’m never this salty. It feels good. After I bared my soul to Glenda, I’m feeling kind of... badass.

Like what’s the worst that can happen, when the worst already has?

I sneak a look at my cell when Aunt Dede’s ordering her martini. Good news. No email from Glenda. I haven’t been fired. Yet.

My aunt waits for the waiter to leave, then leans a smidge closer to me for privacy. “He told me... about all the men.”

For the second time in a day, tears burn my eyes. I blink hard and dab at their corners to keep my mascara intact.

But the despair is just too much. My secrets are out, leaving my job and reputation on the line, my brother cruelly judged me, and I like three men who I can't possibly be with.

On top of that, I sent my email to the guys this morning.

Haven't heard a word back, not from any of them.

They no doubt think I'm a psycho who completely fabricated an imagined affection for me on their part, and are counting their blessings at being through with me.

They're probably laughing over the whole fiasco right now at lunch.

I'm such a fool.

That's when the waiter returns to take our order, and because I can't stop the tears, I look down, shielding my face with a hand on my forehead.

Aunt Dede leans closer. "Dear, what would you like for lunch?"

My shoulders shake as I try my hardest to subdue a sob.

"All right, then. She'll take a house salad. And a hot tea. Please hurry with the hot tea," she says quietly.

"Yes, ma'am," the waiter says in a kind and discreet voice.

"Oh, Aunt Dede," I whisper, taking the hanky she passes me. "I've made so many mistakes. So many. No wonder my ex dumped me like he did."

"My girl," she says, taking my hand off my face so I have to look at her. "We all have our secrets, and when they are discovered, we think the end of the world is nigh. But I can tell you, after having stood in your same shoes many times over the years, that you will come out the other side of this. You are a Sterling. You are strong. And besides, I can't let you go back to that horrid little town you grew up in, so you have to pull your shit together."

My tears stop long enough to let me emit a very unattractive and unladylike snort. I've never, in all my life, heard Aunt Dede mutter a swear word.

She is undeterred. "I have so much to say to you, Ava, that it would take hours to counter every grievance you have at this moment. So I won't even try. I just want you to know that one of the things I admire most about you is that you always try to do what's right. You don't have an ounce of malevolence in you. Unlike your brother, Andy. Who, by the way, I told to hit the road after hearing how he talked about you."

Oh my god. I never knew Aunt Dede had an ounce of respect for me, never mind thought so well of me.

Silver lining of the day. Week, even.

Of course, her words lead to another deluge of tears, causing the waiter to drop off my salad at the edge of the table and run for cover.

"Th... thank you, Aunt Dede. I... thank you so much," I say, reaching for her hand.

Her fingers are long and thin and cool in mine, but the way she clasps mine back is all the comfort I could hope for. She has always been there for me, even when it hasn't been very obvious.

"Honey," she continues, "you would be aghast at all the inexplicable mistakes I've made in my life. But do you think I let them get me down? I mean, I might feel bad initially, but I pull my shoulders back, hold my head high, and keep moving forward. That's what's great about this city. You can always reinvent yourself."

I stare at her. Just stare. She, the most composed and together human I've ever known, has fucked up?

And I never had any idea, because she came out unscathed, or at least as unscathed as one can be in this world.

"Aunt Dede, how come you never married?" I blurt.

She tilts her head and turns over her fork on the table a couple times. "I had a long-term affair with a married man.

That was my first mistake.”

A blow to the head with a hammer would have hit me more lightly.

“Would you like to hear about the other things I’ve made a mess of? How much time do you have?” she asks, waving the waiter over to order another martini.

ETHAN

“LOOK. I know you don’t really want to talk to me. But I need your help.”

While Ava takes her time responding to me, I face the window in my office so no one can see me and squeeze my eyes shut.

I am fucked. *So* fucked.

I hear her breathing on the other end of the line, so I know she’s still there. Finally, she speaks.

“Ethan, it’s not that I don’t want to talk. It’s just that... I think some distance is best for the time being. But what happened? What do you mean, you need my help?”

I knew I could count on her.

“Some woman in your office is saying I harassed her in the elevator.”

The very words make me want to hurl my lunch. I move my trashcan closer in case I do.

The accusation is absurd on so many levels, but what is vexing me most is *why*? Why would a woman I don’t even know make up something about me?

I’ve wracked my brains. Did I look at someone wrong? Say something rude? Bump into somebody? Every time, I come up blank.

I come to work at Bonded Crest every damn day and work my ass off. I don't have time for anything else, much less making a pass at some woman in the elevator.

"Are you kidding, Ethan?"

I roll my shoulders to ward off some of my tension. It doesn't work. "I wish I were, Ava. She's from *Glisten*. They won't tell me what I did, nor who filed the complaint. But I saw her name on HR's paperwork."

She pauses. "Who... who was it?" she asks quietly.

"Someone named Pia. Do you know her? I don't. It's crazy. I'm losing my mind. I guess I just wanted to know if you have any insights. I know you can't do anything," I say like a rambling idiot.

"Did... did you say *Pia*?" she whispers.

"Yeah. At least that's what the paperwork I saw says. This sucks. It fucking sucks. Even if she can't prove anything, this is still a mark against me. It's not right."

"Oh my god," she says quietly.

"I know, right? This is unbelievable—"

She cuts me off. "Meet me at the coffee shop two blocks over. Hurry."

And she's gone.

Well, damn. I don't need this to turn into some cloak and dagger bullshit, but what the hell.

Five minutes later I enter the coffee shop, quiet due to the hour, and spot Ava in the back, semi-hiding behind a post.

I have to say, she's fucking stunning, blonde curls cascading over her shoulders, and her blue wrap dress matching her eyes.

Down, boy.

"Ava," I say.

"Oh my god, Ethan. I know this woman, Pia, whose name you saw on the complaint, and she has it out for me. I think

she knows about us, about all the guys actually, and to get me, she's going after you too." Elbows on the table, she drops her head into her hands.

"I... I don't mean to burden you with this, Ava. I just wanted to find out... whatever I can. What do you mean, she has it out for you?"

"For some reason she doesn't like me. She's always setting me up. I guess at one point she wanted my column and didn't get it. But I know she found out some personal stuff about me—and you guys—by snooping in Cami's DMs. She must think if she embarrasses me enough, I'll leave and she can have the column."

Holy shit. That's serious stuff, especially since Ava's already dealing with a lot. I shouldn't have involved her. She's gone pale and if I'm not mistaken, her hands are shaking.

Jesus, she's just had a shit of a time lately. I didn't need to pile on more. And yet, I am.

"Would... would you feel comfortable putting that in writing for me? Look, I don't feel like you owe me anything, but it would be such a help."

She reaches for my hand, and I realize I thought I might never feel her touch again. "Of course, Ethan. We can't let her get away with this."

I curl my fingers around hers and a bit of calm runs through me. I'm still amped up, but the woman soothes me in ways she has no idea about. "I've missed you, Ava. The guys and I, when we got your email, we wanted to talk together before we responded—"

She waves away my words. "Don't. I don't want to talk about that. Let's just iron out this Pia matter. Get it taken care of once and for all." She stands to go. "I'll head back first. I don't want her to see us together and get any ideas about messing with us further."

She pats me on the shoulder and leaves.

Jesus. I'm happy for her help, I really am. I guess I also thought there'd be a chance to kind of reconnect with her.

Clearly not anything she's interested in.

ETHAN

I LOOK AT JASPER, who caught the worst of Andy's wrath—after Ava— when he found out about us, and in spite of Jasper's request to just let it lie, I really don't feel like keeping my thoughts to myself at the moment.

“Look, I know Andy too, and the dude was completely out of line, coming down on his sister like that,” I say.

I won't be forgetting, no matter what anyone else does. I have my mind to speak.

Jasper shrugs. “Fine. Do what you want, man. I think we should let it go. Talking won't mean a hill of beans for him. He's a stubborn fucker.”

Leo gazes out the diner window. He hasn't said much since we got Ava's letter, which I think actually says a lot. He's hurting like we all are, maybe even more so. He's just not the kind of guy to talk about it. I know he's been through some shit in his past. Hell, who hasn't? But if he wants to be closed off about it all, that's his choice.

I call Andy from the privacy of my office. I really should be doing this at home in case I lose my cool, but part of the reason for calling him from my office is that should I lose my cool, I can't get too crazy at work.

“Andy, it's Ethan.”

Silence.

“Dude, I really need to talk to you,” I say, wondering if he’s going to just hang up the phone.

But Andy’s not like that. He always has to have the last word, which means he’d never hang up without blowing his usual quantity of hot air.

“What do you want, Eth? Calling to say you knocked up my sister?”

The guy’s always been a bit of a dick, but I let it slide because he and Jasper were so close. Not sure I can let that happen anymore.

I take a deep breath. He’s not going to goad me with crude remarks about Ava. “Look, man, I’m not calling you to fight. I want to make things right between us.”

“Go on,” he says.

“I’m sorry you feel betrayed by me. I know the other guys feel the same, but they can have their own conversations with you. I’m calling for myself. And I want you to know I care about Ava. There’s nothing inappropriate about my liking her. She’s a great woman and... in spite of the email she wrote, which I know you saw, I’m hoping that at some point I can talk to her and see where things go.”

Andy inhales a deep breath. “Eth, how do you expect me to feel? My little sister is doing three guys. In what world is that okay?”

“Andy, look, I know it’s not your traditional kind of relationship, but we were making it work. At least I thought so. We had a great connection. She broke it off because she was scared. That’s what I think, anyway.”

“No. She broke it off because you’re not the kind of guy she goes for. Sorry to tell you this, Eth, but she’ll never go for you. She got her rocks off, and now she’s done. She’s set her sights higher, no offense. She’s on her way up in the world and won’t let a guy like you drag her back down.”

Whoa. I had no idea this guy thought so little of me.

I clench my fists in the hope that it will keep my voice—and my words—under control. “That’s pretty... heavy, Andy. Do you feel the same way about Jasper and Leo?”

He scoffs. “Hell, even more so about them. At least you make a decent living. You have more of a chance than the other broke bastards...”

I tune him out while he monologues about how he knows none of us guys are going anywhere in life and will never amount to much of anything while he, on the other hand, has some sort of Midas touch.

Delusions are what he has. Nothing more, and certainly no Midas touch.

What a crazy fucking dirtbag. I feel sorry for Ava, that she has to call this creep family.

I decide to end the call on a cordial note, even though I’d love to tell the guy how I really feel. “Well, Andy, I want to thank you for listening, and also for sharing your thoughts. It’s good to know you think so little of us guys. Just think, if this blow-up had never happened, we’d have no idea you thought we were such losers. So, I guess, in the end, this is a win-win.”

“Now, wait a minute, Ethan—” he says.

Is he going to backpedal? Why bother?

“Nah. It’s all good, Andy. I know where I stand with you. No hard feelings. Just, you know, go fuck yourself.”

ETHAN

“GUYS, maybe we did make a mistake. You know, getting involved with her,” I say.

As shitty as Andy was to me on the phone, I do still feel a little bad for knocking the wind out of him the way we did. While he’s Jasper’s long-time college buddy, I never wanted to push him over the deep end and elicit the kind of response we did.

Even if he does think we’re losers.

Leo shrugs, speaking up for once. “You don’t know how things will turn out when you start. You were going on emotion. We all were. We all fell for her.”

Whoa. Leo expressed a feeling.

And he’s right. We did fall for her. The feeling just wasn’t mutual.

It doesn’t matter, though. She doesn’t want anything to do with any of us. Maybe Andy had a point. Maybe we’re not what she’s looking for. When I ran into her in the lobby of our building the other day, she cordially said hello, waved, and kept on walking. I’m sure that won’t be the first time she does that.

She did, however, make good on her promise to help me. She put the whole story of Pia snooping in DMs, finding out things she never should have, and discovering our trysts, in a

long email to her boss and mine, who pretty much immediately figured out what was going on and roped in HR. Everything was solved and wrapped up in a neat package. I was exonerated and the company apologized. Ava saved my ass.

But so did something else, something Pia hadn't counted on.

The elevator's security cameras. When the date and time of her accusation was looked up in the building's tapes, it was immediately obvious she was full of shit.

Needless to say, she's no longer employed at *Glisten*.

I guess Ava's happy about that. I don't know though, because she won't speak to me.

AVA

THE MOVING van arrives at nine a.m.

I actually don't need a full-on van since I'm taking only what I absolutely need, but I can't live without my green chair, the thing no one loves except me. Problem is, I can't squeeze that into an Uber. Besides, the van is free—Cami's husband Steve is the finance guy for some big moving company, so I got it on the house.

Of course, that means it came without a crew, thus why Steve is yelling up at my window from the middle of the street.

“Yo, Ava. You up?” he hollers.

Thank goodness I took a day off work. If I were doing this on a weekend, Steve would be waking everyone on the block, thus taking his life in his hands. Instead, most everyone is at work already, or if they work remotely, are probably wearing headphones for their Zoom calls.

I lean out the window and like always, wonder why Cami bitches endlessly about this man. He's adorable with his slight paunch and balding head, made all the cuter by his dimples. But the best thing about him is his generous heart. And that fact that he puts up with Cami. For some reason that is beyond me, he adores her.

She recently ranted to me about how he implied that she's vertically challenged—which she is. Seems his sin was buying her the sexy pair of high heels she's been eyeing.

Poor man.

“Hey, Steve,” I say, waving.

His bright smile makes the arduous task at hand seem like it won't be so bad.

I am moving out. No more awesome apartment. No more roommate Jasper. And certainly, no more of the three guys, whether together or individually.

I'm not taking all my things. I can figure that out later, if and when I've decided on my next steps. For now, I just need some space and a new perspective. Cami offered me the guest room in her apartment, so I jumped at it. My current apartment is, at least at the moment, just too much of a tornado of emotions. In fact, I got to the place where I couldn't even sleep at night, and am avoiding Jasper, leaving before him in the morning, and hiding in my room when he gets home.

So freaking juvenile and stupid, I know. But I can't figure out what else to do. Except leave.

“Just these boxes here,” I say to the burly helper I hired off Craigslist.

With a nod, he bends to pick up three heavy boxes of books like they're nothing but feathers and heads for the door where Steve waits downstairs. He's already tackled the green chair, lifting it over his shoulder without breaking a sweat.

I look around the apartment Aunt Dede found for me. She doesn't want me to leave and had a shit fit insisting that Jasper move out instead. She feels she has somewhat of a claim on the place and that ‘it should stay in the family.’ I assured her it will, and that I'll move back in if and when Jasper vacates, or I'll ask him to split. It's just that right now, for the time being, I need to get out of here.

It's not easy leaving, though. This is my first home in New York, and it's beautiful. High ceilings and large windows make

the place feel massive, and I love that I've had my own bathroom.

I'll be sharing one bathroom with both Cami and Steve. I hope that doesn't get old too fast.

So now I'll really just be seeing the guys in the elevator and lobby at work. I wish I weren't going to run into them at all. I don't want my resistance weakened every time I see one of their gorgeous faces.

It's funny, how, when spending a relatively short amount of time with someone—or *someones*—you can get... attached. I mean, the guys treated me better than any other guy ever has, the sex was off the charts, and they were just so freaking fun.

Makes me wonder for a moment whether I really should be running away.

Ugh. Of course, I should. What a ridiculous thing to consider. I've thought long and hard about this and I know it's the right thing to do.

Even though Aunt Dede told me I should reconsider. She stressed that true connection is hard to come by. She thought she had that with a man many years ago, even though he was committed to someone else. By the time she came to her senses and left him, it was too late for her. She missed her opportunity, waiting for someone who would never be there for her.

A story as old as time, she explained.

Maybe in her generation there was an 'expiration date' for women. I'm not going to try to change her mind on that—what would be the point?—even though it seems to me she threw in the towel too easily.

It's funny. I never thought the day would come when I heard a hint of regret in Aunt Dede's voice. She's such the diva, the woman about town, always perfectly coiffed, with tons of friends and activities. From the outside, she seems to have the perfect life.

Key word, *seems*.

If there's one thing I'm learning, it's that no one has a perfect existence. Everyone gets their share of life's shit sandwich.

In spite of Aunt Dede's insights, that doesn't stop me from running away from my own situation. Maybe she and I have more in common than I thought. I jump in the front seat of Steve's van with the moving guy, thanking them both for the hundredth time. We bump over the city streets until we reach Steve and Cami's apartment on the other side of town, pile out of the moving van, and start carrying things up the stairs.

When we're finally done, hands on hips, Steve looks around his and Cami's apartment, now littered with my stuff. "Cami warned me about the green chair," he says, laughing and poking the seat like it might be booby-trapped.

I move protectively toward it. I can't help myself. This darn chair has been the subject of never-ending insults since I got it, and I feel the need to defend it like it's my offspring. "Cami said there'd be space for it in the guest room. I'll just shove it in a corner. I have a funny attachment to it and I couldn't bear leaving it behind, worrying about what Jasper and his dude-bros might do to it."

"Don't blame you, hon," he says with a kind smile. "I'm heading back to the office. You make yourself at home, okay?"

My eyes fill with tears, and I throw my arms around him. "Thank you, Steve. Thank you so much."

Soon as he's gone, I sit in my beloved chair, where I've shed so many tears before, and shed some more, pushed over the edge by Steve's sensitive kindness. I am truly, truly lucky that my bestie's husband is nice enough to help out one of her friends without question and without a smidgeon of resentment.

When I'm finally dry, I get to my feet and start dragging my belongings into the guest room. The last thing I want to do is wear out my welcome here too fast. I'm not sure Aunt Dede has any more Manhattan apartments up her sleeve, and I sure can't go back to where I just came from.

AVA

CRAP, it's getting close to six. To celebrate my new digs, I offered to make dinner for Cami and Lana since Steve is working late.

I push the last of my belongings into every nook and cranny of the guest room—my room for now—and dash to the kitchen to see what I can whip up.

Tearing through Cami's cabinets and fridge, I locate a can of artichoke hearts and an entire dozen eggs. I text Lana to pick up some wine and a salad, and set to work coating the artichokes with egg and flour, and then add them to a hot frying pan, followed by more eggs.

Just in time for the two of them to arrive, I pull a soft, creamy omelet, one of my specialties, off the stove. Actually, this is one of the few things I can cook well and is kind of my fallback.

When the front door opens, Lana barges in, all flying hair, perfume, and sample-sale luxury including a Chanel flap bag I still don't know how she afforded. "Honey, honey, honey," she says, enveloping me in her cashmere-covered arms, smothering my face into her huge chest. She strokes my hair before letting me come up for air, holding me at arms' length, studying my face as if for visible wounds.

I shake myself free. "I'm okay, Lana. I really am."

I mean, I *guess* I am.

She takes a seat at the kitchen counter while Cami fidgets behind me, opening and serving lukewarm chardonnay.

I go to the freezer and help myself to an ice cube for my wine. I am staying here now, after all, so there's no need to hide my tacky habits. Most of them, anyway. "Cami, your husband was so nice to me today. He's such a good guy."

"Yeah. He's all right. Sometimes," she says with a shrug.

Damn.

I raise an eyebrow. "Still think he's cheating?"

She sighs loudly. "*No. I don't.* I was just freaking that day. It's all behind me now," she huffs.

Yeah, until the next time it comes up.

"What about your vertically challenged insult? Ever work that out?" I really shouldn't be bringing up sore subjects because it's none of my damn business, but since I have to hear all Cami's married life drama, I feel entitled to my comments.

"Um, well, yeah. That was kind of silly of me. I am short, after all. And his buying me high heels doesn't mean a thing. After I put them on, he could barely keep his hands off me, he was so hard—"

I raise my hand. "Okay. Enough. I don't need to hear that about your husband, Cam."

Lana picks up on the tension and changes the subject. "So, ladies, here we are. A new view for Ava, if temporarily, but it's always nice to freshen the scenery." She raises her glass to me.

I can't deny that lingering in the back of my mind is whether my move here will turn into a case of buyer's remorse. But I can't think that way.

Get it together, girl.

"It feels good to be here. Like I can breathe for the first time in weeks," I say, all breezy and casual.

Cami looks at me suspiciously but Lana accepts my cavalier remark, moaning as she tastes a bite of my omelet. “Damn, girl. Where’d you learn to make this? I’m about to have an orgasm without even touching my goodies.”

Cami and I giggle.

“Speaking of goodies,” Lana continues, raising a finger in the air, “I want you to know, Ava, that I hooked up with your brother.”

A forkful of food misses my mouth, and artichoke omelet splats the front of my shirt. And I still don’t close my mouth.

Oh God.

I try to set my fork down quietly, but it clanks on my plate like a warning bell. I want to grab the whole bottle of wine and drain it in one gulp, but I’m afraid my shaking hands might drop it. So I just grip the counter edge.

Lana? With my brother? Andy?

Andy Sterling, the guy I grew up with, whom I just had a giant blowout with?

That Andy?

Cami coughs and sputters. “*What?*”

I’m glad she’s asking questions because I am at a complete and total loss for words.

Lana tops off her wine. “Yeah. And it was so hot.”

No, no, no.

I clear my throat, which has gone bone dry, and move my lips, hoping for the best. “H... how...?” I croak. The eggs are suddenly sulfurous in my mouth and the wine tastes like it’s gone bad.

And I thought this dinner was the start of a great new beginning. Now, all I want to do is go to bed, pull the covers up, and come out next year.

“Well,” Lana starts excitedly, “I was out last weekend and ran into Jasper. He was with your brother, obviously, and we

hit it off.”

“Y... you are the woman he had a one-nighter with? Out of all the women in New York City, he was with *you*?”

She nods excitedly and laughs, shaking her head at her good fortune. “I *know*! What are the chances? I can’t wait for him to come back and see if he’s up for pegging. It’s not an easy sell with straight guys, know what I mean?”

She looks at me like I might congratulate her or at least pat her on the back. Instead, I want to vomit. And possibly kill her.

Cami’s eyes are wide. She knows what’s coming.

“Th... that is the grossest thing I’ve ever heard,” I shriek, surprising the hell out of all three of us.

The room goes silent. No forks hitting plates, no wine glasses clinking on the tile counter.

I’m pretty sure no one’s even breathing.

Lana’s nostrils flare. Who knew she could do something so unbecoming? “Oh, calm down, Ava. Get your panties out of a twist and grow up.”

Really?

I jump to my feet and shake a finger in her face. “He’s... he’s a pig. And an asshole. You know what he called me? A whore. And a tramp. He’s a dirtbag, Lana.”

She sniffs. “Guess you now know what it’s like when a friend sleeps with one’s sibling.”

My head snaps back on my neck.

This is like my sleeping with Jasper and the guys? Am I just being a big old hypocrite, taking a page out of my brother’s playbook?

But no, it’s not the same. I have—correction, *had*—feelings for them. It wasn’t just a hook up.

I don’t know what else to do so I go back to my omelet, forcing myself to eat what now tastes like greasy cardboard.

Jasper must have known about Lana and Andy. I don't know what pisses me off more—that they got together, or that Jasper hid it from me. On the other hand, I haven't exactly been available for him to chat with.

Cami lets out a long, low whistle, and everyone goes back to their food.

Before long, Lana finishes her wine and picks up her bag. “Look, Ava, I'm sorry I upset you. It's just that he's so hot and boy did he have a big—”

“Stop!” I yell, holding my palm in her face.

She sighs and heads for the door, quietly pulling it closed behind her.

I slump, just staring at my plate. “I ruined the evening.”

Cami rubs her hand up and down my back. “Sorry, baby. Stupid shit. Why don't you go chill and I'll clean up.”

I look at her, and while she's over the top a good deal of the time, I'm so grateful to have her. She always steps up when I'm in need.

But I'm not done for the evening. I shut my door and dial my brother.

“Hey asshole,” I say.

He grunts. “Good to hear from you too, little sis.”

“I hear you fucked my friend Lana.”

His voice perks up. “Yeah? She told you? How'd she say it was? Man, she's insatiable. Told me I'm the best she ever had ___”

“Gross, you jerk. I don't want to hear anything about it. But I do want to point out what a massive asshole-y hypocrite you are. Giving me shit for sleeping with a friend right after you'd done the same thing?” I hiss.

“Oh hell, Ava. It's not the same. You see, guys have this code of conduct, and it includes not fucking each others' sisters.”

“Shut it, Andy. You are a hypocrite and you know it, not to mention a judgmental asshole.”

I’m so done with this loser, even if he is my only sibling. I don’t need the kind of shit he doles out. I can get treated like crap by people I don’t know, not those who I do and who supposedly care about me.

“But you, Ava, you have made some messed-up life choices. And you know it.”

Oh, if he were here right in front of me, I’d punch him right in his pretty nose. In fact, I have half a mind to head home for the weekend just so I can do that.

“Fuck you, Andy. My life is none of your business. I don’t need your approval or guidance, and I will sleep with whomever I want, even if they are your friends,” I say, a scrap of control seeping back into my body.

“Fine. Whatever, Av. Just to let you know, I will be seeing Lana again. The woman is hot as shit and an animal in the sack.”

I force my jaw to relax, that’s how hard I’m gritting my teeth. “You are an idiot. Do you think she gives two shits about you? She goes through men faster than you lose clients in your little financial services business. Try to set up a date with her again. I’ll bet she doesn’t even return your call.”

He’s finally silent. Out of all the things to say, and out of all the ways to needle him, I just struck below the belt.

I may have gone too far.

In fact, I’m pretty sure I just did.

AVA

JUST WHEN I think I'm getting ahead, and that the good old universe is giving me a break, something comes back around to kick me in the teeth again.

What the hell did I ever do that was so bad?

But there's no sense in bellyaching. I have to move forward. It's finally Friday, the last day of the longest week of my life. Glenda told me I'm not getting fired for being a big phony, but I think she might just be holding out until she has a replacement for me. I know the woman likes me, but she doesn't like me that much. I have to find a new profession, a new place to live, and some new friends. Well, I'm keeping Cami for obvious reasons, and I know I can't really blame Lana for bedding my brother—it's just what she does—but every time she brings up how good he is in bed, I end up on the verge of losing my lunch.

Not only because I don't need to hear about my brother's sex life, but especially because he's such a top-notch creep.

I head home after work, or rather to Steve and Cami's, turning down offers from various coworkers to get a cheap happy hour drink or two. I want to swing by my favorite bath shop and buy some new lotion, maybe even bubble bath, go home, and watch an old Sex and the City rerun on my tablet. I've seen them all a hundred times, but something about the

mindlessness of the show is reassuring, not to mention how those girls bumble through life just like I do.

Settled into my green chair, I prop up my tablet on a little nightstand I've pulled close and dive into one of the many SATC episodes where Carrie makes a mess of yet another relationship. I put my cup of supposedly 'calming' tea on the floor because there's nowhere else to put it.

After burning my lips on the first sip, I find I'm having a little trouble concentrating. I reach into my work duffel bag on the floor and pull out a pen and paper. Before I know it, I've written *Jasper, Ethan, Leo*.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I flip the page over and go back to my show. Carrie falls into a pond in Central Park, and while I usually love that scene, even though she ruins the most beautiful dress I've ever seen, something about it bores me.

I turn my pad back over, and like a total sap, run my fingers over the guys' names, as if I'm actually touching them instead of paper and smudgy ink.

It doesn't feel like them. It just makes me miss them more.

I think back to a column I wrote a few years ago, when Marie Kondo and her sparking joy crap was all the rage. I asked my readers if the men in their lives were really adding to their happiness, to their joy, and advised them if not, it might be time to do the old 'swipe left,' to use the old online dating jargon. Declutter, as it were.

Had I swiped left too fast with regard to Jasper, Ethan, and Leo without really, I mean *really*, thinking about it?

I set aside my tablet while Carrie is still messing up her love life and compose a group text to the three guys before I can talk myself out of it.

How are you all doing?

I lean my head on my chair back, and when my phone vibrates, I nearly drop it.

It's just Cami.

Sorry, Cami.

She wants to know if I want Chinese for dinner. Sure, why not?

As the minutes tick by with no response from any of the guys—not a single one of them—I keep questioning my choices. Was I acting out of fear, pride, and foolishness?

Maybe all three?

I've never been that good at walking away from things that aren't working. Case in point, my loser ex. Now, maybe I'm too good at it.

Regret settles on my shoulders like a concrete weight, pushing me toward a despair I haven't felt since... well, the business with the ex. I guess I thought I was saving myself from the heartbreak of trying to date three guys, but I think I might have, stupidly, broken my own heart.

Is that even possible?

The fact of the matter is, I kicked them to the curb not only because they weren't right for me, but also because I was scared shitless. Scared of intimacy, scared of love, and scared of commitment.

So. Freaking. Lame.

And now here I am, camping out at Cami and Steve's, my belongings crammed into their guest room, watching a twenty-year-old TV rerun, and waiting for my Chinese takeout to arrive.

Living large, yup, that's me.

I thought giving the guys the heave-ho would declutter my love life, but now it just feels like I threw a winning lottery ticket out the window. Or three.

Fuck me. What have I done?

I chuck a pillow across the room, only succeeding in knocking over a big pile of books, and *not* making myself feel better. I look at my phone and while no more messages are

coming through, not from the guys or anyone, I realize I really fucked up my life. Hindsight is 20/20 or however that saying goes, but right now it's just giving me the middle finger. All my efforts to dodge potential drama set me up for nothing more than the pathetic state I'm in right now.

In my haste to protect my cold, hard heart, I eliminated the guys by their individual quirks, rather than looking at them all together, where they fit perfectly to make a potentially beautiful love story.

There's a knock on my door and Cami pokes her head in. One look at my face, and she knows everything. She comes and takes me by the hand to peel me out of my green chair, and leads me to the kitchen where she's made me a plate of the Chinese food she brought home. Steve looks up from his plate and just smiles, doing a great job of reading the room and realizing it isn't the right time to ask about anyone's day or weekend plans.

The ache in my chest refuses to go away, even after I choke down a couple bites of my favorite lo mein, but having friends like these two walk with me through my sadness is the best kind of dinner a girl could have.

LEO

IT'S KILLING ME. Just killing me.

I want nothing more than to respond to Ava's text reaching out to Jasper, Ethan, and me. But we promised each other we wouldn't. We want to give our girl—yes, I said *our girl*—time to think, and organize our next steps.

Which should be a doozy.

We told Ava's boss Glenda what we were up to, and she called what we're doing the 'grand gesture.' She waved us away with her blessing, in part because I think she has a thing going with my boss and knows I'm a nice guy.

Who said these *Glisten* ladies don't like jocks?

Grand gesture or not, we guys are taking a risk. I guess the worst Ava can say to our offer is to go to hell and don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out. That would hurt, but I suppose it wouldn't be the end of the world. Guys are used to rejection. Happens all the time.

Myself, I think this is what we are facing. But Jasper and Ethan are more optimistic. Maybe it's my hardscrabble background, but I always assume things will blow up before they go right. If they ever do.

Jasper and Ethan, who come to all this with more privilege than I do, always look on the bright side of things, assuming everything will work out just the way they want it to. They

come from a world where they're granted the benefit of the doubt, have networks of people to support them, and grew up with a type of financial security I'm only now just acquiring for myself.

All this is to say, guys like Jasper and Ethan have a different worldview than I. Things tend to work out for them. Me, I'm fifty-fifty on a good day. Guess that's why I work so hard.

So, when we came up with the idea to do something special for Ava, I agreed to go along with it against my better judgment. Maybe she'll shoot us down. Maybe she won't.

Only one way to find out.

The three of us approach her cubicle, as planned, and I can smell her before I even see her. I don't know if it's the shampoo she uses or some kind of fancy hand lotion, but her scent is imprinted on me like a freaking engraving. The minty-lemony-ness of it is somehow sexy and fresh at the same time.

Just like she is.

When we round the corner, we find her hunched over her laptop, typing furiously. Her blonde curls are piled up on her head with a pencil stuck through them, barely holding them in place.

I'd love to pull that pencil out and watch her curls go tumbling down her back.

By the time she sees us, we're already gathered around her. As agreed, we don't crowd her, not wanting to overwhelm her, nor give her the chance to tell us to hit the road before we've had the chance to say our peace.

As planned, I slap a plane ticket down on her desk.

She wrinkles her brow, her eyes darting between Jasper, Ethan, and me. "Um... hi?" she says uncertainly.

Jasper adjusts his heavy glasses, and beams at her. "We decided you need a vacation. Some time to... reset. And we'd like to treat you to that."

“Damn, Jas, *reset* is something you do with a phone. Or a computer. Not with a woman like Ava,” Ethan says, amused.

Jasper gives him a dirty look.

I run my hand down my chin and continue the pitch. “Ava, we’re here to take you on a little trip. And we’re hoping you’ll say yes.”

She scoffs. “Oh yeah. Sure. Like right now?”

I nod and she looks at us like we’re crazy. Maybe we are.

“Okay. I’ll just grab my bag and follow you guys wherever you want to go. My job doesn’t matter. My bills don’t matter. I’m free as a bird,” she quips. “I can just pick up and take off whenever I want.”

Leaning closer, Ethan tilts his head. “Funny girl. Yeah, we’re asking you to drop everything and leave now.”

Actually, we are.

“Give us a little credit,” he continues. “We’ve... made arrangements.”

She sits back in her chair, arms crossed. “Well, that’s great. Tell me about these *arrangements*,” she says, using air quotes.

Here comes the good part.

Jasper props his ass on her desk. “We’ve cleared a little time off with your boss, Glenda—”

She jumps to her feet. “You *what*?”

Jasper gestures for her to sit back down. She does not.

“—and Cami has packed a bag for you.”

Ava frowns and looks past us to Cami, on the other side of the office. Cami grins back, grinning and throwing us all a thumbs up.

Ava throws her arms up in Cami’s direction, her face covered in a giant but very pretty and very confused question mark.

She could still say no. Tell us to hit the road. Get out of her face. But Jasper and Ethan smile easily, like this is all a done

deal.

Cami whizzes by, notebook in hand, but slows long enough to throw in her two cents. “Av, you’ve been wearing that same blouse for four days. Switch it up, baby.”

Ava looks down at herself like she has no idea what she’s wearing.

“Um. Okay,” she says, suspiciously. “Were are we going, anyway?”

“London,” I say.

She bursts out laughing, and if I’m not mistaken, even snorts a bit. “You guys are too damn funny. *London!*” She turns back to her laptop, shaking her head in disbelief, and mumbling under her breath.

But Jasper, and his endless confidence, gently pushes her fingers off the keyboard and folds down the lid. Ava sits there, fingers poised like she’s about to type, but without anything to type on. “You deserve this, babe. You need to get away from here for a few days. And away from that sad little cactus,” he says, nodding at the dried-out, brown succulent.

Ava is mock-offended. “Hey, that cactus is my friend. She sticks with me through thick and thin.”

Joking aside, she hasn’t answered us and the wait is fucking killing me.

“What... what about my brother?” she says quietly.

We’re prepared for this.

“First of all, he’s not invited,” I say.

The laughter that follows lightens the mood.

“I talked to him, Ava. We all did. Told him if he had any sense, he’d thank us for looking out for you in a way he doesn’t. He should be grateful for us, the jerk,” Jasper says while Ethan and I nod.

“Well, well, well,” a voice says, dripping with mischief.

Lana's joined us, possibly here to help us seal the deal. "Lucky girl. Invited by these three handsome devils," she purrs. "I should be so lucky."

"Um, you have my brother, don't you?" Ava snaps back at her.

Lana purses her lips. "Like I said, I should be so lucky."

Enough said.

Ava's face turns pink, and it's so damn cute. "Lana," she squeals. "Really?"

Lana shrugs. "Don't worry, honey. I won't be seeing him again. Sometimes a one-nighter is best left as a one-nighter."

Ava frowns. "Does Andy know this?"

Flipping back her movie-star hair, Lana laughs. "If he hasn't figured it out by now, I think he will soon," she says, and slinks back to wherever she came from.

Ava looks from one of us to the other again, like she's still trying to suss out whether we're full of shit or the real deal. After an agonizing minute, at least for me, she says something.

"Did Cami pack my passport too? Because I can't go to London without my passport."

Fuck yeah.

LEO

AVA IS CRAMMED in the backseat of an Uber, stuffed between Ethan and me, while Jasper's in the front passenger seat.

Flipping her passport between her fingers, Ava stares straight ahead like she's nervous. "So... guys, how did you decide on London?"

"Ava," I say, carefully taking her hand, "when one doesn't know where to go, London is always a good idea."

"Hmmm. Isn't that supposed to be Paris?"

Jasper turns around from the front seat. "Paris was closed. Sorry, babe."

As the Uber heads toward JFK airport, our laughter settles and silence fills the cab. Ava's glance moves between us guys. "Seriously, though. Why London?"

Ethan shrugs. "It seemed like the best place for us to impress you. Ya know, a foreign country, but they still speak English and stuff."

"Ethan's leaving out the part about pubs on every corner," I add.

He nods. "Yes Leo, there is that..."

Ava tightens her fingers around mine and when I look, I see Ethan, on the other side of her, has taken her other hand. "So... you guys want to impress me, huh?"

“Well, that, and I knew you’d be most excited about *my* company,” Jasper jokes.

I fake cough. “Delusional,” I mutter.

The teasing drones on like it always does with us guys, until Ava interrupts.

“I... I have something to confess,” she says hesitantly.

The mood in the Uber shifts, but Jasper attempts to keep it light. “Wait. You really are an MI6 operative? I *knew* it.” He smacks his palm to his forehead.

“Yeah, you wish. If I were, we’d be in a badass car, heading to London on a private jet.”

Ethan snaps his fingers. “Damn. I knew I’d forgotten something.”

“All right, guys. Enough playing. I want to say something that’s been on my mind for a while. I never thought I’d have the chance to say this, but now that I do, this seems as good a time as any.”

The Uber driver puts in his ear pods. He’s apparently heard too much gum-flapping for one day.

“I... have fallen for you. Each of you. In different ways, and at different moments.” She points at Jasper. “I love your sense of humor and the way you light up a room, not to mention your supposed chick-magnet glasses that are anything but.”

Jasper fake-gasps and dramatically slides his new glasses off and into his jacket pocket, his last pair broken in the scuffle with Andy

She looks at Ethan. “At first, your grumpy-ass moods scared me. But now that I know they’re just part of who you are, I think they’re kind of funny. I mean, look at you. You’re on top of the world, and you still find things to complain about.”

Ethan’s frowns like he doesn’t know whether he was just paid an insult or compliment. The rest of us just laugh.

“And you, Leo,” she says, naturally saving the best for last, “I love how you’re a self-made man who seized the opportunities that came your way, even though you are married to your work.”

Jasper points at Ethan and me. “In case you guys are wondering, what Ava’s really saying is that I’m her favorite.”

Ava bursts out laughing and slaps Jasper on the shoulder.

He waves her off. “It’s all good, darling. I’m used to being the popular one.”

“Ava,” I say, “this trip will be unforgettable. I’ve never been to London, and I’ve certainly never been to London with a girl as pretty as you.”

“Hate to tell you, Leo, but you gotta share her with the rest of us,” Ethan says.

Our Uber pulls up to the curb, and we gather the small bit of luggage we have. None of us wanted to overpack, which we stressed to Cami when she packed for Ava. We plan to keep it light and unburdened, kind of how we plan to live our lives now that Ava’s back in them.

LEO

ETHAN SPRANG for some fancy-ass hotel in a part of London called Sloane Square, since he's Mr. Moneybags and besides, is prissy about where he sleeps.

Myself, I would have been okay with a dumpy youth hostel, not that I'd ever take Ava to a place like that. I just don't have the highbrow tastes the other guys do.

But when I see our room, I realize I could upgrade my palate, really fast.

The suite is sprawling, with incredible views of the city. Decorated in all whites and beiges, I'm both afraid to touch anything, but also lulled into the peaceful calm the décor offers.

There are two rooms as well as a living room, three bathrooms, and best of all, a full bar.

But I don't care much about any of that, and neither do Jasper or Ethan.

Ava jumps into the bath for a quick freshen-up and I pour her favorite champagne, ordered in advance, of course. The guys and I opt for scotch on the rocks, and we chill in the living room, waiting for our girl.

And damn if the wait isn't worth it.

She emerges in a long slinky gown and heels that Cami must have packed for her, bless the woman, and when she gets to the living room, she slowly turns so we can see her from all sides.

What a sight she is to behold. Dark green silk washes over her every curve, her nipples stiff from the tease of the fabric. As she moves, I can detect a tiny thong panty under her dress, and nothing else. No bra or anything.

Damn straight.

Ethan has a quiet jazzy tune playing on his phone, and Ava starts to move her hips in time to the music. She sips her champagne, and lets her head drop, her long curls tumbling down her back and brushing against her ass.

“That’s it, baby,” Jasper says in a low voice. “Show us how it’s done.”

I set my drink aside before I drop it, desperate to touch her skin after a painful sabbatical. I’m hard as a freaking boulder, my cock pressing painfully against the fly of my now too-tight blue jeans.

I shift in my seat to relieve some of the pressure. I have no choice—it was either do that or start crying like a baby over my pinched balls.

As Ava’s hips weave in time to the slow music, I look her up and down, savoring every inch of her body and the moment, trying to ignore my aching urge to touch her. I’m sure the other guys feel the same way, but I’m not looking at them.

They are not my problem, not at this moment.

“Take it off, baby,” Jasper says, gesturing that she remove the gown.

With a slight smile, she slips one strap down her shoulder and then the other, and with a little shimmy of her hips, the silk falls to the floor in a mound at her feet. She gracefully steps out of the pile of fabric, her tits shaking the smallest amount as she moves. Then, she bends to pick up the gown, giving me a perfect view of her ass and the thin layer of fabric

stretched over her pussy. If I'm not wrong, I can smell her excitement.

"You're something else, baby," I say.

I can think of a dozen dirty things I want to do to this woman, including lick that pussy until she is shaking and crying to come, then drive my cock deep inside and feel her squeeze my dick. In fact, I've been thinking about exactly this the past couple weeks every night when I rub one out.

As if she can read my mind, she saunters over to me and bends down, hooking a finger under my chin, and pressing her lips to mine.

That's all the invitation I need.

I pull her onto my lap so she's straddling me and kiss her until I can't breathe. Gripping the cheeks of her ass, I tug her closer so her covered pussy rubs against the fly of my blue jeans. Her fingers scrape through my hair while I pulse against her, both our sexes greedy for something more than just dry-humping.

What am I, in fucking middle school?

I pull aside the crotch of her panties as her tongue slides along mine, and when I reach her heated flesh, goddamn if her bare pussy lips aren't soft and wet. I run a finger between them, pausing at her opening, and return to her clit, which I circle with my thumb and forefinger.

As soon as I do, she stiffens and arches, pushing herself into my hand while allowing her head to drop back. She digs her fingers into my shoulders for purchase as her red lips part to release quiet moans. Her long blonde hair swings from the back of her head and her tits are within reach of my mouth, inviting me to hungrily pull a hard nipple between my lips.

I'm in heaven. No other way to describe it.

From my side vision, I vaguely see Jasper and Ethan wearing ravenous smiles, shifting in their respective chairs, hoping for more comfortable positions. In fact, while Ethan rearranges himself, Jasper's already opened the top of his jeans and has started stroking himself.

Dirty bastards.

I hope they're enjoying our little show because it's not ending any time soon, even though Ava is grinding me so hard I'm afraid I might come in my pants like a horny teenager.

In a swift movement, she grabs for my jeans, yanking until they are open, reaching through a tangle of shirt tails and boxers.

"Slow down, baby," I say, trying to push her hands out of the way. I don't want to come yet. I don't even want to fuck her.

Yet.

I don't stand a chance against this woman as she grabs my cock and rubs it against her clit. Holding myself at my base, I press between her wet pussy lips, sliding up and down, keeping a thumb on her clit.

We stop kissing long enough to look down at my cock covered in her juices. While she's watching, I look up at her beautiful face and find her eyes heavy-lidded, lips slightly parted, and hear the most beautiful whimpers coming from her mouth.

"Yes, Ava, I want to see you come. C'mon baby, come for me."

With one more stroke of her pussy against my cock, her head drops back and she cries out, shaking and gasping and leaving me covered in her silky essence. Watching a woman like her get off is the stuff of men's dreams.

My own eyes drift closed as she folds into me, and I'm pretty sure London is the best place in the world.

AVA

“How DO you like London so far?” Ethan asks with a wicked smile.

I push him up against the elevator wall while the four of us return to our room, and place my hand on his cock, already hard and waiting for me.

“London?” I joke, “we’re in London?” I’m looking around the elevator, fake-confused, and when the doors open on our floor, I peek around the corner like I’m lost.

The guys laugh. I take Jasper’s and Ethan’s hands and run down the hall, pulling them with me. Leo brings up the rear, wearing one of those stupid souvenir top hats with the British flag plastered on it.

We tried to lose him in the subway. No such luck.

The door to our room can’t close fast enough while I grab at Ethan’s clothes and Jasper grabs at mine. Leo, in his hat, pours himself a drink and leans on the bar, smiling as he watches.

London is cool. Super cool. Not that we’ve seen much of it. We got up this morning with all good intentions, had breakfast at our hotel, and headed to that big ferris wheel thing they have. Jasper had booked tickets, thank goodness because the line was out of control, and after that, we headed to Westminster Abbey because of course, I had to see where Kate

Middleton got married. All that romance must have gotten to me because with one look at the guys, we all knew it was time to head back to the hotel.

And here we are.

London is great, but I'm not sure I'll be seeing much more of it.

I'm quite happy right here in the hotel.

In seconds, I am stripped down to my undies, trying to shake my last leg out of my skinny jeans without falling over, and am laughing my ass off because Ethan *has* landed on his ass, I've done such a bad job undressing him.

I fall to my knees and yank his pants off, followed by his boxers, while he tosses aside his polo shirt.

On the floor next to him I put a finger to my lower lip and pout a little. "Hmmm. Wonder what I should do now?" I joke.

"Get your ass over here," he says in a low growl.

When I do, he grabs my wrist, not to the point of pain but enough to let me know he's in charge. His eyes are on fire, and my heart skips a beat at his manhandling.

I like it.

"Now, lay back, Ethan," I say, pointing.

He stares for a moment, his eyes dark and lusty, then slowly reclines on the soft carpet after releasing my wrist. With his hands behind his head, he props himself up just enough to watch.

I position myself at the V of his legs and watch his stiff cock bounce against his hard stomach. Reaching, I run two soft fingers up either side of his length, slowly, and light as a feather. He shudders under my touch.

That's what I'm talking about.

I grip him at his base, lick my lips, and run them up and down his shaft. Then I swirl my tongue around his cockhead and take him as deeply as I can.

For a moment, I can't breathe, but I relax my throat, and through my watering eyes find him watching me with a sexy half-smile.

“Yeah, baby,” he rasps. “Take me deep.”

I smile with my eyes and pump my mouth over him, one hand on the base of his dick and the other around his balls. He bucks his hips to meet my strokes, and when he begins to pound his fists on the floor, I know I've got him and that it will be seconds before he erupts in my mouth.

When he looks up at me, I plunge faster and deeper, taking more of him than I realized I could. Placing a hand on the back of my head, he grips my hair, following my rhythm. I take one of his nipples, and when I pull on it, he shouts something unintelligible.

But I know what he's getting at.

A moment later, my mouth fills with salty semen and I don't want it to stop. I do my best to swallow as fast as it comes, but some escapes down my chin. When I release him and go to wipe it, he stops me.

“Wait. That is fucking hot, with my cum on your chin, baby. Take a look, boys.”

I turn so everyone can enjoy the mess that I am and while Ethan sinks back into the carpet, trying to breathe and get his thoughts straight, Jasper takes me by the hand and leads me to the sofa.

I am floating. Purely floating.

Jasper holds me because my legs are shaking from not only being on my knees for so long but also the excitement of getting Ethan off. “You good, darlin'?”

Goofball still has his glasses on. Standing there, butt-naked, in his nerd glasses.

I reach for them. “I'm good, Jas. So good.”

He runs a finger down the front of my body, brushing my nipple, and then my stomach until he reaches the hot, wet spot between my legs. I shudder when he finds my clit, that's how

sensitive I am, and he pulls me closer, holding my head for a long, passionate kiss while he continues to play with my pussy.

He lets me go and turns me toward the sofa. “Kneel, baby. Kneel on the edge of the cushion,” he directs.

While I’m getting into position, I check on the other guys, still in their respective spots with Ethan watching from the floor, and Leo nursing his drink from across the room.

My knees sink into the soft cushions as I place my hands on the sofa back for balance. Jasper presses my head down, almost until it meets my knees, leaving my ass up in the air. He sucks in a deep breath when he sees my most private parts, and while at one time I would have wanted to run away in shame in this position, I now bend further to give him an even better view.

“You like it, baby?” I purr.

He groans.

Dragging a finger from my clit to my opening, he enters me for a moment, then drags the wetness to my ass.

Oh my.

“Pretty,” he murmurs.

Is Jasper an ass man?

He rubs a fingertip over my tight opening after he drops spit right on the spot. His massage feels weird but also good, so good I push back against him for more. He increases his pressure and then pops inside me, just a fingertip, and I squeal from the surprise.

“You good, beautiful?” he asks, bending close to my ear.

I nod. “Yeah. I like it, Jas. I think I want more.”

He laughs. “Of course you want more. And I’m gonna give it to you. Can you take another?” he asks.

“Another what? A finger?” I mumble.

Then I nod, because the ability to speak is leaving my body.

There is a burning pain as he stretches me, and then it eases, not entirely comfortable, but not really uncomfortable, either. He pulses his fingers gently in my ass until it begins to feel good. Really good.

While he's doing that, I look back at him from my bent position, and see his eyes are heavy with concentration, his lips pressed tightly together. His cock presses into my pussy while he slowly maneuvers his fingers deeper in my ass. I am full, so deliciously full.

I come almost instantly, bucking back against the dick and fingers inside me. In a surprise moment, he smacks my ass cheek, and I can't help but giggle. It doesn't hurt and in fact added to the crazy sensations that have invaded my body.

"My girl, look at how I'm fucking my girl," he murmurs, pumping both my holes.

When my orgasm hits, I break into a hundred pieces, each flying in different directions, floating like there's no gravity, and I may never come back to earth.

Which is fine with me.

AVA

THESE MEN ARE ADDICTING, and not just because they took me to London where we barely saw the outside of our hotel room. On the flight home, we have the center four seats in our giant plane, and it's heaven, pure heaven to be surrounded by my loves. I take turns holding hands with them, and it's the sweetest fucking thing I've ever experienced. The British Airways flight attendant might have raised an eyebrow, but I'm sure he's seen it all.

In my mind, I have a list of questions, and when the guys fall asleep on the flight, I jot them down in my tablet. The four of us have decisions to make, and while I know we'll handle them like grown-ups, I want to make sure nothing falls between the cracks.

I figure we need ground rules, schedules, and a careful consideration of living arrangements to make sure the relationship remains balanced, respectful, and harmonious. How the heck is all this supposed to work? Has anyone in the history of relationships ever dated three men?

Is it even possible?

Actually, yes, it's possible. I've already decided it is. There are just some details to iron out.

I continue with my list, spelling out how the careful negotiation of our arrangement will reflect our deep affection

and respect for one another, and set the stage for our successful future.

I get all this down, every last word, before I forget it.

Then a sharp elbow in the ribs knocks me out of my reverie.

“Are you serious with that freaking list?” Ethan asks, looking at my tablet and smirking.

I flip it closed. I’m not ready to share my thoughts yet. Still working on them.

I look straight ahead at the western playing on the TV screen in front of me. I couldn’t figure out how to turn the damn thing off.

“Don’t worry about it,” I sniff.

He takes my arm and pulls it to his lap, entwining his fingers with mine. Pulling my hand to his lips for a kiss, he brushes his cheek with it. His facial scruff, pretty out of control due to our long travel day, scrapes my skin.

I don’t mind. In fact, it feels kind of good.

“Ava,” he says, hooking a finger under my chin and turning my head to face him. “You have nothing to worry about, and you don’t need to prepare a manifesto. It will all work out.”

Really? Is this the Ethan I flew to London with only four days ago? The one who flies into a rage when his coffee is not hot enough, and his shirts not starched properly?

When, in his thirty-two years of life, has Ethan ever uttered the words *don’t worry*?

I give my confusion away when I scratch my head, because he laughs.

“Ha. I know what you’re thinking. How do I know everything will be okay?” he asks.

“It’s okay, Ethan. I believe things will work out,” I say with fake confidence.

But really, if Ethan the grump is feeling positive about something, how can I lose?

AVA

Glisten Magazine

Love and Sex by Ava Sterling

Final Draft, Anniversary issue

My dear reader:

As you know, this is *Glisten's* anniversary issue, and each of our lovely columnists is writing about her first time experiencing something... important. In her infinite wisdom, my editor and general kick-ass girl boss decided I should write about my first... O.

Yes, you heard that right. My first orgasm. The first time the earth moved, I saw stars, got off, and blew my load (wait, that one is for dudes).

You'd think that as *Glisten's* resident sexpert, I'd have the bedroom acumen of Cleopatra mixed with the seductive prowess of Mata Hari, and all the O's that come with it. Boy, was I leading everyone down a rose-tinted path... and by everyone, I mean YOU, my dedicated reader.

I generally pride myself on my honesty, although there's been one teensy secret your girl has been hiding behind her feathered quill. But I'm now

ready to share it with you... so please brace yourself.

Until recently, I'd never experienced my *very own* 'Big O.' That's right. I, Ava, the gal you trust with all your saucy dilemmas, have been orgasmically challenged since, well... the beginning.

I know what you're thinking: 'Wait, what? Ava? THE Ava? Miss *10 Tips to Turn Up the Heat* Ava?' Indeed, it's shocking even to my very own core. I've penned sultry tales of passion and provided advice on subjects I've mostly—mastered. But the earth-shattering finale? Well, that was more fiction than fact.

If you are still with me, and can find it in your heart to forgive rather than hate, I have more to share.

You might be wondering, why confess now? Well, darlings, as I tip-tapped away, crafting my witty anniversary issue column about my 'first time', my fingers froze. Who was I writing for? A pretend world where everything is perfect, nothing ever goes wrong, and every zesty session we have with a lover ends in fireworks? I don't know about you, but that's not the world I live in, nor do the myriad of women who, like me, have yet to join the O-Club. Faking it in bed is one thing, but faking it to you? My trusty readers?

I was wrong to do so. I apologize.

Don't cry for me. I've had delightful romps in the haystacks of life. My escapades have ranged from 'Oops, I knocked over the lamp' to 'Is it in yet?' But when it came to that cinematic climax, the crescendo, the fireworks finale, nada, zilch, zippo. Your girl came up emptier than a banker's heart.

And I know bankers' hearts. I used to go out with one named Bran. But I've told you all about that jerk. You know, the one with the tiny penis.

You probably wonder, 'Ava, how did you manage to keep this massive secret under wraps?' Simple. I lied. Lied my ass off. I was a fraud, a faker, a flunky. A pretender of the worst degree. When girlfriends would dive into details about their seismic proficiencies, I'd contribute with anecdotes about hilarious bedroom blunders or my inexplicable ability to attract men who wore socks in bed (sad but true).

But no more.

The shame I felt was, in hindsight, totally unwarranted. In our hyper-sexualized society, there's this underlying pressure for women to always be in a state of rapturous ecstasy, as if our value is measured by the decibels of our moans. The thought of being 'less than' or 'broken' played on repeat in my head.

You're probably dying to know how I finally joined the ranks of the O-enlightened. Was it a tantric yoga session? A steamy romance with a Spanish matador? A quiet moment with one of the many vibrators manufacturers send me to try out and recommend? Alas, it was none of those. It was an evening with someone I've come to care about very much, a man outstanding on many levels, not least of which is treating me to all the Big Os I can take.

My body, contrary to my suspicion, wasn't some stubborn mule refusing to cross the finish line. Instead, it was a mystery I hadn't quite mastered. And master it I did... with patience, no expectations, and (ironically) putting all the advice I'd given you lovely folks into practice.

So why this confession? Believe it or not, I'm not here to splash my intimate details like a Cosmo cocktail over a bar. I'm doing it for every woman who's felt the weight of unmet expectations, the

pinch of societal norms, or the shame of not quite 'getting there.'

I see you.

I am you.

I'm hoping that by sharing my story, you'll feel less inclined to hide or pretend. Whether it's orgasms, body image, or any other intimate detail, you owe it to yourself to embrace your truth and journey. Remember, every woman's path is unique. And if your path has a few detours, well, isn't that what makes the journey interesting?

So here's my advice (and this time, it's from personal experience):

1. Don't let societal norms dictate your experience. It's your body, your pleasure, and your journey.
2. Be honest with yourself and your partners. Authenticity in the bedroom (and beyond) can lead to more genuine connections.
3. Discover what you like. Maybe it's Kenny G, maybe it's doggy style. Find your groove, literally.

To you, my lovely reader, I've always said knowledge is power. But honesty is pure liberation. So here's to more honesty, more exploration, and definitely more O's in our futures!

XOXO,

Ava

HOLY SHIT, holy shit, holy shit. I read my column for the hundredth time, tweaking a word here and there, but never changing the gist of the message. How could I? I've turned over a new leaf and its name is honesty. I imagine some people will like the new me, and some won't. But what really matters is that I like myself a whole lot more now that I don't feel like a damn fraud.

I wanted to say more in my column, so much more, but it was already too long and my readers want to hear about sex and relationships, not so much about how my boss didn't fire my ass for pretending to be someone I wasn't, my friends supported me with a wild plan to find someone via a Craigslist ad, and three handsome men decided to help me address my problem in a way that kept me safe and sane.

In a future column I'll tell them about all the positive that has shown up in my life in recent weeks, the unexpected good fortune I've been graced with, and what it's like to be in love with three guys.

That's right, I just used the 'L' word.

After the creepy ex, Bran, I wasn't sure love was in the cards for me—ironic, given my line of work. But just because someone writes about what I do doesn't mean they have it all figured out, that their life is perfect, and that they are multi-orgasmic.

And it's that perfection I've finally realized I don't need. I'm no superwoman. I have ups and downs like everyone and I'm no longer going to hide that from my readers. Pretending was a disservice to them. I'm done with that crap.

I just hope they aren't done with me.

AVA

“AVA. AVA!”

I’m hustling down the street, hoping I’m not late for a talk I’m giving at Cool Vibes. When they found out about the journey I’d been on, they couldn’t get me in the shop fast enough for a night of conversation and wine with their patrons. They told me a ton of people RSVP’d, which has me a little nervous. I figured maybe five people would show up. Seems a lot of folks in New York have their own little challenges. I just hope sharing my story helps some of them.

When I hear someone shout my name again, I turn around. The sidewalk is jammed and I don’t see anyone who obviously called for me, so I keep walking. A second later, there’s a hand on my arm, stopping me mid-rush. Before I see who it is, a mild annoyance rushes over me. I’m going to be late if I don’t get my ass in gear.

But when I do see who it is, I am majorly annoyed.

It’s Bran. Of the small penis, of the New York Times engagement announcement, the man who used me as a placeholder while waiting for the woman of his dreams to come to her senses and agree to marry him.

My first instinct is to say *oh hi, how are you?* but my days of being a phony are behind me. If I don’t like someone, it’s pretty likely I will be letting them know.

Like this one.

“I’m in a hurry. Please let go of my arm,” I say in a flat voice.

His eyebrows skip up, like he’s surprised at my indifference.

Suck it, mister.

“I... well, I haven’t seen you in a while. I wanted to say hi. And you look fantastic,” he says like he can win me over with lame-ass compliments.

“Thank you, Bran. Now if I can just be on my way—”

“Wait. Wait. Can we get coffee sometime? I’m just so stressed about life and you always made me see that things would be fine. I could use some of that Ava therapy right now.”

I smirk. “And what is so stressful about your life, Bran? The dry cleaner mess up one of your suits? The cleaning lady miss a spot of dust?”

He swallows hard, just now acknowledging the hostility in my voice. But he’s still not deterred.

“Well, um, Ava, you might have read in the paper that I’m getting married?”

Oh my god. Really?

“What about it?” I ask. Was he going to invite me or something?

Actually, that would be fun, showing up with the guys.

He puts his hands on his hips and looks down for a moment.

“It’s like this, Ava. How do I know I’m doing the right thing? Angel is great and all, but what if there’s someone out there better for me?”

This is not happening.

I nod slowly. “I bet Angel would be really interested in knowing how committed you are to your relationship with her.

Maybe I'll just have to phone her up and let her know what a fucking asshole you are before she makes the mistake of a lifetime."

Horror crosses his face, immediately followed by anger. "Wait a minute. You have a lot of nerve talking to me that way —"

"You have a lot of nerve talking to me at all. Why don't you go fuck yourself, you jerk?"

I turn on my heel to get away from him as fast as I can, grinning from ear to ear, and feeling like I just won the lottery. He just highlighted in so many ways just how different I am now than a few months ago.

It feels good. So, so good.

As I get closer to Good Vibes, I see the guys waiting out front for me, ready to throw their support my way. Their faces brighten as I get closer, as does mine. When I kiss all three of them hello, Jasper ruffles my hair and Ethan sneaks a grab of my ass.

And Leo, dear, sweet Leo, sees the bounce in my step. "Hey, baby. How was the walk over from the office?"

I want to throw my arms around him and all the guys. But I have to get moving.

"The walk was... good. Actually, now that you ask, it was great."

EPILOGUE

"SHOES OFF, EVERYONE," Glenda says, looking around the room like a protective momma. "Now, close your eyes, and take a deep breath."

She kicks off our team meeting the way she always does, with a touch of eastern mysticism, before she hits us upside the

head with the burdens of the corporate world. Her approach, taken with the best intentions, always strikes me as a weird bait-and-switch, where our meetings are initiated all touchy feely and kumbaya, but morph to our asses being handed to us for missing deadlines and committing other offenses to the magazine.

Not that I am paranoid or anything, at least not anymore. I know that Glenda is generally a kind and fair person, but there's no doubt in my mind, or anyone's for that matter, that Glisten is her favored child. It has and always will take priority over anything or anyone else.

Which is why I gave Glenda an out by offering to resign when she called me out on my duplicity. I wanted to make it easy on her, speed up the process, flame out knowing I did at least one thing right. No reason to drag out the inevitable.

And yet, for some inexplicable reason, she kept me on.

She said I'd 'find a way through this mess,' bless her. And she was right.

But it hasn't been a journey without a fuck load of pain and anxiety.

I've never, not in my whole entire life, felt as exposed as the day the story on my first O hit the newsstands. Although, 'hitting the newsstands' is somewhat archaic, considering most people receive their subscriptions in their email inboxes before getting any sort of print copies. So I knew exactly when, down to the moment, my column would be read by hundreds of thousands of women—or mostly women, and the few guy-readers of Glisten.

Six a.m. on a Monday morning.

Needless to say, I barely slept the night before. I was back in my apartment, my sojourn to Steve and Cami's short-lived after the London trip. Of course, I wasn't alone in bed that night, with Ethan on one side of me, Leo on the other, and Jasper in his own. But that's not what kept me up. Well, not the only thing, I should say.

The guys dozed off at a decent hour. I tried to, too, I really did, but when two a.m. rolled around and I was still wide awake, I slipped out of bed and retreated to my green chair, which had been returned to its place by the front window. I watched the nighttime pulse of the city unfold, where shift workers returned home, deliveries were made, and garbage was collected—the hidden activities that ensure the city operates at peak capacity during the day.

Hours later when the sun was coming up and the streetlamps switched off, and I was still sitting in the front window, I wanted so badly to log into Glisten's website to see what readers were saying about my column. But I was petrified. People are mean on the internet, that's nothing new, but I knew I was in for a skewering for the offense of misleading my readers. I could only imagine the stuff they'd say about me in their version of a modern-day witch hunt, where I'd be verbally drawn and quartered. Maybe when Glenda sees it, she'll agree my days at Glisten have finally, unceremoniously, come to a painful end.

Cue the bankers' boxes and security guard escorts.

She won't want to do this, but will be forced to react to reader expectations. If the people want me out, then I am out.

I don't blame them.

I wish I could ask them to have mercy on my soul.

But it's too late for that. My story is live on the interwebs, most likely being devoured by subscribers in the Eastern time zone, soon to be followed by those in Central, Mountain, and Pacific as they wake up and start their day, not to mention whenever our international readers receive their copies.

I want to tell them to be kind. That it's the fear of coming forward with a problem like mine that kept me from being honest about myself.

Just like it is for so many other women.

But I know I'll have to face the barrage of comments on my column when I arrive at work so for now, I'm just not looking. It's torture, for sure, but the torture will be so much

worse when readers realized how I've betrayed Glisten fans around the world.

I lay down on the living room sofa, hoping for a few minutes' sleep, when a hand gently shakes me.

"Oh my god," I say, bolting up and looking around. "I dozed off."

Jasper laughs. "It's okay, you're not late yet. Get dressed and we'll share a cab to the office."

"Where are Ethan and Leo?"

"They left a while ago. Didn't want to wake you."

Jasper claps his hands together for me to get a move-on while I yawn and rub my eyes. This is going to be a long day.

Less than an hour later, I'm in the Glisten conference room, hoping Glenda doesn't have us close our eyes for too long for our deep breaths because I have no doubt I'll fall asleep right there in my comfy chair.

"And... open," she says gently, meaning it's time to get going.

I glance at Cami and Lana, seated across from me. They look like they do at all the meetings, their faces plastered with expressions of mild interest, wishing we could just get into the agenda instead of the touchy-feely stuff like everyone else in the room.

But no one would ever tell Glenda that and burst her bubble, acknowledging that she's a corporate boss girl way before she's some kind of benevolent momma bear.

Or is she?

She gets to her feet at the end of the conference table, something she rarely does. She smiles broadly, her bright red lips the perfect outline to her perfect teeth, and puts one hand on her hip while she leans onto the conference table with the other. If there was ever an image of a female power player, this is it.

“As you know, the anniversary issue hit at six this morning.” She looks around the room, and everyone snaps to attention.

It’s not like we don’t care—we do, and a lot. It’s just that, anniversary issue or not, we’re already on to the next issue. That’s the thing with magazines, and really, any sort of publication. You put one column to bed and you’re already thinking about the next one. And the one after that.

But, because this is important to Glenda, we smile and nod, and not a few members of the team sneak looks in my direction.

Oh no.

They know something I don’t. Or at least they think I don’t know. But I’m no dummy. This is my last meeting in the conference room at Glisten Magazine. I have no doubt.

I will miss the free bagels, so I grab another from the middle of the table and wrap it in a napkin. When I’m unemployed, I will have to be very frugal.

Ramen noodles, here I come.

The guys will help me, I know they will. They won’t let me become homeless. They won’t let me starve.

Unless the deluge of hate mail generated by my column sways their opinion of me, as it’s sure to change Glenda’s.

Even Aunt Dede will turn her back on me. I’ll have to move back to my parents’ with my tail between my legs. If they’ll have me.

Glenda’s high-pitch laughter pierces my thoughts. God, they’re snickering at me now...

“Earth to Ava. Hello, dear. Are you all right? You look awfully pale,” she says.

My gaze snaps up to her. “Oh my gosh Glenda, I’m so sorry. Just lost in thought about how... great this issue turned out.”

She beams. “In that case, you may have missed that your column in today’s issue is a huge... hit!”

The room breaks into applause. I look around at all the smiles.

What’s going on? Are they clapping because I’m being fired?

“Way to go, girl,” Lana hollers over the racket.

What? Lana’s happy I’m fired? What kind of friend is that?

Wait. Even Cami’s clapping and beaming. Cami would not be happy if I were fired.

“Ava, comments on your column have exploded and it’s only,” —she looks at her watch— “nine a.m.”

“They have?” I croak. I reach for my phone to finally take a look for myself.

I pull up my article, and my eyes immediately fill with tears over the thoughts readers are sharing.

Until today, I thought I was the only one...

Ava, thank you for shedding light on this important issue...

I don’t feel so alone any more...

Glad you got your O on, girl...

We love you Ava...

I want to read more but the words blur through the tears filling my eyes. I bring my hand to my mouth to stifle a sob. I hate crying at work, but there’s no stopping now. In front of Glenda and all my coworkers, tears pour down my face like a damn waterfall, smearing my mascara and splattering on my phone screen. I scroll and scroll and pick out a few words here and there. They are all of love and support.

And honesty.

I look around the room. “Thank you...” I choke out. “Thank you for giving me a safe space...”

At the head of the table, Glenda nods. “Thank you, Ava, for giving our readers a safe space.”

“CONGRATS ON YOUR COLUMN. I read it and really liked it.”

I look up from my laptop, glad for an interruption. I can't concentrate anyway.

“Thanks. Are you new?” I ask.

The pixie-haired brunette in front of me nods. “Yup. I'm in that cube over there,” she says pointing to where Pia used to sit. “Just arrived in New York. I'm psyched to be here.”

I was that girl, not long ago.

“Oh, wow. It's nice to meet you. Welcome to Glisten and welcome to the big city. Want to have lunch today?” I ask.

I'd like to make this woman's early experiences at Glisten a little better than mine were. There will be no inviting her to clubs, taking photos of her plastered and kissing strangers, and showing them around the office. No, that shit ended the day Pia was fired for sharing our editorial calendar with our competition.

That's right. The fool leaked confidential information to the competitor. And I'd thought she was canned for falsely accusing Ethan of inappropriate behavior, among her other transgressions, like reading people's DMs, not to mention bending over backwards trying to bring me down.

While I knew there was something off about the woman, I guess what I saw was only the tip of the iceberg. She was bad news, through and through. Thank God she's gone.

No gloating, I remind myself.

In a strange twist, I heard she's over at Martha Stewart, having talked Danny into hiring her. I hope this gives her a

chance to start over, re-invent herself, and maybe even become a nicer person. Whether she does that or not, however, I'll never know.

That chapter is closed, I am happy to say. Time to focus on the new ones that open all the time.

For example, all I'm learning about the guys—both good and not-so-good. Turns out we all have things we hide, and that I'm not the only person in the universe who feels like a fraud from time to time.

Take Leo, working all hours of the day and night just to prove himself. He finally got promoted, except when we went to celebrate, it was clear something was bothering him.

"I don't deserve it," he told me later, raking his fingers through his normally perfect hair. "I don't deserve any of this."

My heart broke a little when I heard this.

"What the hell are you talking about? You work all the time. How can you not deserve a promotion? You're a talented hard worker, honey."

He shook his head, avoiding my gaze. "You don't understand. You don't know everything about me."

"What do you mean?" I ask slowly.

He couldn't possibly be another Danny, stealing other people's work. He's not like that. Not at all. But I could see the pain in his face, and I remembered how I felt when I was sure I was a big fraud.

"Leo, did you do something you regret? Do you want to talk about it?"

"It... it was something I did a long time ago. You know the scholarship I got for school? Well, I beat out my best friend for it. He never spoke to me again. He's still stuck in the town where we grew up. He never had the chance I got. I feel like I ruined his life. If I could do it all over again, I'd give the scholarship to him."

Oh my God. What a thing to carry around.

What a wrong thing to carry around.

“Leo,” I start, “you competed for that. I get that you feel guilty for leaving the other guy behind. But it’s not like you did something dishonest or vindictive. You have to forgive yourself. Let it go.”

He looks up at me, tears in his eyes. “I don’t know, Ava. It’s been so hard to live with sometimes.”

I knew there was a reason he suffered. And it was crushing me. I take his hand and bring it to my lips.

“Leo, you are a good man. Look at you and look at your little brother, too. He’s going to college now, thanks to you. You’ve done a very good thing.”

But when it comes down to it, I know all the words in the world aren’t going to heal Leo. Just like I did, pain is something you have to wade through yourself. I just hope he knows when he comes out the other side that I’ll be there waiting for him. Like I am right now.

And then there’s Ethan. My grumpy love, always stressed and at the end of his wits. He recently revealed to me he’s happy he never made it to the NBA, that he never ended up playing pro basketball.

In fact, he purposely messed up just so he wouldn’t be drafted. Turned out he hated the game and only played it all his life because his dad coached every year, and wanted Ethan to do what he hadn’t been able to—play at the pro level.

He’s been tormented by this deception for so long, it’s now part of him, like a big scar. I don’t know whether he’ll ever end up sharing this with his parents, or just keeping it to himself for the rest of his life. Only time will tell. But I do think honesty is the best policy most of the time.

Only he can decide.

The good news is that he’s started coaching basketball for inner city kids. He says it’s a blast and that his blood pressure is better. I’m so happy for him.

Last, there's Jasper, my roommate and Master of the Universe, who changed in so many ways when I came into the picture.

He recently visited his parents after not seeing them for years, thanks to receiving a long-awaited for apology from his father. Turned out the home Jasper grew up in was a pretty unstable, tumultuous one, thanks to his father's drinking. His dad got help, and is all about mending his ways now, including reconnecting with his only son.

Just goes to show it's never too late to redeem yourself.

Some of the best news is that Jasper finally got himself a couple Knicks tickets. He invited me to the game, bless him, but I told him that would be a waste of a ticket, and to bring someone else. I think he may be inviting his dad to town for the game. I'll get to meet Mr. Russo, who's never been on a train, never mind visited New York City. I just hope he's not as handsome as his son. I can't take another Russo with those piercing blue eyes.

My girls Cami and Lana are their usual crazy selves. Cami seems to have given up on the idea that her husband is cheating on her. I think I finally convinced her that her paranoid suspicions were silly, and that Steve, for whatever reason, loves her and is going nowhere. I hope she stays on this positive track, especially now since she's PREGNANT!

Yes, Cami is pregnant and I can't wait to see her belly expand. She's so tiny I'm sure she'll be adorable in her maternity clothes. I hope the baby is a redhead like her. The best part is that I get to be Godmother.

Lana has taken off for vacation in Ibiza to celebrate her birthday there, of course, for the party scene. Well, and the handsome European men, too. Before leaving, she regaled me with long-winded stories about her taste for 'euro-dick,' or dudes who are not circumcised. She said the only downside is that it can be hard to get condoms on them, maybe because the foreskin slides around or something?

Sounds like something I just may have to do a column on. I can see it now. Euro-dick: What's the Consensus?

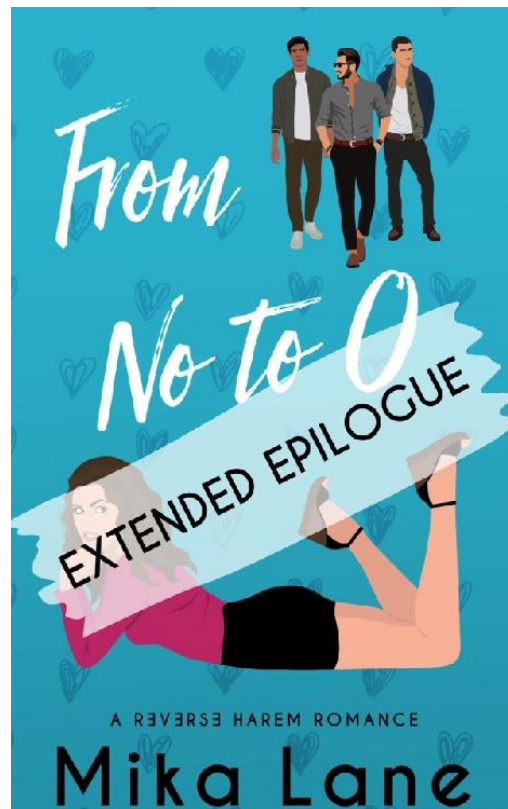
But first, I have to write that damn article about pegging. I asked the guys if they'd let me experiment on them. No takers so far.

But I remain optimistic.

I have so many reasons to be, not least are which are three gorgeous, smart, attentive, funny men. Who all want to go back to London because they saw so little on our first trip there. I told them if they really want to see the place, that they'd better not take me. We'll just end up back in the room doing what we always do.

Nothing's wilder than my new life with three loves. Every day is different, most times unpredictable, but always loads and loads of fun, and while we may never get back to London, there's nobody else I'd rather skip it with.

BONUS EXTENDED EPILOGUE



What happens next with Ava and her three hot men?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I'm USA TODAY bestselling contemporary romance author Mika Lane, and am all about bringing you sexy, sassy stories with imperfect heroines and the bad-a*s dudes they bring to their knees. And I have a special love for romance with multiple guys because why should we have to settle for just one hunky man?

Please join my Insider Group and be the first to hear about giveaways, sales, pre-orders, ARCs, and most importantly, a free sexy short story: <http://mikalane.com/join-mailing-list/>.

Writing has been a passion of mine since, well, forever (my first book was *The Day I Ate the Milkyway*, a true fourth-grade masterpiece). These days, steamy romance, both dark and funny, gives purpose to my days and nights as I create worlds and characters who defy the imagination.

I live in magical Northern California with my own handsome alpha dude, sometimes known as Mr. Mika Lane, and two devilish cats named Chuck and Murray. These three males also defy my imagination from time to time.

A lover of shiny things, I've been known to try new recipes on unsuspecting friends, find hiding places so I can read undisturbed, and spend my last dollar on a plane ticket somewhere.

I'll always promise you a hot, sexy romp with kick-ass but imperfect heroines, and some version of a modern-day happily ever after.

I LOVE to hear from readers when I'm not dreaming up naughty tales to share. Join my Insider Group so we can get to know each other better <http://mikalane.com/join-mailing-list>, or contact me here: <https://mikalane.com/contact>.

