

BECK GREY



HEAL

Me

A LOVE IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST NOVEL

Heal Me

Love in the Pacific Northwest Book 5

Beck Grey



Pine & Moon LLC

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Beck Grey

Newsletter

Blurb

A lawyer and an architect walk into a bar...

Jocelin:

What do you do when your boss's pushy nephew repeatedly asks you out and won't take no for an answer? You create a fake boyfriend. One who works *a lot*, so he never comes to office functions or meets you for lunch. It works well until *le salaud* calls my bluff.

So that's how I find myself at a client event, practically begging a handsome stranger to play said boyfriend. Only after I calm down do I realize *le bel homme* in the bespoke suit is no stranger at all. He's my best friend's brother, and *mon Dieu*, he cleans up well!

When Gunnar volunteers to keep up the ruse beyond one night, of course, I say yes. I'm no fool. But fake love can have very real consequences...

Gunnar:

Being accosted by the attractive, if slightly flustered, Jocelin Allard before I even make it out of the parking lot isn't how I expect to start my evening. But pretending to be his boyfriend for a few hours seems like a harmless way to liven up an otherwise painful social event.

And as far as dates go, fake or otherwise, I could do a lot worse. He's smart, gorgeous, and has a sexy accent. Plus, my sister would kill me if I left her bestie hanging.

When the evening goes shockingly well, almost effortlessly, our relationship turns real, and for a while, it's total bliss. Until I unintentionally take a wrecking ball to my life. Again.

Heal Me is a medium-angst, MM fake boyfriend, sister's best friend, contemporary romance about bad decisions, past trauma, and loving someone including their flaws. It contains no cheating, and a guaranteed HEA.

Love in the Pacific Northwest Series by Beck Grey

Turns out, perfection isn't a prerequisite for happiness.

Whether it's risking your heart on a hookup, falling for your brother's best friend, taking that second chance when it arrives, or pursuing a relationship that doesn't look like everyone else's — life is complex, but love doesn't have to be.

Snarky, sweet and spicy, *Love in the Pacific Northwest* is a first person POV, low-medium angst, open door, contemporary LGBTQ romance series of interconnected standalones. There is never any cheating and all books come with a guaranteed HEA!

Check out all the books in the series!

As always, to Dani

Content Warning

The following story contains mentions of a parent's murder, references to acts of violence including punching and stabbing, on page PTS response including emotional outbursts, and one instance of punching inanimate objects. Other character responses to the PTSD manifestations might be jarring to some readers who suffer from PTSD. There are intimate scenes between two consenting adult men.

PTSD is not a one-size-fits-all diagnosis. It can look very different depending on the causes and an individual's personal situation. I have done my best to accurately represent one possible presentation of the disorder and acknowledge that my character's symptoms and reactions could be very different from those the reader might recognize. I did consult with a sensitivity reader as well as a mental health professional to ensure that the representation is as authentic as possible.

If any of this is a concern to you, please skip this book. Your well-being is important.

Jocelin

Something hits me square in the forehead, then drops to the ground with a metallic tinkling. I jolt to a stop and look around, spying a paperclip on the floor near the reception desk. “Jocelin!” Bethany, my admin, whisper-shouts at me, wide-eyed and gesturing with her head toward my cubicle. “Victoria. Two o’clock.”

Merde. I glance around for somewhere to avoid her, wondering if the elevator I just exited is still waiting on our floor. If I push the call button, will the doors open immediately? I could step in and escape back upstairs to Hibernian Press. Before I can even move in that direction, I hear the clicking of stiletto heels on the marble tiles and the snapping of fingers. Victoria Knobb rounds the corner and points at Bethany. “You. Betty.”

Bethany valiantly refrains from rolling her eyes. “It’s Bethany, Ms. Knobb.”

Victoria dismisses her with a wave of her hand. “Whatever. Where is my nephew?”

I glance at my admin, who is clutching her pen so tightly her knuckles are white. “I don’t know, ma’am. I haven’t seen him yet today.”

Lacking Bethany’s restraint, Victoria rolls her eyes in disgust. “Useless. Find him and tell him to meet me in my office.” I’m about to tell Victoria that my assistant has other responsibilities which require her attention, but I’m stopped by what she says next. “We need to go over the Hibernian Press contracts.”

She now has my full attention. Hibernian Press is *my* client, and there’s absolutely no reason her nephew, Victor, should have to see the contracts. She turns her glare in my direction. “Jocelin, if you’re done chit-chatting with your buddies upstairs, I need the contracts for Hibernian Press and the new imprint.”

Gritting my teeth, I force a smile for my least favorite partner in the company. “Ms. Knobb, I’m sure Alistair—“

“I’ll cover this with Alistair. Victor will be taking over the new imprint as his client.”

A punch to my gut would have been less surprising, though I’d probably feel just as sick. Victor Knobb, Victoria’s nephew and namesake, came to work here about seven months ago, right out of law school. While everyone at the firm is aware he got the job through nepotism, in our professional interactions he’s been competent enough, if a little green. But it doesn’t give him the skill set to handle a client like Hibernian Press. Faking more composure than I feel, I meet Victoria’s eyes and

frown. “Alistair didn’t mention that.” Alistair Trumble is one of three partners at Trumble, Santori, and Knobb, and I report to him. Not Victoria. And as far as I know, he didn’t authorize this transfer of accounts.

She crosses her arms and glares at me. “I’ll be speaking with him this afternoon. You already have so much on your plate, and Victor needs more high-profile accounts.”

Victor needs nothing of the sort. And under no circumstances am I letting him anywhere near the Hibernian Press imprint. Blake McCarthy isn’t just the owner of Hibernian Press, he’s a good friend, and I’m not putting his account in the hands of a green lawyer. Victoria waves at the papers I’m holding. “Are those the contracts? Here, I’ll take them.” She extends her hand, her red talon-like nails slicing through the air in a ‘gimme’ motion.

Hearing the ding of the elevator, I step back instinctively, a wild plan forming in my mind. Before I second guess myself, I spin around to escape with my contracts and plow into a wall that shouldn’t be there. I bounce back, slightly dazed, and strong hands shoot out to grip my biceps, steadying me. “Whoa. Sorry. Are you alright?”

I blink at an expanse of black fabric stretched over a deliciously well-muscled chest. Slowly, so as not to miss an inch, I drag my eyes up... and up. And then blink again as I stare into a strangely familiar face. “Um, yes. Sorry.”

A handsome man with a dark brown, tousled quiff and rakishly shaggy facial hair grins down at me, and the feeling I

know him tickles my brain again. “Oh, it was completely my fault. I’m a bit lost. In fact, I’m not even sure this is the right floor. I’m looking for Hibernian Press. When the elevator doors opened, I just strolled out. I should have double-checked.”

And that’s when it hits me like a sledgehammer. I know who this is, and I’m embarrassed his bright blue eyes didn’t give it away sooner. “It’s two floors up. You almost made it.”

His lips twist into a wry grin. “Story of my life.”

“You’re Gunnar, right? Astrid’s brother?” Astrid Osouf, my very best friend, is an editor at Hibernian Press. It’s been a while since I’ve seen Gunnar, and I certainly don’t remember him being this ridiculously attractive, but there’s no mistaking those eyes. Or that height. Or those muscles. “I’m—”

“Jocelin.” He winks at me. “The accent gave it away. It’s been a while.”

I nod, about to offer him an escort upstairs, when Victoria’s voice cuts in, reminding me why I ran into Gunnar in the first place. “Jocelin.” We both turn to look at her. “When you’re finished with your little tête-à-tête, bring the contracts to my office. I have more important things to do than stand around here all day while you flirt.”

She doesn’t wait for my reply, spinning around to march to her office. When the door shuts with a thud, I finally relax and turn back to Gunnar. “Sorry. She’s a bit intense.”

The scowl he aims at her office door is intimidating and unearths half-remembered stories of explosive tirades and fistfights between the Osouf brothers. But when Gunnar turns back to me, the anger fades and his expression clears. He shakes his head. “No, I’m sorry. I’m interrupting whatever you were doing.” His bright blue gaze has my body tingling and my heart thumping in my chest. Then I remind myself who this is. He’s my best friend’s brother. Not that I think Astrid would mind. She’d definitely tease both of us mercilessly, and I suppose it would be her due. But do I really want to be that person?

I do a little mental shake. Look at me getting ahead of myself. I’ve barely said twenty words to the guy, and I’ve slotted us into a potential relationship. Surely that’s a sign of how shaken I am by Victoria’s demand. It’s also an indication I’ve been out of the dating game too long. Work has taken up most of my focus. I need to get out and socialize. Which is more and more difficult now that my entire friend group has paired up. Nothing like being the only single person in a group of seven. Not that any of them intentionally make me feel like a fifth wheel. And I don’t begrudge my friends the happiness they’ve found. It’s just hell to go out and be the only one still looking. So I don’t.

I sigh and smile at Gunnar, straightening my tie and running a quick hand through my hair. “You are a welcome interruption.” That makes his smile grow even bigger, and shit, it does crazy things to my insides. “Hopefully, your exit from the elevator there will be less eventful.”

Eyes sparkling, he backs up a few steps before turning to the elevators, pressing the call button. “I don’t know.” He shrugs, making his shoulders bunch up distractingly. “I kind of like how this worked out.” When the doors open, he turns back to me. “It was good to see you again, Jocelin.” He backs into the elevator, and as the doors close, I give a little wave. He chuckles and then he’s gone.

Before I head to my cubicle, I make a quick stop at Bethany’s desk. “Hey, thanks for the attempted assist earlier. I wasn’t paying attention.”

Bethany grins. “No problem. We peons have to stick together.” She gestures toward the elevators. “He’s hot.”

I nod. “Yes. He most certainly is.” But I should not be drooling over Astrid’s brother at all, so a subject change is in order. “Are you going to Gary Atkinson’s book launch and signing tonight?”

She shakes her head, a disappointed frown replacing her grin. “No, it’s my dad’s birthday, so we’re all getting together at my parents’ for a cookout. Otherwise I’d definitely go. I love Gary’s books.”

I nod. “I do too. But the birthday celebration sounds...”

Bethany laughs. “Yeah. Boring. But it’ll be fine. Dad pretends he hates the fuss, but he secretly loves it. My nieces and nephews will be running around, hopped up on cake and ice cream. It’ll be a blast watching my sister and brother-in-law try to wrangle them.” She rolls her eyes. “You have fun at the signing, though. Hope your boyfriend can make it.”

For a moment, I almost ask what boyfriend, but I catch myself. “Me too.” I smile and turn toward my desk, wincing internally. I hate lying, especially to people I like, and Bethany is one of the good ones here. But this late in the game, I can’t very well tell her my gorgeous, wonderful boyfriend I’ve been talking about for months isn’t real.

The whole situation is ridiculous and a bit embarrassing, initially born out of a last ditch effort to save my sanity. When Victor Knobb came to work for Trumble, Santori, and Knobb, we were introduced, exchanged pleasantries, and away I went, thinking nothing of it. Then Victor asked me out. I politely declined. That should have been the end of it, but alas, no. He asked me out again. And again. He still does. Not so much in a stalkery way, but he’s overly flirty, ignoring my polite refusals to get coffees or have dinner. I now try to avoid him like I avoid his aunt.

Astrid was the one who suggested I tell him I have a boyfriend. Unfortunately for me, someone else in the office overheard when I mentioned it to Victor, and by the next day, everyone was asking for details. I’ve tried to keep things vague, but I work with a bunch of lawyers and paralegals. They can sniff out a fabrication like nobody’s business. So I’ve taken to adding ‘my boyfriend’ to any of my weekend activities. When my friends and I go out to throw darts or hang out at Blake’s, ‘my boyfriend’ goes with me. He doesn’t have a name. Thankfully, I was smart enough to say he likes his privacy, doesn’t have social media accounts, and doesn’t like

me to post about him online. I think Bethany believes he's some kind of famous actor or singer, which makes me laugh.

The fake boyfriend story hasn't stopped Victor entirely, but it has significantly reduced the number of times he's asked me out, so I keep up the pretense, even though I hate doing it. And now the weasel is trying to take my biggest client? Well, that's happening only if they fire me. Plus, I'm sure Blake would never allow it to happen. That, at least, brings me some peace. And if I can't get to Alistair before Victoria does, I'll go directly to Blake, tell him what's happening, and everything should be fine. I hope.

Gunnar

“Gunnar, quit fidgeting and let the man do his job.”

I sigh disgustedly, but straighten my posture and attempt to be still. “Astrid, you know this is a waste of money. Suits aren’t my thing. After Gary’s signing tonight, it’ll just sit in the back of my closet, collecting dust.”

Astrid peruses the dress shirts and ties, completely ignoring my reasonable argument. “Humor me. It’s not like you can’t afford it. Besides.” She grins wickedly, and I know I’m in trouble. “You never know who you might meet there. That might lead to another suit-wearing occasion. Maybe out to dinner at a fancy restaurant or to a play.”

I groan and cover my face with my hands. “Astrid, tell me you haven’t set me up with someone for this thing tonight. Dammit, I knew I shouldn’t have agreed to this. I love Gary and all, but you fixing me up with someone would ruin an otherwise mediocre evening.” Going to my sister’s boyfriend’s book launch isn’t my idea of fun, but I’m doing it to support them. Plus, Gary always insists on an open bar at his events.

That makes it bearable. I give her my best pleading look. “Please, Astrid. I’m begging you. Stop with the sisterly matchmaking.”

The tailor steps back and nods. “It fits perfectly.” He helps me out of the suit coat and motions for me to go back into the dressing room and change into my street clothes.

Astrid’s voice follows me. “I haven’t set you up with anyone. But I could. I know someone you’d love. He’s very sweet and handsome. I swear he’s perfect for you.”

Panicking that she’s serious, I stick my head out of the fitting room and point at her. “No! Really, Astrid. Don’t start, or so help me, I’ll back out of this right now.”

She laughs and holds up her hands. “Fine, Gunnar. But why is it so wrong for me to want my baby brother to find someone who makes him happy?”

“You’re only five minutes older. That doesn’t make me your baby brother.” I drop the dress pants to the floor and yank on my jeans and black T-shirt, stuffing my feet into my boots. Feeling like myself again now that I’m back in my own comfortable clothes, I exit the dressing room, suit pants in hand and pass them to the salesperson. He patiently arranges them on a suit hanger with the jacket, and zips everything into a garment bag before handing it to me. I take it and put my free hand on Astrid’s shoulder, turning her to face me. “I’m going to this thing tonight to support Gary and his new book, even though I detest crowds. I’m doing it because I love you both. Don’t make me regret it.” She meets my gaze, wide-eyed

and innocent, but I'm not fooled. "Astrid. Promise me you will *not* attempt to fix me up with anyone at this event. Or at all. Ever."

"Gunnar, you don't detest crowds, you detest people." She laughs and hip checks me into the aisle.

I give her my best scowl. "All the more reason never to fix me up. And I don't detest all people. I love you. And Gary, because he's cool. And Bjorn and Erik. Okay, and maybe Jules, too. He's too sweet not to love."

Astrid squeezes me around the waist. "Awwww. You love Bjorn. You said it! I'm so happy!"

This time I scowl for real. "Obviously I love Bjorn. He's my brother." Okay. In fairness, we haven't been very close. Mostly because of my own issues from my teen years. But things have been getting better since we've all gone to therapy. "Astrid, please. Don't fix me up with anyone. Seriously. Just... don't. Okay?"

Her sigh is epic, but she relents. "Fine. I just want you to be happy, Gunnar. I want you to have your somebody too." She leans her head on my shoulder as we leave the bespoke shop and walk the few paces to her car.

"I'm fine, Bean. And I appreciate your concern. But I'm concentrating on work right now. I don't have time for a relationship." I pull her into a big hug and kiss the side of her head. "But thank you for wanting that for me. I love you."

“Love you too.” I let her go and open the car door for her. She turns to me, pinning me with a glare. “One more thing, though. Get a haircut? And a shave? You look like a neanderthal.”

I smooth down my facial hair. “I like my beard. It took me a long time to get it this nice and full. And what’s wrong with my hair?”

“It’s too long. Both your hair and beard. Get a real style, Gunnar. Spend some money and go to a real salon. For me? Please?”

I glare back at her. It’s our love language. “Fine. But I’m not shaving. I’m only getting a trim.”

She kisses my cheek. “That’s all I’m asking. And thank you.”

“Drive safely. Tell Gary I said hey.”

Astrid slides behind the wheel, waving as she backs out of her parking spot. I wait for her to pull away, then walk a few more feet down the sidewalk to my own car, carefully hanging the suit in the back before dropping into the driver’s seat, resigned to a night of smiling and being social with people. With a sigh, I start the car, back out of the space, and head toward the barbershop for a haircut I don’t want, because I love my sister, and I promised.

Jocelin

I step out of the hired car and button my suit coat, then head for the front doors of Jupiter Winery. As planned, I stopped at my apartment to shower and change into a fresh suit. This is a party, which requires a whole different clothing vibe. And now, I'm here, fashionably late, ready to show my support for Gary. I've just reached the top of the steps when someone grabs my arm. I turn to find Victor Knobb standing at my elbow, wearing a ruffled gray suit, with his hair pulled up into a messy top knot. He smiles in a way I assume he thinks is charming, and I curse myself for not spotting him sooner. "Good evening, Jocelin. What a coincidence we showed up at the exact same time."

If I know anything about Victor, it's that, like his aunt, nothing he does is a coincidence. I smile coolly. "Yes. What luck." More likely, he's been lying in wait, ready to pounce the moment I arrived.

He looks behind me, then smirks. "No boyfriend tonight?"

Putain. "If he can get away from work, he'll be here."

The self-satisfied smirk on Victor's face clearly telegraphs his prediction. He reaches for the door. "While we wait, why don't you let me buy you a drink?"

Calling on the manners my mother drummed into me, I keep my smile in place while extracting my arm from his grasp. "This is a Gary Atkinson event. Hibernian Press pulls out all the stops for him, so it's an open bar." I'd have thought Victoria would have clued him in on that. Speaking of... I look around but don't see her. "Are you here alone?" Only when his eyes darken do I realize my words might be misconstrued as interest, and I hurry to mitigate the damage. "I wasn't aware you were on the guest list."

His smugness only intensifies, and I want to smack the look from his face. "Aunt Victoria insisted I come since I'll be working with Blake soon." There is so much wrong with his sentence that I could scream. Instead, I swallow my annoyance and let it pass until I speak with Alistair. He was in meetings all afternoon and unavailable to anyone. At least Victoria hasn't spoken to him yet, either. Victor opens the door and waves me in. "Anyway, let's go get that drink."

As I'm about to politely tell him hell will freeze over before I willingly have a drink with him, the unmistakable roar of a Harley Davidson cuts through the air. We both turn to watch the bike come into view. The rider pulls up to the valet podium, exchanges a few words with the valet, then pulls away, parking in a designated motorcycle spot. He cuts the engine and swings his leg over the seat, pulling off his helmet as he stands, and my mouth goes dry.

Gunnar Osouf is a ridiculously gorgeous man, with ridiculously large, well, everything. As he walks toward us, my entire body perks up. His thick, dark hair, which had been artfully messy this afternoon, is now shorter on the sides, with longer layers on top. He drags his fingers through the low pompadour, puffing it up a bit where it had been squashed by his helmet. His facial hair is now neatly trimmed, revealing plump lips and perfect white teeth. And *my god*, the incredibly expensive navy wool bespoke suit he's wearing accentuates his broad shoulders, chest, and narrow waist perfectly. Next to me, Victor, in his off-the-rack finery, growls.

Before he can say anything, I hurry down the steps to Gunnar. "There you are, *mon chéri*. I was afraid you wouldn't make it."

Confused, Gunnar reaches into his pocket and pulls out a lovely light blue silk tie. "Jocelin, were we—"

I gently pluck the silk from his hand, cutting him off mid-sentence. "Let me help you with that. We both know you'll only butcher the knot." Gunnar doesn't say a word, but plays along, his eyes sparkling with mischief. I drape the tie around his neck and flip up his collar, keeping my voice low. "I know it's presumptuous, but I really could use your help. The person at the door is someone I work with and..." My voice trails off as I try to find a succinct way of explaining the situation.

"Is he bothering you?" Gunnar's tone is quietly menacing, almost a growl, and I quickly glance up. His expression is murderous as he glares at Victor.

I quickly tie an Eldredge knot, fold down his shirt collar, and smooth my hands along his chest. “Yes and no.” That brings his attention back to me. “He’s mostly innocuous but persistent. He keeps asking me out, and I keep declining, but his aunt is a partner in my firm—the woman you saw earlier today—so I have to tread carefully.” So far, Gunnar seems on board, but this next part is where I could lose him. “He has been so persistent, I may have told him I have a boyfriend. Incredibly, said boyfriend never makes it to any office functions, so Victor keeps trying.”

Gunnar’s face goes blank, and he takes a step back. “Oh. He couldn’t make it tonight?”

With a snort, I step forward and put my hands on his chest again, feeling Victor’s eyes boring a hole in my back. “Gunnar, I don’t actually *have* a boyfriend. I made him up.” With a deep inhale, I look him in the eyes and rip off the bandage. “I was hoping you’d play that role.”

Gunnar

The shock on Jocelin's handsome face, followed by the most adorably flustered sputtering, is enough to confirm that he didn't mean that like it sounded. "Oh, my god. *Tonight*. I meant only for tonight. Not permanently."

I grip his shoulders and smile down at him. "Take a breath. I figured that's what you meant." One glance at the sour expression on the guy waiting by the door is enough for me to agree. Stopping his harassment and fucking up his plans will be fun. Plus, if I leave Jocelin hanging, Astrid will kick my ass.

Jocelin continues to fiddle with my tie, and I let him. The attention is flattering, even if it's for phony reasons. Plus, on the infrequent occasions when I do wear a suit, I don't usually bother with a tie, so the help is appreciated. While he's this close, I take a moment to appreciate how undeniably beautiful he is. Because that's the only word to describe Jocelin Allard. The highly styled dark brown hair with a few strategically placed highlights complements his flawless skin. His straight

nose and high cheekbones accentuate his pink Cupid's bow lips. They look soft and kissable. Not that we'll be kissing. This seems like a fairly quick fake boyfriend stint. Plus, he's friends with Astrid. I don't need her nosing into my business, and there'd be no keeping her out of it if I was actually dating one of her friends.

Plus, he's not really my type. His silk burgundy three-piece suit, white shirt, and black bow tie practically scream high-end hipster. Though I will admit, on Jocelin, it works. It *really* works.

He smooths down my tie and steps back. "So, should I take your silence as a no thank you?"

When he looks up at me with the softest brown puppy eyes, I sigh. I've never been able to resist a sad puppy. Especially an attractive, sad puppy. With a really sexy mouth. What could it hurt to play along? I'll do this, Jocelin will get rid of the creep, and we'll hang out for a bit until I know the guy got the message. When things settle down, I'll go find Astrid and Gary. I take one of his hands, kissing the knuckles before lacing our fingers together and pulling him toward the door. "Babe, are you going to introduce me to your coworker?"

Jocelin's whole body relaxes against mine, and his smile could light up all of Seattle Center. "Thank you." I wink at him before he turns, and we walk up the steps to the guy still waiting at the doors. "Victor, this is my boyfriend, Gunnar." There is definitely a hit of glee in Jocelin's voice, and I chuckle. Victor's eyes widen in surprise and then narrow as he

gives me a once-over. “Gunnar, this is Victor Knobb, from my law firm.”

Somehow I manage to keep a straight face, because really? Knobb? That’s a bit on the nose. I let go of Jocelin’s hand and reach for Victor’s, giving it a firm squeeze. He offers me one of those clammy, wimpy handshakes that screams, ‘I have no self-esteem.’ I don’t wipe my hand after, which deserves some recognition. “Nice to meet you, Victor. Jocelin talks about you all the time.”

Victor’s eyes narrow, and he turns them on Jocelin, his smile tight. “Does he?”

Before the situation deteriorates, I rest my hand on Jocelin’s lower back and reach for the door handle. “We’d better go inside, Joce. My sister’s waiting for us.” I turn back to Victor. “Nice to meet you. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around.”

When we’re safely inside, Jocelin pulls me into what looks like a pantry area, then whirls around, eyes twinkling, laughter bubbling out of him. God, he’s gorgeous. “That was perfection. And his face! If he could have killed us with his glare, he would have. And did you just give me a nickname?”

I grin at him, captivated by his euphoria. “It seemed appropriate. If we were dating, I’d probably call you Joce. I thought it made things more believable.”

“Thank you again for playing along. I really think you might have finally helped me dissuade him from asking me out again.” Jocelin chews on his lower lip and turns those soft brown eyes on me, and every part of me gets warm. “So, I

guess you're officially off the hook. No need to stick around.” His cheeks pink, and it's fucking charming.

And it might be wishful thinking, but I swear there's a hint of disappointment in his tone. “That's it? Just a thank you? I thought at the very least you'd buy me a beer.” No one has ever accused me of being subtle. But if it gets me a few more minutes of his time, does it really matter?

Jocelin laughs. “The alcohol is free tonight. But by all means, allow me. I'll even ‘buy’ you something more expensive if you'd like.”

His eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles, and it's all kinds of sexy, just like the rest of him. How had I never noticed before? Not that we're around each other much. Astrid doesn't bring a lot of friends to the house. Mostly because she's learned over the years that anything could happen where her brothers are concerned. Okay, mostly where I'm concerned. ‘Anything’ ranging from unmerciful teasing to throwing punches, though I haven't been that bad in years. But old habits die hard. I wonder if she's been purposely hiding him. “Oh, really? Well, then I accept.”

I grin at him and hook our pinkies together. “We probably should keep holding hands, in case Victor comes back.” I am not above milking this opportunity for all it's worth. If Fate is going to present me with a beautiful man in distress, who am I to throw it back in her face?

Jocelin smiles and laces our fingers together. “Probably. We wouldn't want him to think we're lying.”

“Absolutely not.” I gesture toward the main room. “Shall we?” We wander into the already crowded tasting room and find a vacant square of space at the bar. When Jocelin orders Krug Grande Cuvée, I raise an eyebrow and lean closer under the pretense of being heard over the noisy crowd. “That’s some fancy champagne.”

Jocelin grins. “It’s my favorite. My parents taught me never to settle. On anything.”

I wonder at that as I order Jameson Blue Label, neat, and turn back to him. “So you’re a lawyer, right? I think I remember Astrid saying that.”

Before he can reply, we’re interrupted. “Jocelin.”

We both turn to look, and since I don’t know the person in front of us, I glance at Jocelin to gauge his reaction. His eyes widen, but there’s no tension in his smile, and I relax. “Alistair.” Alistair is tall, though not as tall as my six feet four inches. He looks to be in his late forties or early fifties, but the way his light gray suit fits over his broad shoulders and slim waist, I’d say he’s still in amazing shape. His sandy blond hair is swept back in an impeccable side part, and he exudes confidence and friendly energy. He also seems pleased to see Jocelin. I move back a bit, putting a little space between us, and let Jocelin lead. “I didn’t know any of the partners would be here.”

A wide grin splits Alistair’s face as he holds up Gary’s latest book. “My wife is a huge fan. She’s out of town on business and couldn’t make it tonight, so I volunteered to get her a

signed copy of the new release.” He turns to me and holds out his hand. “Hello. I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Alistair Trumble. Jocelin and I work together.”

Jocelin sputters a laugh. “Technically, yes, but Alistair is one of the firm’s founding partners.”

I shake Alistair’s hand, instantly liking his unassuming manner. “Gunnar Osouf. It’s nice to meet you.”

Alistair winks at Jocelin. “But we do work together. And Osouf. Any relation to Astrid?” He looks between us for confirmation, his eyes briefly stopping on our interlaced fingers.

I nod. “She’s my sister.”

His lips curve into a mischievous grin. “Is that how you two met?”

Jocelin’s cheeks are pink again, but he looks Alistair in the eyes and nods. “Yes. We’ve been keeping it quiet for professional reasons, but tonight seemed like the right time to put it out there.” I’m a bit surprised that he wants to continue the pretense, but it doesn’t really impact me either way. And it could just provide me the opportunity to hang around him and see if there might be more here. There’s definitely at least a spark of interest on both our parts. “Alistair, if you have a few minutes first thing Monday, I’d love to get some clarification on client assignments.”

Alistair raises his eyebrows but nods. “Sure. Is there a problem?”

“No.” Jocelin answers quickly, and something sounds off in his tone, but it’s none of my business, so I stay out of it. “As I said, I’m looking for a bit of clarification. But it’s not worth interrupting your evening. It can wait until Monday.”

Alistair nods. “Oh, before I forget, I’m having a small get-together next weekend at my house. Just a casual thing—a few people from work, a chance to get to know everyone better. Spouses and boyfriends or girlfriends are welcome, of course.” He looks expectantly at me. “Think you can make it?”

Jocelin’s eyes widen, and he looks at me in barely concealed panic. There’s no way I’m committing myself to anything until he and I have a chance to talk. He may not want me to go with him. Hell, I may be over playing knight in shining armor by then. When Jocelin looks at me with those big brown eyes, I know that’s not going to happen. If he asks, I’ll say yes. “I’ll have to double check my schedule, but thank you. That’s very kind of you to include me.”

“We’ll coordinate our schedules this weekend, and I’ll let you know on Monday, if that’s okay.” Jocelin leans into me, and I can feel him vibrating with excitement.

Alistair grins. “That’s perfect. You two have a great evening. I’m heading home with my loot.” He shakes my hand and then Jocelin’s. “I hope you can make it, Gunnar, but if not, I’m sure I’ll see you at future events, now that Jocelin has revealed your secret identity.” With a wink, he excuses himself and heads for the door.

Once he's gone, Jocelin sighs and rubs his face. "So you don't have to come to Alistair's party with me. That's way above and beyond your already amazing help tonight. I don't want to take advantage."

I frown at him. "Will it help you if I go?"

There's an almost imperceptible shrug of one shoulder. "Maybe? It would help keep the storyline believable. But it's okay. I can say you have to work or have a family obligation you can't avoid."

"You aren't taking advantage if I volunteer to go with you. And if you think it will help, I'm there." So what if I'm slightly attracted to him? I'm doing this because Jocelin is Astrid's best friend, which means he's a nice guy. I can't throw him to the wolves.

He looks at me with such relief that I know I've made the right decision. "I'll warn you, it will probably be boring, with lots of talk about work."

"Joce, trust me. I don't mind. And there are worse things than hanging out with you at a party."

Before he can say anything to that, his eyes narrow, and he grabs my hand. "Victor, two o'clock."

I roll my eyes, already tired of this vulture. "He really doesn't understand the word no, does he?"

Jocelin grimaces. "Maybe he's not buying our story."

I turn to face Jocelin and hold his gaze. "I can take care of that. Will you trust me?"

“Yes.” I like that there is no hesitation. Decisiveness is sexy. Though he might regret saying it in a second.

“Alright. Don’t hit me.” There’s a moment of confusion on his face as I haul him against me and give in to the urge to kiss him. He squeaks in surprise, but when I cradle the back of his head with my hand, he melts against me with a tiny sigh. It’s the sweetest little sound, and as we both relax into the kiss, Jocelin takes the lead, his soft mouth pressing against mine with a touch of heat, his tongue flicking against my lips unexpectedly. He slowly slides his hands up my chest, weaving his fingers into my hair, and I forget about everyone around us or the reason I kissed him in the first place. There is only the two of us, and this slow, sensual, mind-blowing kiss. His lips are every bit as soft as I imagined. And the warm, clean scent of his cologne makes it difficult to think. I can’t remember the last time I was kissed like this.

Forgetting where I am, I slowly part my lips. Jocelin follows my lead, our tongues caressing sensually, and I can’t hold back a low moan as heat sweeps through me, waking up every nerve in my body. Lost in the kiss, I almost miss the sound of a sharp gasp, followed by a poorly hidden laugh turned into a cough. Much too soon for my liking, Jocelin brings the kiss to an end, his body still pressed firmly against me, our faces mere inches apart, his head cradled in my hands.

He blinks up at me, and I’m sure I have the same dazed look on my face. “Wow.” It’s so incredibly inadequate to what just happened that it makes me chuckle. I glance around to find Astrid standing a few feet away. I return her grin and motion

her over, still clutching Jocelin against my chest. His eyes are locked on my face, not that I mind, and he isn't making any moves to step away. I'm definitely not going to suggest anything about this situation should change.

Astrid smirks and crosses her arms. "So, I guess you two ran into each other."

That does make Jocelin move. He reaches out an arm and gestures for her to come closer, his eyes darting around. "Shh."

She frowns. "Why are we shushing?" She steps closer, and Jocelin leans in.

"Remember how Victor keeps asking me out? Well, he tried it again, right outside." Astrid screws up her face like she's licked a lemon, and Jocelin nods. "Exactly. But Gunnar stepped in on the spur of the moment, allowing me to introduce him as my boyfriend so Victor would leave me alone."

Astrid's eyebrows shoot up, and she turns to me with an incredulous look. "Oh, really?"

I shrug. "I'm selfless like that." Her snort clearly says how much she agrees.

"Mmm. And was the kissing part of the act?" Her lips quirk into a smirk as she looks straight at me.

I nod emphatically. "Yup."

At the same time, Jocelin says, "Not intentionally."

Astrid laughs. "I see. Well, it was a very believable kiss." She punches me in the arm.

"Ow!" I let go of one of Jocelin's hips to rub my bicep. "What was that for?"

"For making out with my best friend in front of me." She grimaces. "Ewww."

So her issue isn't about my making out with her best friend. Just that it was in front of her. Very good to know. Unfortunately, her reaction prompts Jocelin to push against my chest and take a step back. "Sorry."

Reluctantly, I let him go. "Sorry for what?"

Astrid punches my arm again. "Gunnar, stop glaring at Jocelin! You're gonna make him feel bad!"

"*You're* making him feel bad. No kiss shaming, Astrid." I turn to Jocelin and take his hand. "I'm sorry if I overstepped."

He squeezes my fingers and shakes his head. "You didn't." His cheeks are flushed, and his pupils are huge, and fuck, I like how that looks on him. "Thank you for the quick thinking."

"You're welcome." I turn back to Astrid, wanting to be alone again with Jocelin. She's obviously making him second-guess his fake boyfriend ruse, or picking me to play the boyfriend, and neither sits well. "Don't you need to be with Gary or something?"

She waves a hand dismissively. "Nah. He's having the time of his life. You know how much he loves these things. He's

one of only a few writers I know who absolutely think events like this are the best part of the job.”

“Maybe you should check.” I narrow my eyes at her, but she just laughs.

“Nah. This is infinitely more interesting.” She looks around. “Where’s Victor?” She’s not being quiet anymore, and I attempt to banish her with my glare.

Jocelin grips her arm. “Don’t ask that!” He looks around cautiously and drops his voice. “You’ll summon him.” As if she has, Victor steps away from the bar and heads right for us. I glare at her.

With the smarmiest of smiles, Victor saunters up to our little group. “Did I hear someone mention my name?”

In unison, Jocelin and I both say, “No.”

Victor blinks, and Astrid laughs. “Victor. Good evening.” She holds out her hand, and he takes it, giving her the same limp handshake he gave me. She frowns and pulls her hand away before plastering a smile to her face. “We haven’t formally met. I’m Astrid Osouf. I’m an editor at Hibernian Press. So glad you could make it tonight.”

His grin is smug as he replies confidently. “Well, it’s important to support the client, and since I’ll be responsible for Hibernian’s new imprint, I need to be here.”

Astrid laughs and nudges Victor. “Well, one can dream.” She turns to smile at Jocelin. “Hibernian Press is very happy with the services of Trumble, Santori, and Knobb, and most

especially with how Jocelin's handled our account." She winks at him and then looks back at Victor. "We don't foresee any changes to that."

Victor shrugs. "I'm sure it will all be worked out by the partners." He turns to Jocelin with the lamest attempt at a smile. "We need to make sure we're supporting our clients *properly*."

That does it. "Listen here, you..."

I step forward, but Jocelin puts a hand to my chest, stopping me. He shakes his head, then turns to Victor. "I'm sure the client will have some say in the matter."

Astrid steps in and hooks her arm through Victor's. "It *is* better to keep the client happy than to change things and have them take their business elsewhere. But I'm sure all this can wait until Monday. Why don't I take you over to say hello to Gary?"

She steers Victor away, and I glare after them. "What an asshole."

"Try working with him. Better yet, try working with him and his aunt." He shivers dramatically, then turns to me with a rueful grin. "Hopefully tonight is enough to convince him to stop."

I shrug. "If it's not, I'm willing to play boyfriend whenever you need it. Maybe going to Alistair's party together will solidify your taken status in his mind. If more people think I'm your boyfriend, he should stop. And if not, you can always go

to HR. Pressuring you to go out with him is sexual harassment.”

Jocelin shakes his head. “His aunt is a partner, which complicates things. It could blow up in my face.”

I take his hand and squeeze. “Then you’ll just have to let me know when I need to come to your rescue.”

Jocelin

I look into Gunnar's eyes, amazed by his offer. "Are you sure you want to put yourself in the middle of this? Just because I'm friends with your sister doesn't mean you're obligated to continue the charade. We barely know each other. I really appreciate your help tonight, but I don't want to take advantage of your good nature."

Gunnar laughs out loud. "Joce, the last thing anyone would ever accuse me of is having a good nature. And yes, I'm sure. Unless you don't want me to. I'd understand that."

Before I overthink it, my mouth is moving, and words are pouring out. "If you're willing, then I'd truly love for you to go with me to Alistair's." Heat creeps up my cheeks, and my heart races. "I'm having a great time with you tonight." I laugh. "At least so far." It's surprising but true. For as close as I am with Astrid, I don't know much about Gunnar, except their parents' deaths hit him really hard, and he was kind of a loose cannon because of it. But according to Astrid, he got

help to deal with his anger issues, and tonight he's been nothing but sweet.

The few times we actually met before were at Bjorn's house, and they were very brief. I'd gone with Astrid to pick something up or drop something off, and Gunnar was in the garage, quietly working on his motorcycle. We might have said ten words to each other over the past few years. Nothing I'd learned about him prepared me for how sweet he's being tonight. "So, um... if we are going to continue telling everyone we're dating, we should probably get to know some specifics about each other."

Gunnar glances around the bar and nods in agreement. "This probably isn't the best place to do that, though."

He's not wrong. Not only is it loud, there's always the chance someone I work with will overhear us and figure out what we're doing. "Should we get together at some point this week, then?"

His smile is wide, making his handsome face even more attractive, if that's possible. "Joce, are you asking me out on a date?"

My heart hammers in my chest as I meet his eyes. Is it a real date if we're getting to know each other so we can fake date? Would I mind if it was a real date? I let that question settle in my brain and decide I wouldn't actually mind at all. "Would you say yes if I were?"

Gunnar's eyes sparkle, and he takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. "I would."

That's all the encouragement I need. Stepping closer, I look into his eyes and place my palm against his very firm chest. "Would you like to get out of here now? Unless you need to stay for Gary or Astrid."

His free hand settles on my hip, and a slow smirk spreads across his face. "Nah, they don't need me here." He brings my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles, sending delicious tendrils of heat up my arm. "Where should we go?"

I debate the possibilities. My first thought is to get this sexy man somewhere we can continue kissing and see where that leads. But this is Astrid's brother—her *twin* brother. At least a modicum of restraint needs to be shown. We could go for coffee. There's a cute little bistro around the corner with really amazing pastries and baristas who draw stunning designs in the foam. But that will be noisy, and I'd rather go somewhere we can actually talk. I make the mistake of looking into his eyes. There's so much heat in them, I swear my clothes will catch fire, and it burns my resolve into tiny little piles of ash. "My coworkers think we've been dating for about six months. We should know quite a bit about each other by now, including where we live and what our places look like. So, maybe another drink at my place?"

Gunnar gently nibbles on my knuckle, and who knew that could be so erotic? "A drink at yours sounds good. Should I follow you?"

"I didn't drive." I live downtown, so there isn't really a need for a car. Public transportation or walking usually gets me

where I need to go. And ride-hailing services cover the rest.

Gunnar shrugs like it's not a big deal. "Do you mind riding on the back of my bike? I didn't bring the car tonight."

The thought of zipping through the city pressed against Gunnar's back definitely has appeal. "I've never been on the back of a motorcycle, but it sounds exciting."

"We should probably stop at the signing table to say hello to Gary and tell Astrid we're leaving. Do you know where that is?"

I point toward a doorway at the rear of the bar. "He's set up in the large tasting room."

Gunnar laces our fingers together and starts walking in that direction. "Is there anyone else you need to see or something you need to do before we go?"

I shake my head. "No. The only reason I'm here is for Astrid and Gary."

His grin promises all kinds of naughty things. "Okay. Then let's go."

Gunnar

It takes us another half an hour to say our goodbyes and actually leave. Gary is a popular guy, and he loves to talk, so waiting to catch him between fans is tricky. While Jocelin speaks with Gary, I fill Astrid in on what I know about the situation with Victor and the plan Jocelin and I came up with. “So, Joce and I are going to get out of here and grab a coffee. Do a little getting-to-know-you thing.”

She nudges me in the ribs. “Joce, huh? Guess you guys hit it off.”

I point my finger at her because I know that look. “Don’t start matchmaking, Bean. I’m doing this because that Victor guy is a creep, and Joce seems really nice.”

“Yes, but you did hit it off. Admit it.”

Her expression is smug, and it’s annoying. I want to deny it, but I can’t. “Yes. Fine. We get along well.”

She hums noncommittally. “You know...” There’s a mischievous gleam in her eye, and I’m immediately on alert.

“If you really want to make things believable, you’ll invite him to Sunday dinner.”

I shake my head violently. “No. No way. I’m not putting Jocelin through a family dinner. He’ll see how dysfunctional we all are, and no one we like deserves to be put through that.”

She snorts. “Hey, we like Gary and Jules, and we put them through it every week.” Astrid squeezes my arm. “Besides, have you forgotten I actually know Jocelin? It’s not like he hasn’t heard all the stories.” That brings me up short, embarrassment forming a knot in my stomach. Shit. He knows about all my fuckups. I teeter on the edge of calling the whole thing off before I calm my spiraling brain and remind myself Jocelin doesn’t seem to have judged me too badly. I guess that’s something. Astrid nudges me. “Besides, if the two of you are going to pull this off, he needs to know things about you he can’t learn any other way.” She grins. “Come on. Bjorn and Erik won’t mind. I’ll make them promise to be on their best behavior.”

I scowl. “Like that means anything.” But she’s right. Family dinner will give Jocelin a unique perspective only someone close to us would have. But is it really necessary to be believable? And why do I care so much? I don’t work with these people.

I glance over at Jocelin, who is animatedly chatting with Gary. Obviously, I care because he’s Astrid’s friend. And he’s a nice guy. I rub my eyes and sigh. I care because even if I want to deny it, there’s something about Jocelin Allard that has

my attention. It's pulling at me in a way I haven't felt in a long time. And I like it a little too much. God dammit. "Fine. You're right."

She cups her hand around her ear. "What's that? I didn't quite hear you."

I flip her off. "Fine. I'll ask him." Smoothing down my beard, I glance Jocelin's way. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"What? Pretending to be his boyfriend or bringing him to Bjorn's for Sunday dinner?"

Annoyed because she's right, I glare at her. "Both." I kiss her cheek. "See you Sunday, Bean."

She hugs me and winks. "Have fun getting coffee."

I flip her off again and go to collect Jocelin.



There's nothing like the rumble of a Harley-Davidson engine to get your blood thrumming. Jocelin's wide eyes snap to mine, and I laugh. "I know. Right?" Reaching back, I pull the spare helmet from the saddlebag, handing it to him. "Here. Your hair's gonna suffer, but it's the law."

He takes the helmet and pulls it on. "Okay. But no teasing when I take it off and my hair is a flattened mess."

"Promise." After a few attempts on his own, I turn in my seat and help him secure the chin strap. Jocelin puts his hand

on my shoulder to steady himself, then swings a leg over and sits behind me. He's a lot further away than I'd like, and his body language is tense. I frown and shout over the purring of the motorcycle. "You gonna be okay?"

He nods. "The reality of this is a bit unnerving. I guess I'm just realizing there will be nothing between us and the other vehicles."

"I promise I know what I'm doing, and I'll be very careful." I give his hand a gentle squeeze, even though I'd rather give him a kiss. But the full-face helmet blocks most of the good kissing spots even with the visor up. "I have to protect my precious cargo." Joce shakes his head but relaxes, which was my intention. "Where to?" He gives me his address as I pull on my own helmet, and I mentally whistle. We're headed to the ritzy end of town. "Ready?" When Jocelin nods, I rev the engine one more time and grin. "Hold on tight."

Jocelin grips my hips, and I slowly move the bike forward, letting him find his balance. When we hit the street, I give it a bit more gas, and he stiffens, tightening his hold. It's been a long time since I've had someone on the bike who's never ridden before. I usually ride solo or with Astrid. She and I have ridden together for so many years, it's like second nature. Having a stiff, nervous rider on the back of my bike is throwing off the balance, and though it's not difficult to compensate, it takes more focus.

At the next traffic light, I make a few adjustments, moving one of Jocelin's hands from my hip to cross over my body.

This forces him closer, giving us a better center of gravity on the bike. “This way you won’t feel like you’re going to fall off.” Jocelin nods and wraps his other arm around my waist, and damn, I like the way he fits against me.

At eight o’clock on a Friday evening, traffic is relatively light. Whether it’s the lack of other vehicles on the road or my excellent driving, Jocelin slowly relaxes. By the end of the thirty-minute ride back into the city, he’s pressed up against my back, with his arms wrapped around my body and his chin on my shoulder. I don’t hate it. At all. We pull up to the security booth in the garage of his building, and Jocelin fumbles to open the visor on his helmet. It takes a second, but when he flips it up he’s beaming from ear to ear. “Evening, Jim.”

“Evening Mr. Allard.” The guard nods at me and opens the gate, letting us through.

Jocelin leans against me, visor still raised. “Park in space 38A.” I nod and move up the ramp, finding the parking spot to the left of the elevators. I roll into it and cut the engine, waiting for Jocelin to slide off the bike before lowering the stand and swinging off. I remove my helmet, and Jocelin hands me his, and as promised, I don’t laugh at his slightly compressed quiff. As if he can tell what I’m thinking, he runs his fingers through his hair, spiking up the front, with the rest falling into an artful mess. God, he’s beautiful. I grip the helmets in one hand and take his in the other, following him to the elevators. Rather than pressing a button, Jocelin pulls a key card from his wallet and taps it against the access console. The

doors open, and we step inside, thankfully avoiding any awkward waiting. He taps the card to the inner panel above the floor numbers, presses twenty-four, and the doors shut. I barely feel the movement as the elevator ascends, and in moments there's a delicate chime and the doors open again. I do my best not to stare.

Okay, I totally stare. We step directly into Jocelin's loft, and my gaze shoots across the room to the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. The view is breathtaking. All of Seattle is spread out beneath us, lights from the city twinkling hypnotically. Jocelin moves further into the room, and I follow, my gaze darting to him as he takes off his suit coat, carefully laying it across the back of a chair. His tie follows, laid flat over the coat. He's obviously fussy about his clothes, and I definitely am not, but I usually don't need to be. He reaches for the button at his collar, and I don't even try to hide my interest as he opens it, revealing the dip between his clavicles. It's one of the sexiest parts of a person, at least in my opinion.

“So, this is home.” I pull my gaze from the sexy column of his throat to look around the room, smiling as my architect's brain kicks in. The design is exquisite. It's an open floor plan, with an abundance of light wood and white walls throughout the dining and living areas. The focal point of the design is the windows, but they're beautifully balanced by the huge stone fireplace. The space has an airy feel, like summer in a bottle. From where I'm standing, I can see a kitchen off to the left, as well as an upper floor with a loft office area and at least one bedroom. I spin in a tight circle, taking it all in.

“Would you like a tour?”

I grin and nod as I remove my own jacket and tie, laying them next to Jocelin’s. “Please.”

He motions around the living room. “Well, obviously this is the main room. I don’t spend much time here unless I have people over. I have an office upstairs which doubles as a guest room when needed. That’s where I spend most of my time. Down here is really just for entertaining, and I don’t do much of that.”

I follow him into the kitchen, and my mouth drops open. The layout is functional, with lots of counter space and a bounty of wall outlets, but every square inch of the room, from the stainless steel appliances to the epoxy grout between the hand-placed tiles of the mosaic backsplash, screams luxury. The countertops are granite, the floor is dark hardwood, and the lighting fixtures are custom. The entire area is showroom ready, like it’s rarely used, and I wonder if he has a phenomenal cleaning service, or if he truly doesn’t take advantage of this incredible space. “This is an amazing kitchen. Do you cook?”

Jocelin laughs. “Not if I can help it. Although I can make a mean espresso.” He gestures to a Breville Oracle espresso machine in pride of place on its own beverage bar. “Speaking of which, would you like one? Or a beer?”

“Beer would be nice. Whatever you have.” I roll up my sleeves as I wander around the kitchen, absorbing all the little details. Jocelin grabs two beers from a built-in French door

refrigerator, pulls a bottle opener from a whisper-quiet drawer, pops off the aluminum caps, then hands one bottle to me before motioning for me to follow him back to the living room.

“How long have you lived here?”

We climb a narrow set of stairs to the second floor. “About six years, now. I moved in after the lofts were renovated.” At the top of the stairs to the right is an open study-office that overlooks the grand room. There are neat piles of papers on the desk, an open laptop with two additional monitors, a cozy-looking sofa with a fuzzy blanket artfully thrown over the back, and another breathtaking view of the city. To the left is a bedroom area, and Jocelin heads in that direction. My heart rate speeds up. If this is his way of hinting that he’d like to get to know me better, I’m on board with that.

“So, this is my bedroom.”

It’s a lovely room. The white walls are offset by frequent touches of soft grays and a dash of black. There’s a white brick fireplace, with black grating and cast iron fireplace tools to one side, and a seating area across from it, with an overstuffed white sofa that looks cozy enough to sink into. However, the focal point of the room is most definitely the king-sized bed centered on the back wall. It’s covered in a fluffy white comforter and piled high with lots of gray and silver throw pillows. I imagine Jocelin’s pale skin and dark hair against the lightness of the bedding, and my cock perks up.

I take a deep breath and focus on the dark ball of fur curled up in the middle of the bed. A small fuzzy head slowly lifts, and pale green eyes lock on mine assessingly. With a slow blink, the cat lowers its head, curling in on itself, and I'm dismissed.

"That's Dracona. She rules the house. She's notorious for her bad behavior and disliking everything. If she hisses at you, don't take it personally." Jocelin moves around the bed and through another doorway.

"The en-suite bathroom." I look over his shoulder at the narrow room with all-white walls and fixtures. Everything has clean, elegant lines, from the granite countertop with the enormous trough sink to the free-standing, deep tub big enough to comfortably fit two of me. The floor is light wood, designed to pull the eye toward the back of the room and the massive shower. "God, that's spectacular." The shower walls are white marble, with a mid-ceiling shower fixture as well as three separate shower heads on the right wall, two on the left and a strip of tumbled pebbles down the center of the floor. I know this style immediately.

"This looks like a Tadhg Byrne design."

Jocelin turns toward me, a perplexed look on his face. "Actually, it is. Tadhg designed this for me. He's a close friend."

"You're friends with my boss?" I laugh. "You have to be fucking kidding me. You're friends with my sister *and* my boss." Then it all clicks into place. Of course they know each

other. Jocelin works with Tadhg's brother, Blake. "So, then you probably know Quinn, his partner."

Jocelin stares at me, nodding slowly. "Yes, I knew Quinn first. It's a bit convoluted, actually. I was friends with Blake's partner, Stef, first. Stef introduced me to their brother Jules, who was living with Quinn at the time. Quinn invited Tadhg to one of our game nights, and we've all been friends ever since." Joce shakes his head. "Wait, you work for MRB Concepts?"

"Yes. For all intents and purposes, I'm Tadhg's apprentice. He's teaching me the real world application of high-end single-family dwelling architecture."

Jocelin laughs. "That's definitely how he'd phrase that."

I shake my head. "This night keeps getting stranger and stranger."

Jocelin laughs again. "Is that a good thing?"

I nod and step closer. "Very."

Jocelin

I brush my hand down the front of Gunnar's dress shirt, enjoying the feel of the pure linen weave under my palm. "So, that's the whole place. Just enough space for me without feeling too big." The silence hangs in the air, and I look into his eyes. That's my first mistake because I'm sucked into their warm depths with no way to escape. When did we get so close? My god, his cologne smells so good, all woodsy and clean, and I want to press my nose to his neck and breathe him in. It wouldn't take much effort. We could be chest to chest, hip to hip, lips to lips if I just lean in. From there, it would be a matter of a few steps to the bed, and *mon dieu*, if this simmering heat is any indication, I know we'd burn up the sheets. But while I very much want that, I also *like* Gunnar, and I'd prefer to get to know him. Which, I remind myself sternly, is the whole point of bringing him here in the first place. Well, not here in my bedroom, but here, to my apartment.

With regret so strong I have to force back a whimper, I let my hand drop and take a step back. Hopefully a bit of distance will dilute whatever pheromones he's dousing me with, because right now, they're sorely tempting me to throw caution to the wind and see how quickly I can undress him and get him into my bed. I take his hand and lead him back downstairs. "So should we have a seat and start grilling each other for details?"

Gunnar gives my hand a squeeze, and I look over my shoulder at him. He's smirking like he knows the whole convoluted thought process I just went through. Handsome bastard. "Sure. Are there any off-limits topics?"

Good question. I take a moment to think about that and can't come up with anything I wouldn't answer. "Not that I can think of, but I reserve the right to change my mind and would completely respect your choice not to answer any question if it makes you uncomfortable."

He drops onto the sofa, and I sit next to him, ignoring the little voice in my head suggesting more space between us is a good idea. "Why don't we take it one question at a time, and if we aren't comfortable answering, we can just say that."

"Perfect. Do you want to go first?"

Gunnar rubs his thumb across my knuckles distractingly and shakes his head. "You can."

Now that I need to ask something, my mind goes blank, and I can't think of any of the million questions I want to know the

answers to. Purely to break the ice, I ask something easy. “You grew up in Duval. Right?”

He nods. “Yeah. Out near where Erik and Jules live. After mom was killed, and we found out about the inheritance and the house on Yarrow Point, we moved there. Well, we moved after Astrid and I graduated from high school. Bjorn used those six months to fix up the house since it’d been sitting vacant for years.”

I squeeze his hand and look into his eyes. “I’m so sorry for your loss. Astrid told me what happened.” It’s all I say because I don’t want to open old wounds. I can’t imagine the horror of being restrained mere feet away while my mother bled out on the sidewalk. I’d have been as messed up as Gunnar was.

He nods and squeezes my hand in return. “Thanks.” That’s all he says, and I don’t push. We don’t know each other *that* well. “Anyway, I opted to live at home while I went to UW for architecture.” His mouth twists into a smirk. “Why live in a dorm and share a room with a stranger when you can live in luxury?” He grins, but the smile doesn’t quite make it to his eyes. “So, how about you? Where did you grow up?”

“Montreal. I moved to the States for university when I was eighteen, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Gunnar’s eyes brighten, and he latches onto the change in subject like a lifeline. “What university did you go to?”

“I received my undergrad from Cornell, but I, too, am a University of Washington alum. That’s where I earned my JD.”

Gunnar frowns. “JD?”

“Sorry, Juris Doctor. It’s a law degree.”

He looks puzzled. “And you came to Washington for that? I don’t know much about which law schools are good, but even I know Cornell is an incredible school. Why not get your degree there?”

I rub my forehead and wince. “UW *is* a great school, in an area of the country I love, and it is *very* far away from Montreal and my parents.”

Gunnar laughs. “Ah. I see. You don’t get along with them?”

I smirk and nudge his calf with my foot. “That’s your second or third question. You’re not following the rules.” The bastard tilts his head down and looks at me through his very dark, very thick lashes. Warmth floods through me, and he’s far too adorable like this to resist. “Fine. I’ll answer, but I may exercise my right to pepper in a few extra questions of my own later on.”

“Deal.” Gunnar grins, obviously pleased that I’ve caved to his charms. I think this might be a frequent thing, if we are around each other often.

I choose my words carefully, trying to avoid any overly dramatic implications. “My parents and I are very close. But they are... I think clingy is the best way to describe it. I’m an only child by their choice, and they doted on me.” I roll my eyes. “What am I saying? They still would if I gave them the least encouragement. At any rate, they would make

unannounced visits, expect me to drop everything, and be quite upset if I prioritized class or homework over them. It was in my best interest to make it a little more challenging for them to drop by.” I squeeze his hand. “So, you went to the University of Washington for architecture.” Gunnar nods. “How did you end up working for MRB?”

He winks. “Luck. A friend of mine used to work for one of the big architectural firms here in Seattle, and he helped me get an internship there. When I graduated, they weren’t hiring, so I took a job at a smaller firm and got some experience. My plan was to stay there a few years and then reapply at the bigger company once they had an opening. Then some shit went down, and my friend left to form MRB with Tadhg and Quinn. When they were ready to bring on a new architect, he told me to apply.” Gunnar sits up a little taller. “I had to earn the position. They didn’t just give it to me because I know Tom.” Somehow, I think this is a sore spot for him, and I file that away. “And there was no way I could pass up the opportunity to work with Tadhg Byrne. The guy’s a legend.”

“*Please* don’t tell him that. Ever. It will go straight to his head, and Quinn will never forgive you.”

Gunnar grins, edging a bit closer on the couch, brushing his fingertips along the back of my hand, sending delicious tingles up my arm. This is nice. I like having him in my space. I like being with him, talking about lots of little things. I like *him*. And I would not mind doing this again. Lost in my thoughts, I almost miss his question. “So, if you’re friends with Tadhg, do you know ASL?”

“Yes. My *grand-mère* was Deaf. She lived with us when I was growing up, and LSQ was our primary way of communicating at home. In the Montreal Deaf community, there are a lot of people who communicate in LSQ and ASL, just like many hearing people in the region speak both Quebecois and English. So I learned both.”

“I’m trying to learn ASL. I’ve taken two semesters, but I’m not that good at it yet. I’m enjoying it, though.”

That effort alone would have made me like Gunnar, but add the sweet way he agreed to help me out tonight and his absolute hotness, and I’m in deep trouble. Not that I’m worried because Gunnar seems interested, too. I don’t think I’m imagining that. “Well, if you ever want to practice, let me know. I’m happy to help.”

Gunnar’s eyes twinkle, and I can’t decide if it’s with mischief or interest. Maybe both? “Thank you. I will. Now.” He leans closer. “Is it my turn to ask again?” I roll my eyes and make a ‘go ahead’ gesture. He’s clearly unconcerned with the rules. “Okay, so, this may be boring, but people would expect your boyfriend to know the answer to this probing question.” He waggles his eyebrows, and I can’t help but laugh at his antics. “What’s your favorite color?”

I nod seriously. “Very probing question. Definitely a must ask.” I gesture at the walls. “Although you wouldn’t know from the bland décor, my favorite color is blue. All shades.”

Gunnar glances around, then raises an eyebrow. “So why not paint a wall or four if you think it’s bland?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I would, but the loft actually belongs to my parents. They claim they bought it as an investment, but if you ask me, it’s really so they feel like they still have some control over my life. And my mother chose the decor. If you met her, you’d understand. Neutrals are fine, though it would be nice to have a bit of color.” I sigh and look around. “I suppose I could buy some throw pillows or something.” Before I get too distracted, I bring the question back to him. “What is your favorite color?”

“I don’t really have a favorite.” As I open my mouth to protest his non-response, he clarifies. “I have more of a favorite color palette. I love earth tones. Dark hunter green, burgundy, gold, warm browns and bronzes. Autumn is also my favorite time of year. I never understood how Erik lived in Arizona for as long as he did. Who chooses to live in a desert? It’s too fucking hot, and everything is shades of brown.” He chuckles and shakes his head. “Anyway, I think it’s your turn to ask a question.”

“You’re too kind.” I wink, and as I ponder what to ask, I can’t help but marvel at how well this is going. If I’m honest, I’m having a much better time with Gunnar than I’ve had on the last dozen dates I’ve been on. He’s engaged in the conversation and actually curious about me, or so it seems. There is definitely chemistry between us. So much chemistry, I’m eager to keep the conversation going. Possibly indefinitely. I turn completely sideways on the couch so I’m facing him and use the opportunity to move a little closer so

our knees are touching. “How about another easy one? What is your favorite food?”

He squints at me. “Are we talking main course or dessert?”

I shrug. “Both?”

He gets a faraway look. “Dessert is definitely *Krumkaker*. They’re these little waffle things similar to pizzelle, but rolled. My grandma would make them at Christmas. And she’d make *raspeballer*, which are these Norwegian potato dumplings. But only on Thursdays. I can’t remember why, but she’d never make them on any other day.” He lets out a little groan that makes my body take definite notice. “We’d eat them with lamb or beef stews.”

He points at me, and I assume it’s my turn to answer the question. “Am I allowed to say my favorite food is anything I can have delivered?”

Gunnar snorts. “No. That isn’t a food. That’s a lifestyle.”

I sigh. “Fine. Well, I guess my favorite food is cheese.” I sit up straighter. “Wait! Cheese and olives.” I point at him. “And grapes! Ooooh.” I close my eyes and imagine my favorites. “That really crusty bread with olive oil and spices for dipping. And wine. Red wine. And dates.”

Gunnar throws his head back and laughs. It’s so genuine and carefree that I can’t help but feel a little proud of myself. He’s so full of joy, and I grin, even as I fight the overwhelming urge to crawl into his lap and kiss him breathless. He smooths his

hands over his beard and smiles. “Good picks. And I love your enthusiasm. Anything else to add, or are you done?”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Done. That’s it. I could live on that every day of my life. Seriously.”

He takes a sip of his ale. “I believe you.” He laces our fingers together again. “Now, next question?”

I drain the last of my ale and tilt my head to the side, looking directly into his eyes. The ease of our conversation, being in my own home, and the alcohol, are combining to make me very comfortable and relaxed. Possibly too relaxed, as my desire to get up close and personal with Gunnar begins to override good judgment. “You know...” I drag a finger up the neck of the bottle, slowly circling the lip. “We are supposed to have been dating for months.” Gunnar’s pupils expand as his eyes follow my fingertip. “One would assume that after this long, we’ve slept together.”

He swallows heavily and nods. “Yeah. That makes sense.” His voice is husky and sends ripples of pleasure through me.

Mon dieu, what would he sound like in the heat of passion? “I think it’s very important for me to know a few things. So I will ask them all at once.” I set my empty bottle on the coffee table and tuck my feet under my body to keep me from crawling into his lap.

However, it seems to encourage Gunnar to move so close my shin is now pressed along his wonderfully thick thigh. Does he know he’s playing with fire? “Okay, shoot.”

I lean forward, keeping my voice low. “Boxers, briefs, boxer briefs, or nothing at all?”

Gunnar grins and leans in to meet me, his rumbly voice lighting up every nerve in my body. “Those are some pretty heteronormative assumptions there, Joce.”

Even with my heart beating a million miles a minute and my cheeks flaming, I refuse to look away. “You are right. I have made some assumptions that I shouldn’t have. Allow me to rephrase.” I reach out and run a single finger along the top of his suit pants. “What do you wear under your trousers?”

Gunnar’s chuckle is deep and filthy, and it goes right to my balls. “Usually I wear boxer briefs.”

My brain gets hung up on what he might wear in unusual moments. “What do you sleep in?”

His eyes lock on mine, and he hesitates long enough for the sexual tension to ratchet up so high my balls ache. “Nothing.”

Fuck, I’m only human, and he is most definitely not playing fair. I give in to my urge to drape myself over him, straddling his hips, weaving my fingers into his thick hair. His pulse thrums under my forearms, beating as quickly as mine, and I press my nose against his neck, inhaling him like I’ve wanted to all evening. “What is this amazing cologne? It’s been driving me to distraction.”

Gunnar groans and settles his hands on my hips, his fingers digging in as I drop gentle, open-mouthed kisses along his neck.

“Um, it’s actually not cologne.” His voice is breathy and distracted, and it sends delicious shivers up my spine. “It’s Jack Black beard oil.”

I rub my cheek against his beard. “Beard oil? Isn’t that to soften your beard?” It *is* incredibly soft. “It seems to work.”

Gunnar’s hands slowly drift up my back, pulling me flush against his chest. “Yes. But it smells good, too.”

I hum appreciatively. “One more question. This one is a bit personal.” I nip at his earlobe. “Left or right side of the bed?”

Gunnar huffs out a breathy laugh. “Middle mostly, since I sleep alone. But my alarm clock is on the right side of the bed. So I guess right.”

Without warning, I’m flat on my back, Gunnar’s big body hovering over me. “Okay, your turn.” I close my eyes and arch into him, sliding my fingers through his hair as he kisses along my throat. “What do you wear under *your* trousers?”

I try for unaffected and fail miserably as my words come out rough and needy. “Why are you assuming I wear anything?”

Gunnar grins against my skin, and it makes me smile. “Because you don’t seem the type to go commando.”

I huff out a laugh because he’s not wrong. Just the thought makes me squirm, which presses my quickly hardening cock against his hip. I moan and grip his hair harder. “Boxer briefs.”

He licks a line up my neck, and my whole body shivers with pleasure. “And what do you sleep in?”

I press his mouth against my neck. “In the winter, sweatpants and T-shirts. In summer, shorts and tees.”

“Cologne?”

“The new one by Tom Ford. God, I can’t think of the name right now.” And who could blame me? I’m overwhelmed with Gunnar’s weight, scent, lips, and I want more. He chuckles and mouths kisses along my jawline. “Fine. Left.” Unfortunately, that response makes him stop what he’s doing. I am not happy about it and whine my displeasure. “What?”

He pulls back and stares down at me. “I was going to ask the same thing. What question was ‘left’ supposed to answer?”

“Which side of the bed I sleep on. In my bed, it’s the left because it’s closest to the bathroom. I have to sleep on whichever side is closest. It’s been that way ever since I was little.”

Gunnar looks like he wants to devour me, and I’m absolutely willing to let him. I wrap my arms around his body and pull him down so every inch of him is pressed against me again. “Kiss me, please.”

He grins. “How can I refuse?”

With infinite care, Gunnar’s soft lips brush slowly against mine. He smells so damned good, and I love how his weight presses me into the couch. It’s comforting and possessive, and I move to hook a leg over his hip, but he pulls back, untangling himself and sitting back on the couch. I scramble

up, concerned that I've done something to upset him. "What's the matter?"

Gunnar actually blushes and looks embarrassed. "Joce, I like you." He takes my hand and rubs the knuckles. *Merde*, this is not good. "I really like you. And kissing you? God, it's amazing. And you have no idea how difficult this is for me." No, no, no, no. Please, no. "But you're really good friends with my sister, and you're friends with my bosses."

I sigh, anticipating the "let's keep things platonic" speech. Why are the really sweet, gorgeous ones never interested? I back up, putting space between us. "I understand. It's fine."

Gunnar moves closer. "Joce, listen to me." He looks me right in the eyes, and I can't look away. "I just want to take things slowly. Okay? We barely know each other, and though I'm not opposed to hookups, I don't want that to be what this is." He laughs. "Jesus, I can't believe I'm saying this." He wraps my hand in both of his. "I'd really like to get to know you before we... before we get too physical."

I blink. Then I blink again. That isn't what I expected him to say. That is... well, it's incredibly sweet, and I kind of melt. Gunnar's earnest expression, tinged with a small bit of concern and embarrassment, makes me want to pull him into my arms and tell him it's all fine. *Merde*. "As much as I'd love to argue against it, that's actually very sweet, and quite honestly, probably a responsible idea. But we should clarify a few definitions, so we're on the same page."

Gunnar's shoulders relax, and he smiles gratefully. "Always the lawyer, huh? But that's a good idea."

"Right. So..." I put my free hand over his. "Does that mean we're going to date? Or something else?" I really hope he says date, but I could settle for something else.

He doesn't immediately answer, and in my experience, that's not a good sign. I'm more than a little surprised by how much that disappoints me. However, tonight only happened because Gunnar was being nice. I practically threw myself at him, both at the winery and here on my sofa. And of course, he kissed me back. He can be attracted to me and still not want to date. Plus, we need to make things as believable as possible, and being comfortable with physical intimacy is required to make that happen.

Gunnar clears his throat, derailing my thought spiral. "Which do you want it to be?"

"That's a non-answer, Gunnar." But I'm also putting him on the spot when I'm clearly the one pushing the issue. "You know what? Never mind. I'm confusing things. I apologize."

He shakes his head. "No, you're not. Not really. This is confusing for me, too. It obviously started as fake, but..." He trails off and drags his hand through his hair. "How about it's whichever you want it to be?"

I blink, not expecting that. A million butterflies take flight in my chest, and my hands shake in my lap. It's like I've never dated anyone before, which isn't completely untrue. I've had a few boyfriends. A long time ago. "What if I want us to date?"

I glance over at him, trying to read his expression. My nerves attempt to get the better of me, but I'm in this far, I might as well jump in with both feet. "I really like you, Gunnar. You're sweet and gorgeous, and when you kiss me... *Mon dieu*, the way you kiss me makes my toes curl. We also laugh a lot, and that's incredibly important in my book." He's watching me intently, and I don't know him well enough to determine if he's being nice and letting me talk or trying to come up with a way to let me down easy. "I'd really like to see more of you." I squeeze my eyes closed and want to slap myself on the forehead. "That didn't come out right. I'd like to see you again. For dates." I start to laugh. "Not that I *wouldn't* like to see more of you. I mean, look at that body." I gesture at him with my free hand. "Christ."

Gunnar's chuckle eases any remaining concerns. His hand lands on my thigh and squeezes. "I like spending time with you, too. You make me laugh, and I think you're incredibly sexy and adorable, and I definitely would love to date you."

I nod, trying to rein in the butterflies. "Alright. Next thing, then, is defining what you're okay with, physically. We can always reassess when you're ready."

"Okay, so, hand holding is good."

I smile encouragingly. "Excellent. Hand holding is allowed. What else?"

Gunnar sighs. "I'm probably going to want to kiss you again. A lot. I'd like to say I can resist the urge, but honesty requires

me to admit I know I can't. You're too damned tempting. So kissing is okay?"

I don't even try to hide my grin. "That is fine with me. Anything else?"

Gunnar shakes his head, looking very serious. "Let's cut to the chase. I know my limits. Anything below the belt is off the table. Okay? If we start down that road, I'm not going to want to stop. So the rest will need to be on hold for now. Until we both agree it's a good idea. What do you think?"

I shuffle closer. "We both need to agree to move forward physically. I think that is a good plan." I tease my fingers through his beard and press my lips to his in a soft, tender kiss, then kiss him again, this time flicking the tip of my tongue against his closed mouth. He moans and parts his lips, stroking his tongue against mine.

When he pulls back and smiles at me, I know I'm in trouble. Because Gunnar Osouf is sweet, kind and sexy as hell, and quite honestly, he seems to be everything I've ever wanted in a partner. And I don't think that's what this is.

Gunnar strokes my cheek and places one more soft kiss on my lips. "I think it's time for me to go."

I sigh and pout just a little, but he's probably right. I stand and pull him after me. "Boo. But I understand." Scooping up his coat and tie, I hand them to him as we walk to the elevator.

Tenderly, he strokes my cheek with his thumb. "I can't believe it's taken this long to actually get to know you. Not

that I really know you. Yet. But we're going to work on that."

I nod, smiling. "I'm looking forward to it. And things happen when they should."

Gunnar takes a deep breath and stands a little taller. I know what that means and brace myself for something I might not like. "So, in the interest of credibility at Alistair's party, Astrid suggested you come to dinner on Sunday at Bjorn's house."

My eyes go wide because that's the last thing I expected him to say. "I've heard about the infamous Osouf family dinners. Should I be worried?" I laugh, unable to help myself. "I think I should be worried."

Gunnar winces, probably because a lot of the drama I've heard about has involved him. "It's all true, but please, don't let that stop you."

I reach out and squeeze his hand encouragingly. "I'm not scared. It sounds nice. So, yes, I'd love to come to dinner."

Gunnar's expression relaxes a bit, but his brows are still furrowed. "Good. But there are a few things you probably should know first."

I laugh and step closer, nudging his arm with my shoulder. "Astrid and I have lunch together several times a week. I do already know quite a bit about the Osouf clan."

He looks equal parts amused and concerned. "Like?"

I think about how to reply, fairly certain I know what he's most worried about. "Besides a lot of unimportant little things you probably don't care that I know, I am aware that you

haven't always gotten along with your brothers. But I believe you have been working on that, and things are better." That gets me another nod.

Gunnar's frown turns a bit scowly. "I know hardly anything about you, other than what you've told me tonight. I'm at a distinct disadvantage." He squeezes my hand and makes an effort to relax. "Guess you'll be doing most of the talking then."

I smile and press a soft kiss to his lips. "We'll see. But yes to Sunday dinner."

He leans his forehead against mine and takes a minute, which I readily give him. "I'm really glad I ran into you tonight."

"I am too."

He leans back and tenderly brushes his lips against my forehead, sending shivers through me. "Why don't I come by and pick you up at four? Dinner isn't until six, but everyone usually gets to Bjorn's early and we have a few drinks and snacks while we make dinner." He frowns again. "Hey, is there anything you can't eat? Any food allergies I need to tell Bjorn about?"

I shake my head. "No allergies." It's a very considerate question and not one people normally think about. "And before you ask, anything Bjorn wants to make is wonderful because I won't have to cook it. I'm not a picky eater. Should I bring anything? Wine? Dessert?"

“Nope, just you.” He leans in and kisses me again, this time slowly and quite thoroughly.

I melt against his wonderfully broad chest and sigh when the kiss ends. “See you at four on Sunday.”

Gunnar pushes the call button, and the doors open. He backs into the elevator, still holding my hand, and I don’t particularly want to let go, but I have to when the doors start to shut.

“Oh, wait!” I step between them, forcing them open. “Phone numbers. I don’t have yours. You don’t have mine. We should probably exchange them.”

Gunnar nods, pulling his phone out of his pocket. I take it from him, enter my contact information, and hand it back. “Text me when you get home so I know you made it. That way, I’ll have your number too.”

Gunnar slips the phone back in his pocket. “Night, Joce. I had a great time tonight.”

I grin like a fool, not quite believing how this evening turned out. “Night, Gunnar. See you Sunday.”

I step back and let the doors close, feeling like this might actually be the start of something good.

Gunnar

I wipe my forehead with the back of my arm and look toward the sound of clinking glass. Bjorn walks across the driveway, two amber bottles in one hand and the socket wrench I need in the other. He steps through the open garage door and pauses beside the Harley, handing one of the bottles to me. “You change the spark plugs yet?”

“That’s next. Just finished cleaning the carburetor. It didn’t take as long as I thought.” I raise my beer in salute. “And thanks.” I take a long pull on the bottle and smile as the tangy, slightly bitter liquid hits my tongue.

Bjorn squats next to me and hands me the wrench. “Figured you probably need this. I was fixing the treadmill last night and left it in the gym.”

“So that’s where it went.” I take the wrench from him and switch out the socket, then remove the first spark plug. The dark black powder at the end of the terminal isn’t surprising.

Bjorn takes the plug from me and examines the tip. “Looks like she was running a little rich on the fuel mixture.”

He says it like I don’t know that. Like I haven’t been working on engines since I was old enough to ‘help’ Dad by handing him tools as he worked under the hood of his latest vehicle. But I keep my comment to myself. “Yeah.”

“Did you adjust the intake on the carburetor?”

Biting my tongue, I remove the second spark plug and see the same dark color. “That’s next.”

It’s Bjorn’s turn to grunt an acknowledgement. “So how are things?”

I glance over at him, weighing what to say without throwing him into dad-mode. Although my therapist, Cassandra, would tell me not to base my response on someone else’s reaction. I set the fouled spark plug aside, take the new ones out of the box, and adjust the gaps. At the very least, I need to tell him about Jocelin coming to dinner. “Things are good.” I think about last night and don’t bother hiding my smile. “Have you talked to Astrid today?”

Bjorn side-eyes me. “No. Should I have?”

And there’s the ‘what have you done’ tone I’ve been expecting. Which I’m not supposed to do. Don’t pre-ascribe intent on someone. But years of habit are hard to break, even after therapy. I take a breath and let my annoyance go. Bjorn is asking a legitimate question, not grilling me about doing my homework or asking if I did my chores. “Not necessarily. I

thought maybe she'd call and tell you about last night's event at Jupiter Winery."

I don't imagine Bjorn's sigh of relief. "Oh. No. I figured she'd tell me about it tomorrow at dinner." He takes one of the finished spark plugs and screws it into the cylinder head while I adjust another.

I'd be an idiot not to take this opening, but I actually consider letting it go. Then I imagine Cassandra's disappointed look and leap in before I can second guess myself. "Speaking of dinner tomorrow—"

Bjorn cuts me off. "You're not bailing, are you?"

I sit back on my heels and glare at him. "Bailing?"

His hands are immediately up, palms out. "Sorry. I'm sorry. That came out wrong." I stare at him for a few seconds, then focus on screwing the second spark plug into place. Maybe I should forget about Jocelin coming tomorrow. "Really, Gunnar. I'm sorry. What did you want to say?"

I push to my feet and walk to the other side of the bike, trying to control my reaction. It's just as hard for Bjorn to break old habits as it is for me. Kneeling, I concentrate on removing the other set of plugs and work to keep my voice level. "I'm bringing someone to dinner. Don't make me regret it." You could have heard a pin drop in the garage, and after a few uncomfortable heartbeats, I look up at Bjorn. His mouth is hanging open, and he's utterly gobsmacked. "What?" It may come out a bit defensive, but Bjorn doesn't call me on it.

“Nothing. That’s great. I’m just surprised.” He comes around the bike and pulls two new spark plugs out of the box, handing me one. “I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

I take the plug from him and adjust the gap. “I didn’t know I had to tell you if I was.” Sighing, I drop my hands into my lap and hang my head for a second before I meet his eyes. “Sorry.”

He shakes his head. “No. I am. We’re having one of those poor communication days, and I seem to have started it.”

My shoulders relax, and I smirk as I screw in the plug and take the second one from him. “You always start it.”

“Shut it.” His grin belies the terse words. “Now, who are you bringing to dinner?”

I have half a mind to let it be a surprise, solely so I can avoid the ‘are you absolutely sure that’s a good idea’ speech, but he’s going to find out eventually. There’s no way Astrid can resist spilling the beans, and I’d rather he gets my version. She’ll make it some floofy romantic fairytale and embarrass the hell out of me in front of Jocelin. “So, here’s the thing.”

I matter-of-factly go through the highlights of what happened at the winery, from the asshole coworker who won’t take no for an answer, to being invited to the second work party. “Sounds like you did this guy a solid. That was really nice of you. I’m—” He cuts himself off before he can finish the sentence, even though I know he was going to tell me he’s proud of me. A phrase that shouldn’t set me off. But it does.

Sometimes. “—curious why you’d go to so much trouble for a stranger, though.”

Okay, I may have left out a few key details. I focus on tightening the plugs so I don’t have to look at him while I drop the bomblet. “Well, it’s not a complete stranger. It’s Jocelin.”

“You conveniently left out that key piece of info, asshole.” Bjorn whips a rag at my head. “So, you’re fake dating Astrid’s best friend?” His tone clearly calls bullshit.

“Yeah. Joce needed help. What was I gonna do? Leave him hanging?” The moment the nickname leaves my mouth, I know I fucked up.

“Since when do you call him Joce?” There is zero dad-tone in that comment. No, that’s pure oldest-brother-giving-youngest-brother-shit tone.

“Fuck off. We spent a lot of time together last night. Jocelin is a mouthful.” That’s an unfortunate choice of words because now I’m imagining having a mouthful of Jocelin, and my cock perks up.

Bjorn chuckles. “Alright. Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” He starts picking up tools and putting them away. “So it’s Jocelin coming to dinner tomorrow? That’s cool. I like him. I haven’t had a lot of opportunities to talk with him, but he seems nice.”

“He *is* nice. And super smart. He graduated from Cornell and got his JD from UW. He’s one of the youngest lawyers in

his firm.” I finish tightening the last spark plug and look up to find Bjorn staring at me. “What?”

About a dozen expressions cross his face before he settles into a neutral look. “At the risk of starting a fight—” He points at me. “—which I absolutely am not trying to do, I feel like I need to tell you to be careful.”

I hold his gaze, trying not to slide into defensive anger. “Careful about what, exactly?”

He sighs, taking in my tone and body language. “Never mind. Forget I mentioned it.”

Well, what did he expect? “No, Bjorn. You have something to say, so say it. You know it’s going to eat at you until you do.” Not that I give three shits about that. If he doesn’t say whatever it is, it’s going to eat at *me* until I poke and prod it out of him. And that definitely will cause a blow-up.

Bjorn drags his fingers through his hair and then gives in. “Jocelin is Astrid’s best friend and a really good friend of Erik and Jules. He’s also close with Gary.”

I wait for him to say something else, but he doesn’t, and we just stare at each other. “And? I can hear the *and*, Bjorn.”

He sighs. “Fine. I get the impression you might be interested in Jocelin as more than a friend. Purely based on how you sounded just now when you talked about him. If I’m wrong, I apologize. But you should really consider what the end result might be if you pursue him and things don’t work out.”

“Pursue him? Like, what? A stalker? Like, that’s the only way someone would go out with me? Like I’m the only one interested? Because someone as smart and good looking as Jocelin couldn’t possibly be into me?”

Bjorn shakes his head. “I didn’t say that.”

I glare. “You didn’t have to. It was clear as glass by your word choice.” I shove to my feet and toss the wrench into the toolbox, then slam the drawer shut. “I’ll have you know—” I bite my tongue on the ‘dad’ that wants to fly from my lips, and take a very deep, very long breath, letting it out slowly. Very succinctly, I remind myself that Bjorn took on the parent role after mom was murdered, even though no one asked him to, so he could keep us all together. His motives were and are well-intentioned. He’s not trying to be an asshole, it just comes naturally. “Jocelin is just as interested in me as I am in him. We hit it off. Yes, we’re pretending we’ve been together for longer than twenty-four hours so this jerk at his office will leave him alone, but we like each other, and we’re going to see where it goes. And you, Erik, and Astrid, have no say in that.” I cross my arms over my chest and turn around to face him. “Astrid, by the way, is thrilled for us. She was the one who suggested bringing him to dinner tomorrow.” That makes him blink, and the victory, small though it is, helps me calm the rest of the way down. “But it wouldn’t have mattered. I don’t date people based on how smart you guys think the decision is. Plus, we’re grown-ass adults. If things don’t work out, it doesn’t have to end in a huge dramatic breakup. We’ll be grownups about it.”

To his credit, Bjorn doesn't snort at that. Instead, he holds up his hands in surrender. "Okay. Points taken. You're right. And I'm sorry."

I uncross my arms and snatch the rag from the floor, wiping my hands on it for something to do. "Thanks. I appreciate that." The conversation didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped, but it didn't go as badly as I'd feared, and I'll take it. "I really like him, so please be nice tomorrow."

Bjorn grins. "To my little brother's date? Of course! I'll be on my best behavior."

Somehow, I highly doubt that.

Jocelin

My phone pings with a new message alert, and I pull it from my back pocket, scanning the text as I grin like a fool.

Gunnar: Out front now

Me: OMW

I slip the phone back into my pocket and give myself a once-over in the mirror. Initially, my tapered, ankle-length, gray-checked chinos and black sweater might have seemed too dressy for a family dinner—one not hosted by my parents, anyway—but I switched out my black ankle boots for a cute pair of white canvas Vans, and now it's perfect. I hurry down to the living room, jab the call button, and grab my black pea coat. Once I'm in the elevator, I slip it on and press the button for the ground floor, stuffing my hands into the pockets to keep them occupied. Dear god, I'm nervous. More nervous than I've been about a date in a very long time. What if Friday

was a fluke? What if the chemistry isn't there anymore? Maybe Friday had been adrenaline and alcohol.

The elevator doors open, and I step into the lobby, hurrying across the tiled floor. And then I catch sight of Gunnar leaning against his motorcycle, his long, muscular legs stretched out in front of him and his arms crossed over his broad chest, biceps straining the leather of his black motorcycle jacket. My progress slows to a crawl as my heartbeat speeds up. Friday was no fluke. Not. At. All.

I'm so preoccupied staring at him that, as I push through the two sets of double doors, I almost trip over the threshold, staggering to a stop in front of him. He reaches out and steadies me, though it still feels like I'm falling into his piercing blue eyes. "Hi."

Heat rushes to my face as Gunnar's gaze roams all over me, that damned sexy smirk curling at the edges of his mouth. "Hi. You look amazing."

My body seems to have developed a Pavlovian response to his sexy rumbling voice. "Thanks. You look really great too."

He leans down to kiss my cheek. "Ready?" I nod, and he hands me a helmet. "Hope you don't mind, I brought the bike again. I figured it was such a nice day you might enjoy it. Oh, and if it's alright with you, I thought we could stop at my place so you can take a look around. You know, in case anyone at work asks. We have to pass by my exit on the way to Bjorn's anyway, and we can switch to the car at that point. That is, if you want."

“Sounds like a plan.” I pull the helmet on and secure the chin strap on my own, thank you very much, then swing my leg over the bike, immediately wrapping my arms around Gunnar’s waist as I press against him. Have I been imagining this since Friday? Yes. Yes, I have. And I’m going to take full advantage of the situation. Gunnar briefly covers my left arm with his, squeezing gently before starting the bike, putting both hands on the grips, and pulling out into traffic.

As we ride down the highway, I move closer, pressing against him from hip to shoulder, unable to think about anything but the feel of his big body against mine. Thank god for the cool wind keeping things a little too chilly because there’s no way he would miss my very interested cock pressing against his ass.

About twenty minutes after we pull away from my building, Gunnar exits the highway and weaves through the side streets of a cute little community. Many of the single-family homes are built in the English Cottage style, and I’m utterly charmed.

We pull into a driveway about halfway down one block, and a little old lady in the next yard stops sweeping her sidewalk to wave at us. I slide off the bike and watch as Gunnar pulls off his helmet and steps across to the picket fence between the yards. “Hi, Mrs. Clarke. How’s it going today?”

“Gunnar! I was hoping you’d be home soon, dear. I have a batch of your favorite cookies in the oven. They’ll be done in

about ten minutes. I'll just bring them over when they've cooled off."

"Oh, you don't have to, Mrs. Clarke. I can come over and get them. I'm actually heading back out in a little bit. It's Sunday."

She laughs. "Yes, I know. Osouf Family Dinner. I remember. That's why I baked extras." Mrs. Clarke peers curiously at me over Gunnar's shoulder, then turns back to him, waiting expectantly.

He chuckles. "Mrs. Clarke, this is Jocelin." He holds his hand out to me, and I cross the driveway to stand next to him. "Jocelin, this is my neighbor, Mrs. Clarke."

I extend my hand and gently shake hers. "It's very nice to meet you."

She practically beams at me. "The pleasure is mine, Jocelin." She gives Gunnar a knowing look. "Is this your boyfriend, Gunnar? He's very handsome."

My cheeks flame, and Gunnar blinks, momentarily caught off guard, then gives me a shy smile. "It's early days, Mrs. Clarke, but it seems promising." He turns back to her. "I'm gonna show Joce around the house, but I'll knock on your door before we head back out, if that's okay."

"Perfectly fine. It was so nice to meet you, Jocelin."

"It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Clarke."

She waves to us and turns back toward her house. As we walk up the driveway, Gunnar leans down and whispers in my

ear. “She’s my cookie dealer. She keeps me stocked in fresh baked goods.”

I laugh. “And which is your favorite?”

“By far, it’s her butter cookies. They aren’t fancy, but they’re so good! Before I know it, I’ve eaten two dozen. Thankfully, she always makes a ton. Her chocolate chip cookies are really good, too.”

Gunnar opens the front door and ushers me inside. “Welcome to *Chez Osouf*.” I step into the house and glance around. The walls are distressed brick, and the floor is unpolished hardwood covered with multiple oriental rugs. The ceiling is open beams, with a mix of industrial and antique lighting fixtures. It’s a blend of rustic and modern, and it really suits Gunnar’s personality. “Feel free to have a look around. Open cupboards, look under the bathroom sink.” He grins and takes off his coat, tossing it over the back of one of the two distressed leather couches. “There’s nothing here you can’t see.”

I remove my coat, setting it over Gunnar’s, and brush my fingers over one of the many multicolored throw pillows, as I make my way to the fireplace. A plethora of Osouf family photographs vie for space on the mantel, and it’s easy to pick out Astrid and Gunnar. I grin at the younger versions from their teens.

Gunnar reaches past me to pick up an older picture. “These were my parents.”

I gently take the offered photo, feeling the unintended weight of this moment. These two people meant the world to this man, and they left him far too soon. I have an overwhelming urge to call my parents—and isn't that a surprise. "Erik looks a lot like your mother. And the rest of you look like your father. You especially. It's uncanny." The seconds stretch on, and Gunnar is far too silent next to me. I glance at him, concerned by how still he is. He's staring at the photo, his expression so bittersweet it makes my heart ache. "I'm sorry, Gunnar. I didn't mean to bring up painful memories."

Gunnar shakes his head. "I handed you the picture. Remember? And it's alright. I just miss them. Some days more than others." He carefully takes the photo back and places it in its spot on the mantel. When he turns back to me, he's smiling. "Want to see the rest of the house?"

Glad for the opportunity to change the subject, I nod. "Absolutely. Lead on."

Grabbing my hand, he leads me toward the back of the house and through a doorway to the right. "The kitchen." He makes a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Probably not your favorite room."

I grin and roll my eyes. "I love the kitchen. It's where the food is. I just don't like to cook it. But this is beautiful." The cabinets and floor are reclaimed wood, stained a dark mahogany. Black granite countertops ring the room and highlight the terracotta tiled backsplash and back of the

cooktop. With the stainless steel appliances, it's a striking combination. "Do *you* cook?"

Gunnar see-saws his hand. "Nothing fancy. I can follow a recipe, but I mostly stick to grilling. I seem to manage that fairly well." He shrugs. "Anyway, onward." He leads me back through the living room and up a small winding staircase to the second floor, where we exit directly into the bedroom. "My room."

The exposed brick walls, wooden floors, and ceiling beams give the room a rustic feel. A king-sized cast iron bed, piled high with pillows, takes up most of one wall, and the rest of the furniture is dark wood with cast iron accents. There's a working fireplace directly across from the bed, and the entire room is warm and inviting. I can easily imagine snuggling under the comforter with a fire crackling in the fireplace on cold winter mornings. "Gunnar, I love it. It's so cozy."

"It is. Most days, I struggle to pull myself out of bed. Astrid says I'm a natural born napper."

The energy in the room turns electric as we both stare longingly at the bed. I can feel his proximity, the heat pouring off his body, and I want to turn into him, feel his arms around me, beg him to touch me, kiss my neck, and pull me onto the bed. Gunnar exhales, and the tension bursts like a soap bubble. "So, over here is the bathroom."

Even though I'm disappointed he has so much self-control, I can't fault him. He wants to take things slowly, and he has every right to ask for that. I'm flattered he likes me enough to

not want to rush things, even if I'm incredibly horny and frustrated. I tamp down my wandering imagination and follow him into the bathroom.

A huge mirror hangs over a double-sink vanity, reflecting the light from the two dormer windows. The entire back wall is the shower. Actually, the whole back half of the room is the shower. There's no enclosure blocking it off from the rest of the space. The floor slopes enough to direct the water from the multi-directional shower heads toward the drain and away from the rest of the room. It's striking, and I wonder if he designed it. It's a wonderful, creative use of space. "This is beautiful."

As we pass back into the bedroom, I reach out and take his hand. The electricity between us is immediate, and warmth tingles up my arm from where our fingers entwine. I step closer. He doesn't pull away, so I place my hand on his chest and move even nearer, stopping when I feel the soft exhale of his breath on my face. Gunnar's heart hammers under my palm, and I'm glad he feels this too. "Gunnar?"

"Mmmm?" His eyes lock on my mouth, and my heart gallops in my chest.

"I'd like to kiss you. Is that alright?"

Gunnar's eyes never leave my lips. "Yeah."

Every part of me thrums with excitement as I slide my hand up his chest and along his neck, weaving my fingers into his lush, dark hair. "I've been thinking about this." I push up on my toes and lightly brush my lips to his. His soft gasp against

my mouth makes me smile, relieved he's feeling whatever this is, too. I lean into him, slowly parting his lips with mine, sweeping my tongue into his mouth to tease against his. I moan with all the pent up need simmering just below the surface since our last kiss.

He wraps his arms around me, practically crushing me against his broad chest, leaning back until my toes barely touch the floor. I moan, my entire body on fire like one big erogenous zone, and everywhere Gunnar touches only increases my need for more of him. "Gunnar."

Without warning, I'm back on my feet, and he steps away, guilt clear on his face. "Sorry. I got carried away."

I take a moment to catch my breath and make sure my disappointment doesn't show on my face. "It's alright. That was my fault." He's absolutely flustered, and damn if it doesn't look good on him.

Gunnar shakes his head, his smile rueful. "I think it's going to be too easy to get carried away kissing you. We probably should head out before my resolve breaks and we skip the whole dinner."

I bite my tongue because I'd be okay with skipping dinner if it means crawling into bed and getting naked with him. Instead, I follow him back downstairs. Damn. Taking things slowly isn't easy. At least, not with him. By the time we reach the kitchen, we're both a bit more composed. Gunnar grabs his keys from the counter and turns to me. "Bike or car? Your call."

Now there's a dilemma. I'd love to ride pressed against Gunnar's back again, but given we're trying to behave, and I'm not doing a very good job of that, it could be torture. "Car. That's probably less cruel for both of us right now." Gunnar smirks but nods. We grab our coats and head through the kitchen and out to the garage. I follow behind him and pray my semi goes away before I face an entire house full of Gunnar's siblings.

Gunnar

We step into the garage, and Jocelin freezes, mouth open. “You have a classic Mustang. An actual classic Mustang?” I can’t help the rush of pride as he walks around the car. “Gunnar, it’s beautiful.”

“Yeah. She’s a Boss 429.” I’m about to go into full-on gearhead mode and then realize he might just like how she looks. “Are you into cars?”

He shakes his head, but his attention is all on the car. “No, but I can appreciate beauty when I see it. Original condition?”

He looks up at me, and I nod. “She was my dad’s from back when it was just him and mom. He eventually stopped driving her, but couldn’t give her up. Mom said a two-seater muscle car wasn’t practical with kids. But he still took amazing care of her, and when he passed, the car went to Bjorn.”

Jocelin grins at me. “She’s gorgeous.” Ridiculously, my heart swells in my chest at his use of her pronouns. It’s too sweet, just like him. “How’d you end up with her?”

I shrug. “Bjorn drove her for a couple of years, but then he got a motorcycle and said he didn’t want her anymore.” My stomach does a little embarrassed squeeze thing. “At least, that’s what he said. Told me I could have her, and at the time, I believed him. But I think the truth is he knew how much I loved her. How much it makes me feel like a part of Dad is still with us because of her.” I run my hands along the fender and wonder, not for the first time, if Dad would be proud of how well I’ve taken care of her. “I also needed a car to get to and from school. And I love tinkering with engines.”

“You are amazing.” I glance over to find him gawping at me. “That is such a useful skill. I’m hopeless with practical things like that. I can barely figure out how to work the microwave.”

I laugh at his joke, then shrug. “It’s relaxing. Tom and I basically rebuilt the engine over a summer. I thought his wife, Josie, was gonna kill me because we were at it constantly. It was a few years ago, when I was really struggling with things.” Struggling is an understatement. I’d been angry, sad, and hurting so desperately I didn’t know what to do with all of it. “Working on her was a good distraction while Tom helped me figure stuff out.”

“Stuff?” Jocelin walks around to my side of the car and leans into me.

Without overthinking it, I put my arms around him and pull him close. “Yeah. How to deal with all the thoughts and feelings about my parents. And Bjorn. And Erik’s leaving.” I

fiddle with the side mirror. “I wasn’t in a good place mentally and lashed out a lot.”

“And Tom is Tom Randall? Your friend who works with Tadhg?”

I nod. “He’s my best friend, really. He’s done so much for me. Helped me get my head out of my ass. Got me into therapy, where I really needed to be.” I drag my hand through my hair and grin sheepishly. “Sorry. This is kind of a heavy conversation, and we probably should get going.”

Jocelin puts a hand on my arm and squeezes. “Hey. I like that you feel comfortable talking about this with me. It can’t be easy, and I appreciate your trust.” He tilts his head until I’m forced to look into his eyes. “I want to get to know the real you. Not just the good parts. Okay?”

Fighting back an overwhelming wave of emotion, I cup his face with my hands and kiss him softly. He has no idea how much I’ve needed to hear those exact words from someone. “Okay.” I take a moment to get my shit together, then grin. “There are a lot of good parts, though.” He rolls his eyes and shoves me playfully. “Let’s get moving. You don’t want to miss a minute of the Osouf family dinner shenanigans.”

We climb into the car, and I thumb the button to open the garage door. As I slowly back into the driveway, I remember Mrs. Clarke is waiting for me. “Wait a sec, okay?” I put the car in park and jump out, vaulting over the three-foot-high fence, then sprint to her front door.

Mrs. Clarke answers with her usual sweet grin and hands me a rectangular metal tin full of butter cookies. “Here you go, dear. I packed some extras.” She peers around me and waves to Jocelin.

He rolls down his window and waves back. “Hi Mrs. Clarke. It was nice to meet you.”

“Good to meet you too. Come visit next time you’re here, and I’ll have more treats.” She looks up at me with a twinkle in her eye. “Your boyfriend seems very nice. And he’s quite good looking!”

I laugh and glance back at Jocelin. “Thanks, Mrs. Clarke. I think so too. On both counts. And thanks for the cookies. Is there anything I can do for you before we head out?”

She pats my arm. “No dear. I’m fine. You boys have an enjoyable evening. Tell your family I said hello.”

“I will. Thanks again, and have a good evening.” I turn back toward the car, this time walking the long way around the fence so I don’t damage the cookies. When I’m back in the car, I hand the tin to Jocelin and give him a stern look. “I’m trusting you with these. Don’t let me down.”

He laughs and clutches the box to his chest. “I will defend these cookies with my life. You have my word.”

I back out of the drive, and Jocelin turns in his seat to face me. “I’ve been wondering about something. You said Tadhg and Quinn’s business partner, Tom, is your best friend. Isn’t he a lot older than us? Where did you two meet?”

“UW.” I rub the back of my neck and glance at Jocelin. “It’s not a story that makes me look good, but it’s my history. Please keep in mind that I’ve grown up some, and though I’m a work in progress, I’m better than I was.” Jocelin reaches out and squeezes my hand encouragingly, so I continue. “Tom was an advisor for ROTC.”

Jocelin’s jaw drops. “Wait, you were in the ROTC?”

I laugh and shake my head. “No. Tom was. I was just an out-of-control twenty-year-old who liked to get in fights and mouth off. Anyway, to make a very long and very unflattering story much shorter, Tom watched me have a meltdown at the campus fitness center. I almost punched another student, who *was* a jerk and possibly, actually deserved it but definitely didn’t deserve the level of anger I was experiencing. Tom says he witnessed a few of my meltdowns that year.” I risk a glance at Jocelin, but his face gives nothing away. “I hadn’t started therapy yet and was a loose cannon. It’s not something I’m proud of, but it is what it is. Nothing I can do about it now, except not be that person. And I try.” I shrug. “Anyway, Tom intervened at that point and dragged me off to the campus boxing facility. Threw gloves at me and told me to hit him instead.” A laugh bursts out of me as I remember how confused I was. “Imagine I’m in the middle of a rage, and some huge guy, calm as you please, steps in the middle of a fight I’m trying to pick and drags me off to a completely different part of the facility. And for some reason, I willingly follow along behind him.” I shake my head again. “Don’t get me wrong. I was mouthing off the entire time, and he wasn’t

literally dragging me along. In fact, he wasn't touching me at all. Anyway, I'm standing there, holding a pair of boxing gloves, and this huge guy is telling me to put them on and hit him, if I can."

Jocelin laughs. "What did you do?"

"I put on the gloves."

"Did you hit him?" I glance at Joce again, relieved that he's not freaked out by my past behavior. In fact, he's leaning in, eyes focused on me, eagerly waiting for an answer.

I shake my head. "Nope. Not for lack of trying, though. Tom was an amateur boxer in his twenties. For ROTC or something like that. I don't remember. But he was top of his club. Anyway, I spent the next hour trying to hit him, and he spent that hour egging me on, hands lowered, not even trying to defend himself with anything but footwork and dodging. By the end of that session, I was exhausted, but I wasn't angry anymore. I was too tired to be angry. Tom dared me to come back again the next day, which I did, and we did it all over again. And again. And again." I look over at Jocelin. "He saved my life. Or at least, he saved my sanity. It didn't fix everything, but it fixed enough. And it helped me get to a place where I could admit I needed to talk to a professional about my anger and my parents' deaths." I shrug. "We've been friends ever since that first day."

"And is he the one who got you started on architecture?"

"No. I was already planning that as my major. It was just another happy coincidence and something else we could talk

about.”

We’re both quiet for a minute, lost in our thoughts. “I’ve only met him a few times, but I always get a solid, calm vibe from Tom. He’s a nice guy.”

“He’s a great guy. The best.”

The rest of the drive to Bjorn’s is an uneventful trip into the more affluent part of town. I pull up to the wrought-iron gate in front of the house and key in my code. The gates swing in, and I continue down the drive, past the front of the house, to park off to the side near Astrid’s red BMW M850i. As we approach the house, I gently nudge Jocelin away from the door. “Stay right there, and don’t move.” At first, he’s confused, but I see the moment he remembers why this is necessary. I step up to the door, take a deep breath, brace myself, and open it. In a flash, I’m holding sixty pounds of wiggling Norwegian Elkhound. I futilely attempt to block all the licking as Pita whines with excitement. “Good boy, Pita! Good boy! I missed you too, buddy. It’s been a whole day since you’ve seen me.”

I put him down, but Pita’s having none of it until a loud command comes from inside the house. “Pita! Heel!” He pivots and runs to sit behind Bjorn.

Brushing the hair from my shirt, I glare at my brother. “I thought you were going to train him not to greet people like that.”

Bjorn scratches Pita’s furry head, then snaps his fingers, pointing in the house. “Go.” Pita dashes inside, and Bjorn

offers me a hand. “I was, but then I figured it’s a great defense against home invasions.”

I snort and take his offered hand. “Thanks. Has he gotten heavier, or is it just me?”

“It’s you, little brother. It’s always you.” Bjorn yanks me into a bear hug. “Good to see you. How are you?”

I return the hug, then shove Bjorn playfully. “Astrid’s here, so I’m sure you know how I am. Speaking of which, Bjorn, you remember Jocelin Allard. Joce, my brother Bjorn.”

Bjorn smiles and extends his hand. “Hey Jocelin. Nice to see you again. It’s been a while.”

Jocelin shakes his hand. “I think the last time I was here was a few years ago for a cookout of some kind.”

“Probably. I love a good barbeque.” I snort at the understatement. Give Bjorn any excuse to grill and he’s there. Rain, snow, wind, he doesn’t care. “Come on in, and let’s get you a drink. You guys have some catching up to do on that count.” He looks at me and smirks. “You’re late. Something detain you?” He glances meaningfully at Jocelin.

My face heats, and I flip him the middle finger. “As a matter of fact, yes. Mrs. Clarke baked cookies, and I had to wait for them to cool before she’d give them to me.”

Jocelin is still clutching the box of baked goods to his chest. “Should I pass them to Bjorn or am I still responsible for guarding them?”

“Hold on.” I open the tin and grab a handful of the small, golden cookies, then look Jocelin square in the eyes. “Take them in the house, and give them to Astrid. *Only* to Astrid. She’ll know what to do with them.” I hold out a bite-sized cookie to him. Jocelin looks at it and then at me, then slowly parts his lips. Fuuuuuck, that’s hot. I place the cookie on his pink, wet, tongue, and when he closes his mouth and chews, I swear my entire body is going to catch on fire.

Bjorn groans. “Good god, save it for when you’re alone. Some of us are painfully single right now.” He laughs and leads us into the house.

I take Jocelin’s hand, and we go inside, kicking our shoes off at the door. We head through to the kitchen, where a cheer goes up, and everyone gives us crap for being late.

“We’re five minutes late, and we had to stop at Mrs. Clarke’s.”

Astrid’s eyes go wide, and Jocelin hands her the container of cookies. “Gunnar said you’d know what to do with these.” She nods and disappears with the box, coming back a minute later, licking her lips, the box nowhere to be seen. She winks at me and goes to sit by Gary.

Jocelin inhales deeply and smiles. “Something smells wonderful.” I turn toward the smell and watch Erik pull a large pan out of the oven.

“It’s paella. Jules and I have been taking a cooking class, and we made this recipe last week. It’s pretty easy, so we figured

it'd be perfect for family dinner. We have a really great Tempranillo that pairs nicely with it.”

I snort. “Pairs nicely? Are you suddenly Gordon Ramsey?”

Erik brandishes a spoon at me. “Yes, I’m Gordon Fucking Ramsey, and get the fuck out of my fucking kitchen.”

“It’s not your fucking kitchen.” We all laugh, and even though this is my family, and I’m used to their teasing, I’m grateful no one seems to be making a big deal about me being here with Jocelin. I lean against the counter next to him. “Can I get you something to drink? Wine? Beer? Cider?”

His eyes widen. “The cider sounds interesting, but I think I’ll have some of the red that Erik suggested. I’ve learned never to question the chef.” Erik grins and nods in acknowledgement.

I grab the bottle and pour him a glass, then glance around. “You know everyone here, I think.” I gesture to Gary, Astrid, Bjorn, and Erik. “Wait, where’s Jules?”

Erik points to the ceiling with his spoon. “Upstairs. We came over early to go swimming, and he went to shower and change.”

“And now I’m clean and wearing dry clothes. And I think I deserve a reward for that.” Jules hurries across the kitchen and slips under Erik’s arm.

Erik grins down at him. “And what reward would you like?”

“Kisses. I deserve lots of kisses.” Jules leans back and puckers his lips, waiting for Erik, who obligingly bends down and gives him a quick peck. Jules glares at him. “Excuse me?”

That won't do at all!" He tugs on Erik's arm, trying to pull him back down, not budging him. Erik laughs and cups Jules' jaw, gently tilting his head up. Jules tries not to smile or respond to the kiss as Erik all but devours his mouth. He fails at both.

Laughing, Jules shoves against Erik's chest. "You're lucky you're loved, you big goof." Erik goes back to stirring the paella, but he's blushing and has a gentle smile on his face.

Astrid pouts to hide her sappy smile and turns around to face Gary. "I need a kiss. Everyone else is getting kisses."

Gary raises an eyebrow. "Everyone?"

Her shoulders droop dramatically and he gives in, sliding a hand around her neck to bring her face very close to his. He whispers something directly into her ear, and it makes her cheeks flush pink. She giggles as he presses their lips together, but it turns into an appreciative hum as he kisses her like it's their last. Erik and Bjorn make whooping noises and catcalls, and Jules laughs.

I shield my eyes. "Ewwwww. Please! That's my sister you're kissing like that!" I make gagging noises for extra drama, but I'm sure it's obvious I'm trying not to smile.

Jocelin nudges me with his shoulder. "This is not at all what I was expecting. Your family is wonderful." I don't tell him it's not at all what I was expecting, either. Everyone seems to be in a really good mood, and it's not often that happens in this family. I slide my arm around his waist and squeeze. Astrid clears her throat.

Jocelin and I turn to find her pointing at us. “*You* have not been kissed. Both of you must kiss someone in this room right now. So who’s it going to be?”

I’m about to point out that Bjorn hasn’t been kissed either, but he’d probably try to kiss me as a joke, and that’s not happening. I would also prefer not to kiss Jocelin in front of my entire family. It’s still new, and I really don’t want to put him on the spot like that.

As if we’ve choreographed it, we both point to her, but Gary holds up his hand, stopping us. “No way guys. Gunnar, eww. That’s your sister.” He’s obviously enjoying throwing my words back at me. “And”—he directs his next words to Jocelin—“that’s *my* girlfriend, and I’m claiming all of her kisses tonight. So pick someone else.”

Bjorn raises his hand, and I scowl, wrapping Jocelin in my arms. “No way. You are not kissing either one of us.” I glare at Bjorn. “Hands off! Don’t even think about it.”

I turn Jocelin so we’re almost nose to nose. He’s grinning, and I can’t help but return it. “Gunnar, your family is very unique.”

I laugh. “Yes, they are.” I cup his face with my hands, and the air between us turns electric. I guess we’re doing this. We could protest and probably get out of it, but now that we’re here, I don’t want to. “Is it okay if I kiss you?” When Jocelin nods, I lean in, brushing my lips against his. It’s sweet, and like every time we’ve kissed, the world around us disappears. Jocelin drapes his arms around my neck and presses against

me, deepening the kiss. I tighten my arms around him, pulling him even closer, lost to everything except how good he feels.

Whistles and cheering from the room effectively destroys the mood, bringing our kiss to an abrupt end. I glare at everyone, a little embarrassed and a lot turned on. Jocelin shifts in my arms, leaning back against my chest, resting his hands over mine. I drop my chin onto his shoulder and give him a quick squeeze. “So, when do we eat?”

Jocelin

Dinner is a raucous affair, with lots of laughing and stories from when the Osoufs were kids. Even Jules joins in, sharing a few adventures of camping with Stef and Erik that had us all in stitches. We consume copious quantities of paella, and I follow it up by eating my weight in flan and Mrs. Clarke's butter cookies. By the time we're done with dinner, I'm ready to burst but very satisfied. "Erik, the meal was amazing. Thank you so much."

"Yes, thank you." Bjorn leans over and kisses his head, and Erik nudges him, pretending to be annoyed but smiling. "If everyone's finished, why don't you head into the living room and relax?"

We all get up to begin clearing the table, but as I grab my plate, Astrid takes it from me and hands it to Gunnar. "Here, I need to borrow your boyfriend for a minute." I'm about to say we're not boyfriends, but we're practicing for the party at Alistair's. And this *is* a kind of date. I know he's attracted to me, but even if this is a legitimate date, it certainly doesn't

equate to boyfriend status, much as the idea appeals. “Come on, Jocelin. I have something to show you.” I glance at Gunnar, who protests, but Astrid holds up her hand. “Bjorn, come corral your brother. Jocelin needs to see some family photos.”

Gunnar groans. “Astrid! No!” She laughs and steers me toward the living room.

“It’s a family tradition. I have the albums right here.” She winks conspiratorially and pulls me down the hall into the enormous room. The decor is ultra-modern, with three long cream-colored leather sofas arranged in a “U” shape and a huge dark brown square coffee table in the center. Directly across from the sofas is the largest television I’ve ever seen, set flush into the wall.

“Holy huge television.” I stare at it, transfixed.

Astrid laughs. “Ah, that’s Bjorn’s baby. You have no idea how much time he spends in front of that stupid thing, playing video games and watching movies. Well, in fairness, it’s mostly video games. Anyway, come on. Let’s sit down, and I’ll show you things Gunnar wishes you’d never see.” She grins wickedly and pulls me onto the nearest sofa. I’m barely settled when she plops a thick photo album onto my lap and starts flipping pages.

We look through the typical newborn pictures and photos of a first birthday party. I grin at pudgy baby Gunnar, hands and face full of birthday cake, looking so proud of himself. “Awww, he was adorable.”

Gunnar pokes his head into the room. “I still am.”

Astrid snorts. “Eavesdrop much?”

He nods his head in my direction. “I need to make sure you’re not ruining my chances of keeping him around.”

That makes me blush, and I can’t help the goofy smile I know I’m wearing. “Not possible.”

Astrid puts a hand over her heart. “Oh my god, you guys are too cute. Now, go away, Gunnar. We’re busy.” She turns the page past photos of a family outing at the zoo and starts laughing. “Oh he’s going to kill me for this one.”

“Hey!” I look up to see Gunnar halfway down the hall, turning back toward the living room. “Astrid, what are you showing him?” His voice is annoyed and a bit panicked.

“Nothing Gunnar. It’s fine. I’m definitely not showing him any naked baby pictures of you.”

Gunnar scowls. “Oh, come on Astrid! You’re killing me!”

I know this is their dynamic, and they do truly love each other, but as an only child, I’m not used to this kind of arguing. It’s stressful, and I’m worried we’re really upsetting Gunnar. “Maybe we should stop if he doesn’t want me to see.”

She waves away my concern. “Nonsense. He’s just being dramatic. He really doesn’t care.”

Gunnar sighs and meets my gaze, his glower transforming into a sheepish smile. “It’s fine. Just don’t judge me too harshly.”

I shake my head. “Never.”

Astrid mutters something about being too sweet under her breath as Gunnar wanders back into the kitchen. I return my attention to the album as Astrid flips through the next few pages of school photos and birthday party pictures of the two of them. Bjorn and Erik are in a few shots, looking adorable, with their missing front teeth and big brother pride clearly on display. We get to a picture of Gunnar dressed in a white T-shirt, denim jeans, little biker boots, and a pair of mirrored sunglasses that are obviously far too large for his face. His hands are shoved in his pockets, and it’s so close to the outfit he’s wearing today, I have to laugh. I point at the picture. “So, not much has changed in the fashion department.”

“Astrid, whatever you are showing Jocelin, just stop.” I snap my head around to find Gunnar lounging against the doorframe, arms crossed. He looks more amused than upset, and I feel the weight of my worry lift.

I wave him over, and he sits behind me, on the back of the couch, his hand resting on my shoulder. Leaning my head on his thigh, I look up at him. “If you’d rather I didn’t see these, we’ll stop.”

He brushes his knuckle along my cheek and smiles down at me. “Nah. It’s fine. I just like to give Astrid shit.”

She snorts. “It’s his thing. He gives us all shit.”

Bjorn comes in from the kitchen and nudges Gunnar’s shoulder as he walks past and plops down on the couch. “And then he wonders why we all give it back.”

Laughter from the hallway precedes Erik, Jules, and Gary. They join us in the living room, and now the massive seating arrangement makes sense. Gunnar kneads my shoulder and the muscles melt under the pressure. I hadn't even realized I was tense. He leans down, his whiskers tickling the edge of my ear, as his warm breath ghosts over my skin, making me shiver. "Are you okay? You're so tense. I'm not really mad about you looking at the pictures. I promise."

His proximity is too tempting. I turn my face into his and lean closer. "I didn't want to upset you."

He brings his large palm up and cups the side of my face. "You didn't. I promise. And I'll be more clear next time." I tilt my head, and our lips brush. I thought it would be at least a little awkward in front of Gunnar's family, but it feels natural, and oh so very right.

"Get a room!" A throw pillow bounces off Gunnar's head, and we spring apart. Gunnar lobs the pillow back at Bjorn, who bats it away. Jules crawls to the other side of Erik and tucks himself against him, more like he's using Erik as a shield for any further pillow projectiles than because he's afraid, but it's a good indication of how this could escalate.

It's been an enjoyable evening, and everyone has behaved well, but perhaps we've reached the limit on getting along. I stretch my arms out and follow it up with a yawn before collapsing back against Gunnar's thigh. It does the trick. Gunnar squeezes my shoulder and stands up. "I think it's time we head out. Everyone has work tomorrow. You ready Joce?"

I nod. “Thank you for allowing me to intrude on your family dinner. Erik, the food was absolutely exquisite, and your wine recommendation was superb.”

Astrid grabs my hand and squeezes. “It was great to have you here. Come back anytime. You have an open invitation to Osouf family events. No need to wait for me to drag you to them, now.” She winks at me.

Bjorn stands and claps me on the shoulder. “Yeah, and now that you’re with Gunnar, you can’t say no to them either.” Grinning, he offers me his hand, which I shake. “It was a lot of fun having you here, and there are lots more stories you haven’t heard yet. So you’ll have to come back.”

I shake hands all around and kiss Astrid on the cheek. “See you tomorrow? I’ll have those signed contracts for Blake.”

Astrid nods. “Lunch?”

“Let me take a look at my schedule, and I’ll let you know when I drop off the contracts.”

Gunnar hugs everyone goodbye, and we head out to the car. By the time we’re on the highway, I’m feeling exhausted but happy with how well the evening went.

Gunnar takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. “I hope that wasn’t too painful. But that’s a typical Osouf dinner.”

“I loved it. Your family is wonderful. They made me feel so welcome. And now I have lots of stories and bits of information to help make our dating believable.” Though most of the details revolve around his family. “Gunnar?”

“Yeah?” He glances over at me.

“The party at Alistair’s is next Saturday. Do you think you might have time this week to get together again? I know my weeks get pretty busy, and I’m sure yours do too, but maybe we can meet for coffee or something? We probably should cover some things about me and get a few timeline points ironed out.”

“Coffee sounds nice. My nights are usually free. I normally just watch TV, play video games, or work on my own designs. So if you get some free time, text me, and I’ll meet you somewhere or pick you up.”

He pulls up to the drop off area in front of my building, and I turn to face him. “Did you want to come up for a bit?”

He smiles and squeezes my hand. “I’d love to. But we both have to get up early for work tomorrow, and I’ve had just enough wine to think our agreement to keep things above the waist is ridiculous. So it’s probably best if I go.”

“You’re okay to drive, though?” He doesn’t seem impaired, so maybe it’s an excuse not to come up.

His gaze drops to my lips and he sighs, dragging his eyes up to meet mine. “I’m fine. I promise.” He brings my fingertips to his lips and kisses them lightly, sending tiny sparks up my arm. “I’m trying to behave.”

I grin, disappointed but also relieved as I fight another yawn. “Okay. Maybe next time.” I lean over and place a chaste kiss against his lips. And then another. And sigh into his mouth as

Gunnar grips the front of my shirt and pulls me farther onto his side of the car, all but devouring my mouth before ending the kiss and leaning his forehead against mine. “I love kissing you.”

His words make my heart skip a beat. “I love kissing you. Are you sure you don’t want to come upstairs? We could continue the kissing...”

Gunnar chuckles softly. “Unfortunately, I’m sure. But when we both decide it’s a good idea, you won’t be able to keep me out of your place. I promise.”

I kiss him one more time and reach for the door. “I had a lovely time tonight. Thank you.”

“I did too. And really, thank *you*. Night, Joce.”

“*Bonne nuit*, Gunnar.”

Gunnar

I drop my coat over my chair and set my messenger bag on the desk before heading to the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. Tom is just putting the milk away and turns around when he hears footsteps. “Morning Gunnar. How was your weekend?”

I shrug, trying to mask the grin that wants to appear every time I think of Jocelin. “It was okay. How was yours?”

He eyes me skeptically. “Mine was fine. Nothing much happened. I mowed the lawn, Josie and I went out for dinner, the usual. But I can tell from the way your face is twisting into knots that your weekend was more than okay. So spill.”

I grab a mug from the cupboard and a tea bag out of the canister on the counter, purposely keeping my back to Tom. “Well, I went to that book event thing that Astrid’s company had for Gary at Jupiter Winery.”

“Okay. Decent start to a weekend.”

I concentrate on pouring the hot water into my mug so I don't scald myself. "And I kinda met someone for the first time again."

Tom snorts. "How do you *kinda* meet someone for the first time again?" I can hear the grin in his voice.

"Well, I showed up, expecting the evening to be painfully boring. But when I got to the winery, Astrid's friend Jocelin came rushing over, calling me *mon chéri*, pulled my tie from my hand, then draped it around my neck, forming some elaborate knot I'll never be able to duplicate." I pause and blow on my tea.

"Gunnar."

"I'm getting to it. Anyway, there was this other guy there who I guess has been repeatedly asking Jocelin out and won't take no for an answer. I felt bad, so I kinda let him talk me into playing his boyfriend for the event."

I risk a glance over my shoulder. Tom is leaning against the fridge with his arms crossed over his broad chest and an expectant look on his face. "You *are* going to fill in the details. Right?"

Groaning under my breath, I head for the fridge to get the milk, nudging Tom aside. "Fine. So, Jocelin works with this jackass who keeps pressuring him to go out. To get him to back off, Jocelin made up a fake boyfriend. I'm not sure about all the details, but the guy was at it again when I got to the winery, and Jocelin panicked and told the asshat *I* was his

boyfriend. What was I supposed to do? He's Astrid's best friend. I couldn't leave him hanging."

Tom makes a little grunt, which is his 'I call bullshit' noise. "Of course not. *And...*"

I stir the milk into my tea, square my shoulders, and turn to face him. "Well, we got inside, and his boss came over. Well, one of his bosses. I guess he has a few? Anyway, this boss was excited to finally meet Jocelin's boyfriend." I point at myself. "Me. And then he invited us both to some party he's throwing at his house next weekend. Jocelin was so excited. Like, really excited. It was adorable. So I said of course I would go with him." Tom hums for me to continue, and I relax into the story. "Anyway, the pest, Victor, kept hovering around us, making Jocelin nervous." I smirk. "So I took care of it."

"And you did that how?"

I shrug, trying not to grin too broadly. "So I kinda kissed him."

Tom chokes. "Hell, yeah. Did he kiss you back?"

A rush of heat washes through me. "Oh, yeah." I blow on my tea and take a sip so the pain will redirect my attention from my dick. "Did the trick, too. The creep backed off."

Tom laughs loudly. "That good, huh?"

"Well, the first time I kissed him, it was pretty great. But we both were in a bit of shock about it since I kind of caught him off guard. But then when we kissed back at his place—"

"You went back to his place?"

I hold up a hand. “It was just to get a look around. Everyone at his office thinks we’ve been dating for a while, and we’ve been invited to another of his work functions. So if we’re going to pull this off, then we have to know a certain amount about each other, and what his apartment looks like would be one of those things. Right?” I fiddle with my mug. “Anyway, we really hit it off. And I really like him.”

Tom makes another of his ‘I’m letting that go, but we’re coming back to it’ noises. “And are you going to ask him out?”

I sheepishly meet his eyes. “Well, we’ve already kinda had our first date.”

Tom snorts. “God, you don’t waste time.”

“It was only to Bjorn’s on Sunday.”

The silence is thunderous, and I glance at Tom. He’s staring at me, open-mouthed, and that’s not an expression I’m used to seeing on my best friend. “You took Jocelin to Osouf Family Dinner for your first date? I thought you liked him.”

I shake my head. “You’d think it would have been a disaster, right? God, I remember the first time Jules came over for dinner.” I still feel so fucking guilty about that night, especially now that I know him. “But Jocelin fit right in. It was seamless. He already knew Astrid and Gary, and he’s been to Bjorn’s once or twice before and met everyone. So, there wasn’t even any drama.”

Tom whistles. “Wow! Amazing.”

I take a sip of my tea. “I know, right?”

Tom throws back his head, and the room fills with his booming laugh.

There’s a throat clearing, and we both turn to see Quinn MacDougall, the M in MRB Concepts, standing in the doorway. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but did you say you went on a date with our friend Jocelin Allard?”

I grip my tea and meet Quinn’s gaze. This isn’t anything to be embarrassed about. It was a date. And he may be Quinn and Tadhg’s friend, but he’s Astrid’s *best* friend. And if she doesn’t have a problem with it, then they shouldn’t either. “As a matter of fact, yes. We met at Gary’s book thing, and I took him to my brother’s house for dinner last night.”

It’s at that point that Tadhg joins us. ‘What’s up?’

Quinn steps into the kitchen and positions himself so Tadhg can see all of us, then fills him in. ‘Gunnar went on a date with Jocelin this weekend.’

Tadhg’s eyebrow shoots up, and he looks at me. ‘True biz?’

I nod, able to keep up with the ASL only because everyone is signing slower for my benefit, which I appreciate, and that particular idiom is one Tadhg explained to me when I first started working here. ‘We’re going out again this Saturday, and maybe after work one night this week.’ My signing still needs more practice, but I’m able to get my point across. At least right now. I often revert to writing out long explanations

of things, or Tom or Quinn will help facilitate communication. But the more I try, the better it gets. Baby steps.

‘That’s nice.’ Tadhg pours himself a coffee. ‘I wonder why he didn’t let us know.’ His facial expression doesn’t look upset or angry, but I can’t help feeling like I’m being grilled by a disapproving parent. Next thing, he’ll be asking me what my intentions are. Why can’t I get away from people who feel the need to parent me?

Quinn nudges him, and Tadhg looks up. ‘Maybe because he’s a big boy and can do whatever he wants with whomever he wants.’ Quinn’s grin is soft, but his eyebrows are raised, encouraging Tadhg to see his point. Thank you, Quinn!

Tadhg sips his coffee and looks at me. ‘So, the date went well?’

I nod. ‘Amazingly well.’

He stares at me for several very long seconds and then nods. ‘Good. I’m glad. Now we should all get to work.’ He turns and walks out of the kitchen, and Tom chuckles. “Twenty bucks says he’s on his way to video chat with Jocelin.”

Quinn shakes his head. “Not taking that bet.” He pulls a mug from the cupboard and makes himself a coffee.

I swallow my mouthful and set my mug on the counter. “Is he upset about my date with Jocelin? I really didn’t think it would be a big deal. Joce said they were friends, but I didn’t know they were that close.”

Quinn slaps me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. Tadhg is very protective of his friends, but if Jocelin is happy, then Tadhg will be happy.”

Tom snorts. “Yeah, just don’t piss Jocelin off, or you’ll have to deal with an upset Tadhg. Trust me, you don’t want that.”

I groan and rub my eyes. “Yeah, I’m seeing that.” He’s very protective of Quinn and Tom, and I can only assume he’s the same with his other friends. The amount of information they share is almost too much, and I’m learning that it’s typical in Deaf culture, though I’m still getting used to it. “But Jocelin’s completely worth it.”

Jocelin

Astrid exhales a long sigh. “Thank god things went well. That could have been awkward if Tadhg had been a jerk about it.”

I gather up the contracts and shuffle them into a neat stack. “I wasn’t really worried. He just wants his friends to be happy. I’m not sure what I’d have done if he’d had a problem with it, though. It wouldn’t have stopped me from seeing Gunnar, but it does make everything that much easier.”

Astrid loops her arm through mine as we walk toward the elevators. “And he’s okay with bringing someone who works for him into the friend group?”

Her question makes me pause. I hadn’t considered that, and I’m not sure Tadhg did either. It’s not something we specifically covered in our chat. “Maybe that’s the reason for the whole grilling. It’s definitely one reason Gunnar and I are taking things slowly. There’s a lot of fallout that can happen if this doesn’t work.”

We stop in front of the elevators, and Astrid squeezes my arm. “Well, I think it’s great. You have my blessing, for what that’s worth. And even if things don’t work out, you’ll always have my friendship, no matter what.” Even though I knew that’s what she’d say, hearing the words eases much of the worry I had about trying for something real with Gunnar. “But I have a good feeling about you two. I think you’ll be fine.”

I press the call button and try not to get too ahead of things. It’s still very early days, and Gunnar and I could find out we aren’t as compatible as we think. “I probably should get back downstairs. I’m in the middle of a large project, and there’s so much to do.”

“Alright. Don’t work too hard. Be sure to take breaks and get up and move.” She knows me too well. “Drink lots of water, too.”

I give her a quick hug, and when the elevator doors open, I walk inside, my mind already on the Alistair project. Unfortunately, I’m not able to dive in when I get back to my desk.

“Jocelin.” Victoria’s tone is more accusation than greeting.

I am not in the mood for this. “Ms. Knobb.”

“Upstairs again? This is why the new imprint should go to Victor. You spend far too much time away from your desk. Shouldn’t you be working on the contract for Alistair?”

I sigh and rub my temple, trying to stave off a headache. “I was dropping off the contract for Gary Atkinson’s latest

manuscript. And I'm almost finished with Alistair's contract. It should be ready for review in a day or two. I'm double-checking everything before I submit it to him." I try to walk around her to my chair, but she purposely blocks my path.

She crosses her arms and taps her taloned fingers against her bicep. "Make sure you're focused on the correct things, Jocelin. This contract is important to this company, and if you screw it up, it will have severe consequences. You shouldn't allow one client to get in the way of the rest of your job."

White hot anger burns my chest, and I am sorely tempted to tell her exactly what I think of her advice. I am utterly out of patience with her and her nephew. Instead, I take a moment to breathe, ratcheting back the anger because blasting her would only backfire on me. So, I swallow down the words I want to say and shove past her, dropping into my chair, my eyes fixed on my laptop screen in obvious dismissal. "I have never missed a deadline. Nor do I spend an excessive amount of time on Hibernian Press. I spend just the *right* amount of time on them, and Alistair agrees. They are my biggest client, so they get the majority of my focus. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to concentrate on this contract for *Alistair*."

Victoria clenches her fists, her body radiating outrage, and storms away from my desk. I finally take a breath when her office door slams shut. Closing my eyes, I try to calm myself. She's furious that I spoke with Alistair about Hibernian Press, and he unequivocally confirmed that I would keep them and any imprints as my accounts, until such time as he and Nando conclude that there is too much work there for just one person.

I wasn't privy to the discussion she and Alistair had, but we could all hear the shouting through his office door.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she's upset. And Victor has been strangely absent today. Though now that I've thought that, he'll probably appear to harass me. I check the time, and debate the merits of staying and working on Alistair's project versus heading home. My concentration is shot, and sitting here with Victoria several yards away isn't going to help. I pack up my laptop, grab my coat, and head to Bethany's desk, planning to work from home for the rest of the afternoon.

She's on the phone, so I wait for her to finish the call. After she hangs up, she turns to me, eyeing my laptop and coat. "Heading out?"

"Yes. If anyone is looking for me, I'll be working from home for the rest of the day. I need to finish Alistair's contract, and I don't need another distraction."

She glances at Victoria's office door and nods, keeping her voice low. "Probably a good idea. But, way to stand up for yourself! I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks. Though I'm sure that's not the last I've heard from her on the subject." We fist bump, and I rush to the elevator, thumbing the call button, hoping it arrives before Victoria comes out of her office. The little voice in the back of my mind says I've probably just made things infinitely worse for myself with her, but there's no use worrying about it now.

What's done is done, and I have no regrets. I'll deal with the fallout if and when it comes.

Gunnar

I pull into the parking garage and roll down the window. “Hey, Jim. I’m here to see Jocelin Allard. He’s expecting me.”

Jim assesses me like he’s never seen me before. “Name?”

“Gunnar Osouf.”

He squints at me and picks up a phone, covering the number pad as he dials. “One moment please.”

I get another suspicious look before he turns his back to me. I can just make out the muffled sound of my name and ‘verify his description’ before he nods and hangs up. With another dubious glance my way, Jim types into a computer and then cautiously hands me an elevator key card. “Here, sir. This is a *temporary* card, which will get you into the elevator and up to Mr. Allard’s floor. You should return it to the guard pavilion as you leave. If you forget”—his tone clearly indicates he knows I’ll forget—“please be aware that the coding on the card will expire four hours from now, so you won’t be able to use it after that.”

“Thanks Jim. I’ll be sure to give it back. Have a good evening.” I give him a big smile and wave before pulling forward and parking in one of the empty spaces designated for Jocelin’s loft.

Me: Made it past the gate. *guardsman emoji identification_card emoji saluting_face emoji*

Me: On my way up now

Jocelin: *facepalm emoji* Sorry. Jim can be a little overzealous

That’s the understatement of the year. I lock the car and jog the few paces to the elevator, tap the key card against the call panel, then once I’m inside, I duplicate the steps I saw Jocelin do. When the doors open again, I step into an armful of very affectionate Jocelin. “Hi.”

I tighten my arms around him, pulling him close. “Hi to you, too. This is quite the welcome.”

He melts against me, his voice all rough and sexy. “I can make it even better.” The moment his lips touch mine, I forget about anything else. God, his kisses are like electricity rolled in pleasure, baked in sunshine, and I’m addicted. He slides his hands into my hair, tugging gently, making me gasp. Reflexively, I grab his ass, squeezing the firm muscles as we press our hips together. Jocelin’s deliciously filthy moan is like a siren song, and it takes everything I have to let go of his ass

and slide my hand up his back, breaking the kiss. I drop my forehead to his, panting heavily while trying to ignore my protesting dick. “Sorry. Got a bit carried away. You caught me off guard.”

Jocelin’s sexy smile doesn’t make it any easier to remember we’re trying to take things slowly. “Don’t apologize.” His fingers tease the hair at the back of my neck. “I really didn’t mind at all.”

Hints of something clean and crisp tickle my nose, and I want to bury my face in his neck and inhale him. But that isn’t a good idea if we want to make it out of the apartment today. I lean back so I can see his face clearly. “Where are we off to? And before you even say it, no, we aren’t staying here. We’ve just proven we can’t be trusted alone together.”

Jocelin glares at me for all of five seconds before his beautiful smile appears. “Fine. We are going to a little bistro around the corner. It’s very cozy and friendly, and I think you’ll like it. Let me get my coat.”

I reluctantly let go but follow him with my eyes, enjoying the way his dark, fitted jeans hug him in all the right places. “You look good, Joce.”

Jocelin slips into his coat and grins impishly. “Thank you. And compliments will get you everywhere.”

“Noted.” I take his hand in mine, giving it a little squeeze. “Shall we go?”

He sighs dramatically. “If we must.” Laughing, he pulls me toward the elevator. This time, we stop at the main lobby level and head out to the street.

A five-minute brisk walk later, we’re stepping through the door of a cozy cafe. The aroma of strong coffee and delicious pastries is heavenly, and I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath. “God, I love the smell of coffee.” I don’t particularly care for the taste, but I can appreciate the scent.

Jocelin grins. “Me too. But I prefer to drink tea.” Yet another similarity we share.

I glance around, taking in the tone of the place. Interspersed among the beautiful pieces of art on the walls are pride flags and photographs of panels from the AIDS memorial quilt. There is a small dining area with a few tables and chairs, shelves of board games, and a larger lounging area with comfortable-looking sofas and overstuffed wingback chairs. Small signs on the tables give the Wi-Fi password. There are a few solo customers and several small clusters of people, but the majority of the customers are same-sex couples, and I feel myself relax. Grinning, I slip my hand into his. “I had no idea this was even here.”

Jocelin squeezes my hand. “Love ’n Cup is one of my favorite spots in the city.”

The name tugs at a memory. “I think Jules comes here a lot.”

He laughs. “We all come here a lot.”

Of course they do. “In my mind, you’re Astrid’s friend. I keep forgetting you’re friends with Erik and that whole group too.”

“Worlds collide.” He smiles and squeezes my hand. “What do you think you’d like to order? It’s my treat. I’m getting an oolong and something from the pastry case, but I need to see what Bill has today before I choose.”

I look at the drink board. “I’ll have an Earl Grey. And show me these pastries.” Jocelin pulls me to the case, and we peer in.

“What’re you in the mood for? Oh hey, Jocelin. How are you?”

When I look up, I pause, unprepared to see a guy with two full sleeves of tattoos, long black hair braided down his back, and a gloriously full beard and mustache. He looks like he belongs in a biker bar, not behind the counter at a cozy cafe. When I stand up to my full height, he looks me straight in the eyes, and I grin. It’s not often I meet someone as tall as I am, who isn’t related to me. Without hesitating, he grins back. It’s utterly disarming and softens his otherwise almost scary appearance. He checks out my tattoos approvingly. “Love the ink.”

I gesture to his arms. “Yours is sweet. Incredible detail.”

“Is that Jörmungandr?” He points to the dragon-serpent tattooed around my left wrist.

I hold up my arm. “Yeah. How’d you know? Most people think it’s just a dragon or snake.”

His eyes sparkle. “Well they aren’t wrong, but also not quite right. And I kind of cheated. One of Jocelin’s friends comes in frequently, and he has some really cool Norse tattoos. He told me all about ’em, and I went home and did a little research on my own. Came across mention of *Jörmungandr*, *Fenrir*, and *Hel*, and thought they’d make really cool additions.” He winks. “I was right.”

Jocelin’s laugh reminds me I’m being rude and ignoring him. “Sorry, Joce. Got a bit distracted.” I take his hand and squeeze, but he’s smiling, and when he leans into me, I kiss his temple.

“It’s fine. Bill, this is my boyfriend, Gunnar.” From the way Jocelin smiles as he says ‘boyfriend’, he likes saying it as much as I like hearing it. “He’s Erik’s brother.”

Bill’s eyes go wide. “I should have known. Huge guy with Norse tattoos, here with Jocelin.” He extends his enormous hand across the pastry case. I take it and shake, liking him immediately. “Nice to meet you, Gunnar. As Jocelin said, my name’s Bill. I’m the pastry chef and evening manager here at Love ’n Cup.” He turns to Jocelin and smiles sheepishly. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to monopolize the conversation.”

Jocelin shakes his head. “I don’t mind. The stories behind people’s tattoos are almost always interesting. And I don’t have any of my own, so I live vicariously.” He gestures to Bill’s arm. “Gunnar, you should see Bill’s Apollo. It’s scarily lifelike!”

I frown teasingly. “Is Apollo a euphemism for something?”

Jocelin snorts, and Bill’s loud laugh fills the cafe. “No. He has Apollo on his bicep.”

Bill pulls up his short sleeve and shows me the full image of an incredibly detailed statue of Apollo. I whistle and lean closer. “How many hours?”

“Took four sessions to get all the work done. About six hours each time.”

“Local?”

Bill nods. “Shop’s just up the road in Capitol Hill. Wouldn’t go anywhere else. Had my piercings done there, too.”

My eyes immediately go to his ears, but there aren’t any piercings there, and I can’t see any on his face. Bill blushes a soft pink, but he winks at me, and I laugh. “Ah.”

“So, what can I get you two? I’m certain you didn’t come in here to chat with me about my tattoos and piercings.”

Jocelin leans on the case, peering inside. “What do you recommend today?”

Bill glances at me. “Any food allergies I should know about?” When I shake my head, he nods. “Well then, I’ve been experimentin’ with recipes, and today I have two new ones you might like. Right there is sfogliatelle. It’s Italian, if you hadn’t guessed. It’s layered pastry, with a sweet custard-like fillin’ made with semolina, ricotta, and candied citrus fruit. And then over here, I have galaktoboureko, which is Greek. That’s phyllo, sprinkled with melted butter and a layer of light

semolina custard. It's all doused with orange-spiced, sugary syrup, and it's amazin', if I do say so myself." He gestures to the rest of the case. "We do have the regular rotation of brownies, chocolate chip cookies, pound cakes, and cream horns." Bill winks at me. "Met my fiancé over a cream horn."

Jocelin's eyes open wide. "Fiancé? When did that happen?"

Bill's grin gets a bit goofy. "Last weekend, while we were away visitin' Duncan's sister in Portland. He got down on one knee in the moonlight, and bless him, he was nervous as a cat in a room full of rockin' chairs." Whoever Duncan is, Bill is obviously besotted, and it's cute. "Next time you're in, I'll hopefully have my ring back from the jeweler. It's gettin' sized right now." He smooths down his beard. "Anyway, enough about me. What can I get you?"

Jocelin chews on his lower lip as he stares into the case, eyes darting from one thing to the next. I nudge him. "Can't decide?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "I want to try one of the new pastries, but I also love Bill's lemon pound cake." He screws up his face and then points to the top shelf. "A sfogliatella. And an oolong please."

Bill grins and looks at me. "And what can I get for you?"

"I'll have an Earl Grey and the lemon pound cake." I lean in until my lips brush against Jocelin's ear. "You can have some of mine."

His grin is wide, and it makes my heart feel too big for my chest. “Are you sure?”

“For you, I’m absolutely sure.”

He kisses my cheek, and Bill gestures to the other end of the counter. “Go pay and have a seat. I’ll bring everything out to you.”

Jocelin tugs me toward the register, where a forty-something woman of average height, light brown skin, and dark wavy hair stands behind the counter. “Amanda, how was Arizona?”

Her face lights up when she sees Jocelin. “Hot. But it was nice to see the family.” She glances pointedly at me and raises an eyebrow at Jocelin. He grins and squeezes my hand. “Gunnar, this is Amanda. She’s one of the owners of the shop.” He turns and points to a tall, red-haired woman chatting with a couple near the fireplace. “That’s Amanda’s wife, Georgiana. She’s the other owner.” Georgiana hears her name and looks over at us. Jocelin waves and she returns the greeting before going back to her conversation. “Amanda, this is my boyfriend, Gunnar.”

She holds out her hand, and I shake it. “It’s very nice to meet you, Gunnar. What can I get for you?”

“Earl Grey tea, a slice of lemon cake, an oolong, and one sfogliatella.”

I reach for my wallet, but Jocelin shakes his head. “I picked the place, I pay.”

“Is that so?” I cock an eyebrow at him, but he just nods and hands his card to Amanda. “Okay, I’ll remember this rule.”

He grins and takes his card back, then leads me to an overstuffed loveseat by the fire. It’s cozy without being uncomfortable, and we’re close enough for me to stretch my arm along the back of the loveseat and still slip my fingers into Jocelin’s hair. “So you come here a lot?”

“Yeah. It’s one of my favorite places. I love the ambiance, but I also love the pastries.”

His grin is almost boyish, and it’s completely charming. “Is this your go-to date spot?”

Jocelin shakes his head. “I don’t really do a lot of dating. Work and friends keep me busy. Though I haven’t been doing as much of the friend thing lately.” He wrinkles his nose. “It’s kind of depressing being the only unpaired person most of the time.”

I know what he means. Tom’s been married for as long as I’ve known him, and with Astrid dating Gary, and Erik with Jules, I’ve been even less social than I normally am. “You make it sound like you haven’t had a boyfriend in years.”

He shrugs. “I haven’t.”

“How is that even possible?” Jocelin makes a self-deprecating snort. “No really, I’m serious Joce. You’re intelligent, fun to be with, and you’re gorgeous. Like, seriously everyone-thinks-so gorgeous. How come someone

hasn't snatched you up already?" I don't mean to embarrass him, but it doesn't make any sense to me.

He blushes. "I grew up in a conservative family where same-sex couples were tolerated but not easily accepted. I'm not the first queer member of my family, but the rest aren't wearing rainbow T-shirts and marching in Pride parades. That message sunk in very early on, so even though I knew I was gay by the time I was ten, I didn't come out until I was in my teens. Even then, everyone kept asking why I didn't have a girlfriend. My *grand-mère* was the only person in my family who would openly talk about it with me. She'd ask which boy I liked at school, and we'd gossip about which famous people we thought were attractive, and that helped a lot. But my parents preferred not to discuss it."

He leans into me, and I drop my arm around his shoulders, offering him what comfort I can so many years later. "I did have a few boyfriends during my six years of undergrad and graduate school, but none of them lasted. They wanted to party, and by then, I was too focused on my studies for most of them. It's been all about my career since graduation, trying to be the best lawyer I can for my clients. Meeting you was pure coincidence and luck. I'm not sure we'd have connected, if it hadn't been for Victor." He winces, then snorts. "Damn! I guess I actually owe him for this, don't I?"

I chuckle. "Yeah, I guess we both do. Though I think Astrid might have eventually succeeded in getting us together."

“Alright. Here we go.” Bill sets his tray down, then unloads everything onto the small coffee table. “You both enjoy.” He turns to Jocelin. “Let me know what you think of the sfogliatella.” He tucks the tray under his arm and wanders back behind the counter. I nudge Jocelin. “So speaking of Victor, how’s it been this week, now that you’re officially off the market?”

His cheeks pink. “He’s completely pissed, and it’s been a bit unpleasant at work, but it’s totally worth it.” He chews on his lower lip. “I may have made things worse by telling his aunt off within earshot of several people.”

My eyes go wide. “What did you say? And why?”

His indignant huff is too cute. “Well, she continued to insist that Victor should have the Hibernian Press imprints because I had too much on my plate. Even though Alistair told her this morning, in no uncertain terms, that it wasn’t her decision, and that I was responsible for the imprints and would remain so until he and Nando decide otherwise. I just reminded her of that. I take my job very seriously, and I’m not a slacker.” He scowls. “She had no right to continue pressing her point, and I told her so in a very professional and non-confrontational way. Sort of.”

I chuckle. “Sort of?”

Jocelin grins. “I might have raised my voice. And I definitely had a tone.”

“Good for you.” I squeeze his hand. “Astrid says you’re a wonderful lawyer, and Blake counts on you. I’m sure others

see that, too.”

I pull him closer, and the air thickens around us, becoming supercharged with possibility. “I’d like to kiss you now, in this very public place. Is that alright?” I drag the pad of my thumb across his lower lip, remembering how soft and plush his mouth felt against mine. Jocelin nods, staring right back, and he’s so serious I can’t help teasing him. I blame my birth order. “There may be tongue and everything. Are you absolutely sure?”

“Gunnar.”

Jocelin grabs the front of my shirt, and I grin. “Yes?”

“Shut up and kiss me.” I haul him close, closing the short distance between us. With deliberate slowness, I softly brush his lips with mine, gradually deepening the kiss. I lean in and grip the back of his neck, pressing our mouths together as I slowly tease his lips apart with light flicks of my tongue. With a moan, he tilts his head and opens his mouth, gliding his tongue along mine until I forget where we are. The only thing in the world is Jocelin and this kiss.

Until someone very close by laughs, dragging me from our little bubble. Reluctantly, I pull back. “Joce.”

“Fuck, Gunnar.”

The blatant lust in Jocelin’s eyes makes my cock throb, but his shift from arousal to disappointment pulls a laugh out of me. “Joce.” He pouts, and I try not to let it sway me.

“Sweetheart. We’re in a very public place and need to keep things SFW.”

“We’re not at work.”

It’s all I can do to keep my resolve. “Joce, I like you so much, and god I want to rip your clothes off and do very dirty things to you. And PDA aside, we have a lot to lose if this doesn’t work out. We shouldn’t rush it.”

He drops his forehead against my shoulder and groans. “Fine. Be all mature and self-controlled. I’ll just be over here, dying.” With a groan he sits up, staring me straight in the eyes. “Damn, Gunnar. How do you have so much self control?”

“I truly don’t. I’m almost as amazed by it as you are.” Chuckling, I hand him his mug. “Here. Occupy your hands with that.” I pick up my tea, take a sip, and attempt to adjust myself discreetly in jeans that are definitely feeling too tight.

We make it through our desserts without further slips of hands or lips, staying occupied by chatting about work and hobbies. It’s not surprising to learn that Jocelin likes to read classic literature and collect fine wines. I tell him about my passion for tinkering with engines and riding my Harley whenever I can. We do discover we both love spy movies, but our tastes in music are complete opposites.

The conversation flows so easily that it’s a shock when Amanda comes to clear us out. “Okay guys, we’re closing in fifteen minutes. Can I get you anything else?” When we shake our heads, she collects our empty plates, gives us a wink, and heads back toward the kitchen.

I look at my phone and can't believe the time. "We've been sitting here for hours."

Jocelin laughs. "Honestly? It doesn't feel like it's been that long." It really doesn't. Not once did things get awkward or bogged down, and I could easily keep talking to him longer. Unfortunately, that's not an option. "We'd better get going. You still have a bit of a drive ahead of you, and we both have work tomorrow."

I nod and stand, handing Jocelin his coat and grabbing mine. We slip into them and head for the door. Jocelin waves to Amanda and Georgiana, and I take his hand, holding it the whole walk back to his loft. "I had a great time tonight, Joce. I really love talking with you."

Jocelin swings our hands between us as we walk. It's cute, if a bit juvenile, but if it makes him happy, I'm not going to complain. "I had a great time, too. Talking with you is easy. So easy, we had no trouble filling four hours."

I squeeze his hand. "Yes, and now we're prepared for Alistair's party."

Jocelin nods. "True." We cross the street to the corner of his block. "We might as well go in through the garage entrance. I can get on the elevator there, and you won't have to walk through the lobby."

We turn down the ramp into the garage, stopping at the little booth, and I hand my temporary key card to the guard, who looks confused by our lack of a vehicle. "Thanks Jim. See you next time."

I walk Jocelin to the elevator and cup his face in my hands, placing a soft, chaste kiss on his very tempting lips. Gripping the front of my coat, he pulls me in so our foreheads touch. “I really don’t want you to go. I know why you think we should take it slow, and I respect that, so I won’t push.” He brushes the tip of his nose against mine. “But I’ve had such a lovely evening, I don’t want it to end.”

I kiss his forehead. “I don’t particularly want to go, but I have to. And we’ll see each other this weekend, right? What time should I pick you up for Alistair’s party?”

“He lives near Bjorn, so it’s about forty minutes to get there. It starts at 7:00, so why don’t you come over around 6:30? We’ll be fashionably late.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Recklessly, I lean in and kiss him, enjoying the soft feel of his lips against mine. But I pull back before either of us gets carried away again. “Night, Joce.”

“Bonne nuit, Gunnar.”

Slowly, Jocelin releases my coat, and I back toward my car. “I’ll call you tomorrow night. Just to say hi. Maybe you can help me decide what to wear to Alistair’s since you seem to have a lot of knowledge in that area.” I grin and come to an abrupt stop when I bump into my car.

Jocelin laughs. “Definitely call me tomorrow night. We can talk about whatever you want. And be careful driving home. I like you in one piece.” He taps his key card to call for the elevator, and I lean against my car to wait until he steps inside. We wave as the doors close, and then I sigh, unlocking my car

and sliding in, all the while calculating how many hours need to pass before I can reasonably claim it's officially tomorrow night, and I can talk to Jocelin again.

Jocelin

“Name please.”

“Jocelin Allard and Gunnar Osouf.”

There’s a brief silence before the gate retracts. “Please pull through to the podium. Valet parking will assist you from there. Welcome to the Trumble residence.”

Gunnar slowly pulls down the drive to the stand by the front door and puts the car in park. We get out, and he hands the keys to the valet, offering me his arm. “Shall we?”

I grin and slip my hand into the crook of his elbow, giving it a little squeeze. “Are you sure you’re ready for round two of Victoria? She’s been in rare form since Alistair told her he wasn’t giving her nephew Hibernian Press’s new imprint to handle.”

“Hey, one entitled, demanding diva can’t ruin my evening. Not when I’m here with you.”

The way my heart flutters in my chest threatens my ability to breathe. Thankfully, Gunnar takes charge and guides me up

the front steps to the door. Before we even lift a hand to knock, it opens, and Alistair appears. “Jocelin, Gunnar, welcome! I’m glad you both could make it. Come on in. Here, let’s take care of your coats.”

We hand them over to a blond man in a tuxedo, who disappears into a side room. “Everyone is either in the kitchen, the living room, or outside on the patio. Let me get you a drink, and then feel free to make yourselves at home, wander around, have some snacks.”

Alistair walks us through the entry hall, into a huge kitchen that was clearly designed for someone who loves to spend time cooking and entertaining. There are two ovens, an eight burner cooktop, an industrial-sized stainless steel refrigerator, huge amounts of counter space, and an array of kitchen gadgets and countertop appliances. The center island serves as the bar, with several varieties of wine, beer, liquor, and frozen drink ingredients arranged across the surface. Alistair leans against the counter. “So what can I get you?”

I look over the wine selection and choose a piquette, while Gunnar opts for a local pale ale. When we have our drinks, Alistair lifts his glass. “Glad you could make it tonight. Cheers.” We tap our glasses and take sips as a beautiful, petite blonde approaches and slips her arm around Alistair’s waist.

“Alistair, here you are!” A soft look passes between them, and I like that he can show affection and be human in front of his employees. It makes me like him even more than I already did.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to my wife, Selina Darcy. Selina, this is Jocelin Allard, a very promising lawyer in my firm, whose specialty is contract law.”

“It’s very nice to meet you.” I extend my hand to her, and she takes it, shaking firmly.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Jocelin. Alistair has told me some very nice things about you.”

Alistair gestures to Gunnar. “And this is Gunnar Osouf. Jocelin’s boyfriend.” Alistair frowns. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what you do for a living.”

“Architect at MRB Concepts.” He flashes his heart-stopping smile and offers his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting me to your lovely home.”

She grins back at him. “Aren’t you the charmer? And you’re very welcome.”

“Is this, by chance, a Paul Hayden Kirk design?”

I glance at Gunnar, not recognizing the name or what design he’s asking about, but Selina obviously does. Her face lights up, and she nods. “It is! Would you like a tour?”

Gunnar glances at me, obviously looking for some kind of permission, and I laugh. “Go. Geek out over the architecture. You can tell me all about it later.”

“Thanks, babe.” He leans in and kisses my cheek while I stand there, slightly stunned by the spontaneous endearment. We hadn’t covered that during our lengthy conversation the

other day. Selina slips her arm through his, and they're off before I recover.

I turn back to Alistair, who winks at me. "I hope you don't mind."

I frown. "Mind what?"

"That my lovely wife has whisked your boyfriend away, leaving you here with me."

His grin is self-deprecating, and every time I think I can't like Alistair more, he proves me wrong. "I don't mind at all. I'm thrilled he has an opportunity to indulge his passion for architecture."

"Good. Supporting your partner's interests is key to a successful relationship. At least in my opinion." Alistair grins. "So, I heard a rumor that you've had a rough week."

Heat creeps up my neck. "I'm sorry for my unprofessional outburst at the office. I probably owe Victoria an apology."

Alistair leans in conspiratorially. "If you apologize to her, I will reconsider my decision about the new imprint." I glance at him, wondering if he's teasing me, but his smile looks completely sincere. "From what I heard, she had it coming. And as far as what you said, my understanding is you were professional but very direct. The only fault might lie in the location of the discussion, but Victoria can be quite infuriating."

I'm absolutely shocked that Alistair is aware of the *discussion* and isn't upset with me about it. He's right. I should

have asked Victoria to move the argument into her office. Hopefully, there won't be a "next time," but if there is, I'll remember that. "I'm afraid she doesn't care for me at all. But I've found, and will continue to find, ways to make it work."

Alistair laughs. "Good for you. If it ever gets to be too much, though, let me or Nando know." He nudges my shoulder with his. "You're a valuable member of our team, and I don't want to lose you over something like that."

A snide voice cuts through our friendly moment. "Like what?"

I tense, Victoria's voice grating on my nerves like her blood-red nails on a chalkboard. Alistair doesn't miss a beat. "Miscommunications. Not enough down time. You name it. Whichever working conditions make things challenging for our employees. We want to ensure a happy work environment." He turns to look directly at Victoria. "Don't you agree?"

She flips her blonde hair over her shoulder. "Within reason. We don't need to coddle anyone." She turns and glares daggers at me. "How did you get an invitation?" She shifts her gaze back to scowl at Alistair. "Victor wasn't invited."

Before I can protest that I wasn't in charge of the guest list, Alistair jumps in. "No. He wasn't. How's your drink, Victoria? Can I get you another?" He looks at her with annoyance, and I almost choke on my piquette. It's the first time I've ever seen him openly upset with her.

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” She spins around and walks out of the kitchen, onto the patio.

“Well, that certainly didn’t endear me to her.”

Alistair grips my shoulder. “It’s not you. She’s like that with everyone. She’s just a miserable, bitter person.” He looks out the French doors. “One of these days, she’ll actually let us buy her out of the business.” He turns back to me, utterly serious. “When that day comes, we’re having the biggest damned party in the history of parties.”

I sip my drink to mask my surprise as well as my satisfied grin. Alistair is some actor because up to this point, I’d never imagined he disliked Victoria so much.

“You’ve been doing great work for us, Jocelin. I want you to know I appreciate the effort you put in. Your contracts are always sound. That’s why I put you on the Hansley case. I knew you could handle the magnitude of the project, and that it would be in good hands.”

I’m a bit dizzy from the praise. “Thank you, Alistair. That means a great deal.”

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. And Nando is equally impressed with you. We have our eye on you and expect great things.” A wave of laughter drifts in from the patio, drawing our attention. Alistair claps me on the shoulder. “I should probably spend some time with the rest of my guests. But I’m very glad you made it tonight. Have something to eat, mingle. Make yourself at home. I’m sure we’ll chat again later.” He toasts me with his drink and wanders off.

I pour myself another piquette and go in search of Gunnar. After wandering through a few rooms, I find him leaning against a grand piano, laughing about something with Selina. When I approach, he throws his arm over my shoulder and pulls me against his side. “And where have you been? Chatting with Alistair all this time?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact.” I lean in so only he will hear. “It was very enlightening. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Gunnar raises one eyebrow. “Hmmm. That sounds intriguing. I look forward to it.”

Selina rises from the piano bench, leans in to squeeze Gunnar’s hand quickly, and pats my shoulder. “I’ve monopolized your boyfriend for long enough. It was such a nice surprise finding someone who appreciates the architecture of the house like I do. We’ll definitely all have to chat more at the next gathering. But I should go find Alistair and say hello to a few more of our guests.”

I gesture toward the backyard. “He was headed to the patio.”

She smiles and picks up her empty glass. “Thanks. See you guys later.”

Gunnar turns toward me, pulling me into his arms, and I go eagerly. “Joce, I can feel the excitement pouring off you. What’s up?”

I lean close so I won’t be overheard. “Alistair just admitted he can’t stand Victoria! I had no idea.”

Gunnar snorts. “Did you think they liked her?”

“No, but I didn’t think they *disliked* her.” I look around, making sure no one is eavesdropping. “Let’s just say Alistair is not a fan. But he did tell me he and Nando love the job I’m doing.”

Gunnar grins and hugs me tightly. “Joce, that’s great news. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.” I lean into him, enjoying the press of his body against mine. “We should probably mingle with others, though. Make the most of this opportunity.” We head back to the kitchen and then out to the patio, where several people are sitting in padded chairs around a fire pit. There are outdoor heaters placed along the length of the house and lawn torches throughout the yard. I spot Nando speaking to one of the lawyers from the financial division, and we head that way.

“Good evening, Jocelin! Glad you could make it tonight.” Nando stands and offers his hand. I shake it and then gesture to Gunnar. “Nando, this is my boyfriend Gunnar Osouf. Gunnar, this is Fernando Santori, one of the partners at my firm.”

Nando extends his hand, and Gunnar takes it. “Please, call me Nando. Everyone does. And it’s very nice to meet you, Gunnar. Have you two been enjoying your evening so far?”

“Yes, it’s been lovely. Gunnar got a tour of the house, and I had a chance to chat with Alistair for a bit.”

“Good. I hope he mentioned we think you’re doing an outstanding job and appreciate how well you handle all your

clients. You're an asset to our organization, Jocelin, and you have a bright future with us."

I try to wrap my head around the unexpected compliments he and Alistair have given me tonight. In the back of my mind, I suppose I knew they viewed me as competent and reliable, but hearing them both tell me I'm valued is unexpected praise, and it fills my chest with a warm pressure that makes it a little difficult to breathe. Before I can get too full of myself, Nando bursts that bubble. "I hear you had a run-in with Victoria."

I groan. "Does everyone know?" Thankfully, it's too dark to see the flush on my cheeks.

"Probably." The laughter in his voice is clear, and I'm grateful.

"I'm sorry I didn't have the forethought to move the discussion into her office instead of having it in the middle of the main floor."

Nando shrugs. "She can be quite... challenging. Sometimes people can force the situation, and we are not at our best. It happens. But not letting someone else bully you is a very valuable skill to have, especially for anyone in a law firm. Alistair and I are pleased to see that you have no problem standing up for yourself." His white teeth gleam in the firelight. "Even if it is in the middle of the office."

"Thank you. Hopefully, there won't be a next time, but I appreciate your understanding." Gunnar squeezes my hand, and it's exactly the reassurance I need. "But we won't take up

any more of your time. We didn't mean to interrupt your conversation."

"It was great to meet you, Nando." Gunnar shakes his hand, and we stroll toward the other end of the patio and down the few steps onto the impeccably manicured lawn, where several other guests are strolling.

"Your bosses really seem to like you and your work."

I shake my head, still a bit dazed. "It's surreal. On one hand, I know I'm doing a great job because I make sure I am. My clients rely on me to be diligent and look out for their interests. I take that very seriously. And everyone always hopes their bosses think they're performing well. But I really respect Alistair and Nando, and to have them tell me in no uncertain terms that they appreciate my work is so validating."

"Does that mean you'll get a promotion? Sorry, I'm not sure how law offices work, and that always seems like the reward for doing an excellent job."

I shake my head, even though he probably can't see it in the dim light. "No. In most law offices you have to litigate in order to make partner, or even junior partner, and that's not where my passion is. I could do prep work for court cases, and maybe eventually back up Alistair or Nando in the courtroom, but I much prefer working behind the scenes on contracts. Which means no promotions."

"That sucks."

Gunnar's bluntness makes me laugh because it's so refreshing. "Sometimes. But I get merit raises, and the work is enjoyable. It's enough."

For the next few hours, we chat with the other guests, and everyone is incredibly kind and giving of their time. There are only a few others here who aren't part of the executive team, and we're all taking advantage of the opportunity to make connections. It's been a surprisingly enjoyable evening. I should have known it was too good to last.

On my way back from the bathroom, I see Victoria in the kitchen. I consider turning around, but she pins me with a stare and stalks toward me. "Ingratiating yourself with Alistair and Nando won't help you keep Hibernian Press as your account." Her words are carefully enunciated, and her usual sneer of disdain is now undisguised loathing. I glance at her mostly empty wine glass and wonder if that's the cause.

I'm baffled as to why she hates me so much, but I'm also tired of dancing around the issue. "Not that I'm doing anything of the kind, but why is that?"

Her bright red lips curve into a sneer. "Because it will be Victor's account." She crosses her arms over her chest. "As my nephew, he needs higher profile clients. You have no connections, and they're too important a client for a nobody to handle their account."

At that moment, I feel incredibly sad for her and for Victor. Maybe it's because I'm having such a lovely evening, this particular moment aside. Or maybe it's because I'm still riding

the high of Alistair and Nando's praise. But I don't actually hate either of the Knobbs at this moment. "Victoria, it's sad that you are so angry all the time. That must be such a lonely way to live. And I think Victor would be happier if he *earned* higher profile accounts rather than having them handed to him. You aren't doing him any favors."

A choking sound comes from the doorway, and I glance over to see Gunnar holding back a laugh. He clears his throat and walks toward me. "Everything okay?"

I turn away from Victoria, who is gaping at me, and meet Gunnar halfway, slipping my arms around his waist. "Yes. But I think it might be time to go home before that changes."

Gunnar eyes Victoria again and nods. "Okay with me."

We head back onto the patio to say our goodbyes. "Alistair, thank you so much for inviting us tonight. We had a wonderful time."

Alistair extends his hand, first to me and then to Gunnar. "I'm glad you both could make it. You'll have to come to the next one, too."

"Thank you. We'd love that." I take Gunnar's hand and lead him back inside. We stop to get our coats, and by the time we have them on and step out the front door, the valet has Gunnar's car waiting. As we drive to my loft, his hand rests on my thigh, steady and stationary. I try to be equally reserved but fail spectacularly. My fingers ghost over his denim-covered thigh, drawing lazy patterns against the fabric, drifting a little higher with each stroke. He covers my hand with his and

brings it to his lips, kissing my knuckles. By the time we pull into the garage and get out of the car, the sexual tension is thick enough to cut with a knife. Gunnar holds my hand as he walks me to the elevator, pulling me close before I can tap my card against the reader. “It was a fun evening.”

“It was.” I wrap my arms around him and press up on my toes to brush my lips against his. “Are you sure you won’t come up?”

He pulls me closer as our brief kisses begin to linger. “I want to, Joce. I do.” He slides his hand along my jaw and cradles my face in his palm. “We need to talk about a few things before we go any further, though.”

It’s the responsible thing to do. I know it is. It doesn’t make it any easier to rein in my desire or to wait. But there are two of us in this new relationship, and I should respect his boundaries. I take a step back, putting a little breathing room between us. “Yes, we do.”

Gunnar’s expression is serious, and I try not to think about how sexy his little scowl is. “So, I haven’t been with anyone since a one-night hookup with my ex-girlfriend about nine months ago. Before you wonder, it wasn’t a ‘let’s get back together’ kind of thing. She was connecting through Seattle on her way to Vancouver. We used a condom, and I got tested after. Everything came back negative, and I haven’t been with anyone since. I’d rather go without than hook up with a stranger.” He quirks his lips. “I’m sure you’ve heard I’m not the easiest person to be around.”

I step closer and smooth down the front of his jacket. I'd heard about his mercurial temper, but I can't reconcile that with the Gunnar I know. "So, how long were you and your girlfriend together?"

"We dated exclusively during my junior and senior year of undergrad. Mostly because I liked her, and the access to sex was convenient." I must make a face because he rushes to explain. "I didn't know that's all it was at the time." He rubs his neck and grimaces. "I may be an ass, but I don't think I'm cruel. And I really wanted it to work. But now I can see that, although I loved her, I wasn't *in* love with her, if that makes any sense." I nod because yes, it does. Those are very distinct things. "In graduate school, I realized I was more attracted to guys, and things kind of went south after that. We have... had... a sort of standing 'thing' whenever she connected through Seattle. Only if neither of us was seeing anyone, of course. We'd get together and let off some steam. But she doesn't come through town often. And now..." He squeezes my hip. "Well, I don't think I'll be seeing her again. Not like that."

The implication makes my belly swoop, and I exhale, unsure why I've been holding my breath. Though I'll admit hearing Gunnar say he hasn't been with anyone recently and isn't into one-night stands makes me happy. "Okay. That's good to know."

He gazes down at me expectantly, and I suppose it's my turn. "There were a few guys in college but only one serious boyfriend. That lasted about six months. No one could put up

with all my studying and the strange hours I'd be in the library. Most thought I was making excuses and sneaking around with someone else." I shrug. "I got tested after each encounter. There have been a few hookups but nothing recently. I haven't been with anyone in about a year. I just haven't had time for a relationship. And I'm not really into sex without feelings." Gunnar smiles down at me, and before I think about it, I reach out and brush a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "So, neither one of us has had lots of hookups. And none lately."

He leans into my touch, and it makes my chest feel full. "That's what it sounds like. But, Joce, would you get tested again with me? I think we'd both feel better if we knew for sure. At any rate, I would."

I press up on my toes and kiss his perfectly soft lips. He is so sweet it makes my heart ache. "I will absolutely get tested with you. Do you want to go to the LGBTQ center in Capitol Hill tomorrow? They do testing there. No sense in delaying, right?"

"Right." Gunnar takes both of my hands and kisses them. "But..."

I grin wryly. "But the mood is dead."

Gunnar nods. "Yeah. Sorry."

I put my fingertips on his lips. "Don't apologize for initiating important conversations."

"Alright." He rests his forehead against mine. "I had a great time with you tonight."

“I had a great night with you, too.” Reluctantly, I lean away and tap my key card against the reader. “Drive safely.” Gunnar pulls me into his arms again, kissing me one last time before the elevator doors open, and I step inside. “Text me when you get home.”

“Okay. Sleep sweet.”

The last thing I see before the doors close is his tender smile, and then he’s gone.

Gunnar

I pull into the garage and park the Mustang, fishing in my pocket to see who's been blowing up my phone. When I see three texts from Jocelin, my annoyance fizzles away, replaced by a goofy grin. Stepping into the kitchen, I toss my keys on the counter, then thumb open the text thread as I pass through to the living room.

Jocelin: You just left but I already miss you

Jocelin: I'm in this big bed all alone

Jocelin: Dracona doesn't count

Jocelin: It would be cozier with you here

Jocelin: I keep thinking about you. I want you so much

Jocelin: Sorry if I'm being too forward

Jocelin: I'll show more self-restraint next time

I shake my head and grin, already knowing that Jocelin Allard will be the death of me. But I'll die a happy man. I drop onto the couch and text my reply.

Me: Don't be sorry. Don't ever be sorry for wanting me

Me: Because I want you. God, I want you so much

I hit send at the same time more dancing dots appear on the screen.

Jocelin: I do understand why you want to wait

Jocelin: Testing is smart

Jocelin: And things have moved quite fast

Jocelin: It's been a long time since I've felt like this

Jocelin: Merde. Maybe I'm rushing us

Me: I feel it too. We just click. Being with you is easy.

Me: I get wanting to rush

I squeeze myself through my jeans, moaning as I imagine Jocelin, rock hard, stroking himself. Fuck it. Texting isn't enough. I want to hear his voice and see his face. I need that. With a shaking hand, I jab the video chat icon as I press the heel of my other hand against my aching cock.

“Hello?” My screen lights up with the image of a bare-chested, slightly ruffled Jocelin, sitting up in bed.

My heart races, and my cock throbs. “Joce.” It comes out like a croak. “Jesus. I want you. You have to know I want you. I’ve wanted you since we ran into each other at Jupiter Winery. We clicked immediately, and I guess I was worried it’s been too easy.” I laugh ruefully. “Relationships of any kind don’t normally come easy for me. I think I wanted to make sure it wasn’t fake feelings about a fake relationship. You know. I wanted to make sure we weren’t caught up in the moment or whatever.”

“Mmm. Makes sense. And what do you think now?”

I can see his shoulder moving and wonder if he’s touching himself. “I think this is something. It’s not a fluke or a moment. You’re amazing, and god, you’re so fucking hot.” I stroke my palm over my denim-covered cock and inhale quickly. “I think about you all the time, now.”

There’s a momentary pause, and then Jocelin whispers, “Tell me.”

I groan, fumbling one-handed with my zipper, plunging my hand under the waistband of my boxer briefs so I can wrap it around my leaking cock. “Your skin is so soft and pale, and I wonder what you taste like. Fuck, I want to explore every inch of you with my lips and tongue.” Jocelin moans, his right arm moving rhythmically, and I know he’s stroking himself, too. “Fuck. Babe.”

“I think about that too, *mon beau*. How incredible it feels when your beard scrapes my face and neck. How incredible it will feel along my thighs.” Jocelin’s husky voice is a silky caress, and I shove my jeans and boxers down my legs, stroking myself a little faster. “I want you in my mouth. I want to taste you, feel the weight of your thick cock on my tongue as you grip my hair and slowly thrust into my mouth.” Holy fucking hell. I manage a strangled noise as my fist shuttles over my cock, now slick with precum. “I want to suck you so deep, bury my nose in your happy trail.”

Jocelin’s eyes are dark and heavy-lidded, his hand moving faster, and damn, I want to see what he’s doing. I groan, low and needy. “Babe.”

“Are you touching yourself, *mon chéri*?”

“You know I am.” It comes out like a hoarse growl. Jocelin bites his lower lip, and I moan. “Fuck, Joce. You have me so hard I can’t see straight. I’m leaking everywhere.”

“Show me.”

It’s not a request, and I inhale deeply, so fucking turned on by the command in his tone and not really sure what to do with that information except obey. Slowly, I pan the phone down my body until the head of my cock appears, slick and red, shuttling in and out of my fist with absolutely filthy squelching noises. Jocelin moans, closing his eyes momentarily before licking his lips and locking his gaze on the screen. “That’s so damned hot. You didn’t even take off your coat. Were you that desperate for me?”

I groan, any shred of embarrassment fading as my cock throbs in my fist. “You fucking know I was. Am. Fuck. I wish this was *your* hand around my cock. Or your mouth.”

“Or my ass? Would you fuck me, Gunnar?”

I groan with frustration. “Baby, you’re killing me. I’m so hard right now.” It’s not going to take much before I come all over myself.

“*Gunnar*. Tell me what I want to know.”

“You want me to tell you I couldn’t even make it to the bedroom? That I’m sitting on the couch with my coat on and my cock in my hand because you have me so worked up I can’t think about anything else? I just... I need this... you. *My* fist is wrapped so tight around my cock, but what I really want is to slide inside your beautiful body, feel you pull me in, hear you moan and gasp as I fill you so fucking full.” I close my eyes and listen to his harsh breathing, desperate to come. “I can’t catch my breath, thinking about how tight you’d feel. How it’s gonna be so fucking good when I can finally push inside you and feel you squeeze around me.”

Jocelin whimpers. “Yes. *Mon dieu*, yes, I want that. I want you so deep inside me I’ll feel it for days. I want that satisfying ache as you grip my hips and push inside me for the first time. You’ll stretch me wide, slow inch by slow inch.”

My heart hammers in my chest, and I can barely suck in enough air. A tingling starts at the base of my spine, and my balls tighten against my body. “Fuck, I’m close, baby. I’m so close.”

“Look into my eyes, *mon chéri*. Imagine it’s me you’re fucking and not your hand. Imagine how tight I am for you. How much I want you. All of you.”

With Jocelin’s sexy voice purring through the phone, I can only manage incoherent grunts as my hips jerk into my fist.

“That’s it, *mon beau*. Let me hear you while I watch you come apart.”

My body stiffens, and I growl through gritted teeth as my orgasm rips through me, come gushing over my hand and belly, my hips jerking as the pleasure slowly turns to oversensitivity, and I finally melt into the couch. I’m still breathing hard when I get control of my now hoarse voice. “Babe, I’ve just come all over myself like I’m a god damned teen jerking off in my bedroom.” I pan the phone over my dripping hand and come-splattered shirt.

Jocelin whimpers, and my eyes dart to the phone screen. “That’s so damned hot. Keep talking, *mon beau*. I’m so close.”

My eyes lock on Jocelin’s face, his pupils blown wide with lust, his lips red and swollen from biting them. His hairline is damp with sweat, and he looks so fucking good. “That’s it baby. Fuck, I’m gonna wrap myself around you and slide into your tight ass, slowly fuck in and out of your sweet hole as I jerk your cock, make you scream my name as you come all over everything.”

“Gunnar.” His voice is reedy, and I can tell he’s close.

I drop my voice and growl into the phone. “You’re gonna look fucking incredible impaled on my cock. I’ll be so deep inside you, yanking your hips back against me, hearing all your needy little whimpers. Should I make you beg, baby? Make you plead with me to let you come?”

“*Mon chéri*. Please.”

Jesus Christ, this is hot as fuck, and I can feel my cock trying to get in the game again. “Do you want to come, baby? Do you need me to fuck you harder?”

Jocelin’s shout is cut off by short quick grunts. His eyes squeeze shut, his head falling back against the headboard as he quivers, and fuuuuck that’s so sexy. When he stops shaking, he slowly opens his eyes and sinks into the pillows, a sated, dopey grin on his face.

“Fuck, babe, that was hot as hell. You look gorgeous right now, all sweaty and fucked out, lying across the pillows.” His exhausted laugh makes me grin. “I wish I was there.”

He nods. “I wish you were here, too.” He takes several deep breaths. “Gunnar?”

“Yeah?”

He smiles at me. “This was incredible.”

I chuckle because that’s the understatement of the year. “Yeah. It was. Not as incredible as actually being with you will be, but this was pretty amazing.”

“Mmmm.”

He sounds sleepy and wrung out in the best way. Kind of how I feel, and a warmth blooms in my chest because I did that. “You okay, baby?”

“Mmm. I like when you call me that. And very. You?”

“Never better.” And it’s true. I can’t remember the last time I felt this content. “And for the record, I love it when you speak French. It’s very sexy.”

“Noted.” Jocelin groans and forces himself into a sitting position. “I think I’m going to shower and go to sleep. Will you text me tomorrow?”

“I’ll text you when I wake up. We can make plans for the clinic and maybe grab lunch or something.”

He smiles and strokes a spot on his phone screen, where I assume he can see my face. “Sounds good.”

Before I fall asleep on the couch, with my jeans around my thighs and my coat still on, I need to get upstairs and into the shower. I force myself to my feet. “Night, babe.”

He smiles and blows me a kiss. “Night, *mon chéri*. Sleep sweet.”

We hang up, and I pull my clothes together enough to make it upstairs. I shower and slip into bed, exhausted but happily sated, and drift to sleep with my last conscious thoughts of Jocelin and his beautiful smile.

Jocelin

With a tap of the keys, I save the final draft of the Hansley contract to the server and email Alistair, letting him know it's ready. Leaning back in my chair, I rub my tired eyes. Cramped muscles and a growling belly remind me I've been sitting at my desk far too long and need to get up. Shoving to my feet, I slip into my suit jacket and head for the elevators. It feels incredible to be done with the project. It's been intense but rewarding to work on, and collaborating with Alistair has been a dream, but it's very different from my usual contracts. There's visibility working on big projects like this, but I love the personal aspect of smaller ones, and I'm not sure which I prefer.

By the time I make it to the lobby and push out into the crisp fall afternoon, the stress of the project lifts from my shoulders, and I walk to my favorite Chinese restaurant with a spring in my step.

I'm barely seated, just beginning to scan my menu, when I hear my name spoken in a voice I've come to dread. "Jocelin."

I frown at Victor as he crosses the restaurant, sliding into the seat opposite me. “Victor.” It’s rare to see anyone from work here. I come to this particular Chinese restaurant because it’s far enough away from the office to deter most of my coworkers. Plus, they have amazing egg rolls. “What are you doing here?”

Victor looks around and then back at me like the reasoning is obvious. “Ordering lunch?”

“Yes, but why *here*? I never see you here.”

I don’t even try to keep the disdain from my voice, and he doesn’t hide his grin. “I asked around and found out you like this place. I thought we could have lunch together.”

I have had enough of this man and his aunt. “No.”

He blinks, clearly surprised. “What?”

“No. N-O. I do not want to have lunch with you. I want time to myself to eat in peace. If I had wanted to have lunch with you, I’d have accepted any one of the other dozen invitations you’ve given me.”

He leans back in the booth and tilts his head to the side. “Come on, Jocelin.” I can tell his smile is supposed to be charming and flirty, but it’s more creepy than anything. Or maybe it’s this situation that is starting to get creepy. “Say yes.”

“I don’t want to say yes.” Maybe Gunnar was right. Maybe no one has ever told him no and stuck to it. Victoria obviously

indulges him at work. It's probably the same with everyone else in his life. "You'll have to accept my no and move on."

His brows draw down, and he crosses his arms over his chest like a spoiled, angry child. "Why don't you want to have lunch with me? I'm a great catch."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and beg the universe for patience. "Because I have an amazing boyfriend, whom I adore and who adores me. I don't want anyone else." Having an actual boyfriend in this situation is loads better than pretending to have one. If push comes to shove, I can prove he exists. "But even if I wasn't dating anyone, I still wouldn't say yes to you. You're pushy, arrogant, and a bit of a bully." Given how he followed me here, I could add stalkerish to the list, but I don't really want to go there. "I'm not interested in socializing with you in any way."

Victor narrows his eyes and leans into my personal space. "Are you sure? You might want to reconsider, given that my aunt is a partner in the firm."

Rage burns through my chest. This sorry excuse for a human has just trounced on my last nerve. "Are you threatening my job, Victor?"

His smile is malicious. "Merely stating facts, Jocelin. I'll give you time to think about it." He slides out of the booth.

"I don't need time, Victor. As I said, I have a boyfriend, and we're very happy." This whole situation is surreal. This kind of thing only happens in the movies. "I'm sure there's someone else who would love to date you. As you say, you're

a catch.” The words almost make me choke because he’s anything but that. But I have to work with him, and if I can salvage this situation, I will.

He leans on the table. “I am. And I deserve the best. That’s you.”

“That’s kind of you to say, but I’m very much in love with Gunnar. He is the only man for me.”

Victor’s smile disappears, and his eyes go flat. “Is that your final answer?” When I nod, he sighs. “Well then, I suppose that’s that.” He turns around and walks out of the restaurant while I wonder what the hell just happened.

Unease creeps up my spine. Without thinking, I pull out my phone and call the one person who can make me feel better.

“Hey, beautiful. What’s up?”

Confronted with having to explain what just transpired, I wonder if I’m making more of this than I should. “I just had another run-in with Victor.”

“Do you need me to come over there and beat his ass? Because I totally will.” There’s a smile in his voice, so I know he’s joking. Probably.

“No.” I let out a long sigh. “I think it’s okay.”

Gunnar’s tone changes immediately. “Joce, what happened? You don’t sound okay. Seriously, do you need me to come over there?” I can hear his desk chair moving, and I’m sure he’s up and headed for his vehicle. The last thing I need right now is an angry Gunnar at my office.

“Really, I swear it’s fine. Victor just said some things that got under my skin, and I knew hearing your voice would make me feel better.”

“Aww. Babe, that’s so sweet. You always make me feel better, too. Are you sure you don’t need me to make an appearance? Intimidate the jerk?”

That makes me laugh. “No. It’s alright. But thank you. Are we still getting together this evening?”

“Definitely. Seven o’clock at Love ’n Cup. It’s a date.”

Spending time with Gunnar in my favorite cafe, with some of Bill’s pastries, sounds like the perfect evening. “It certainly is. Thank you for making me feel better.”

“You’re welcome, babe. You can call me anytime.”

His words settle my nerves, and since we’ve both been given the all-clear from our tests, I plan to thank him properly tonight, when I see him. “Okay. I’ll see you soon. I have plans for you.”

“Definitely. And I can’t wait.”

We hang up, and the server takes my order. Thankfully, I come here enough that I know the menu by heart. Once I’m alone again, I take the time to relax and catch up on some personal reading I’ve been unable to get to, with all the overtime I’ve been putting in. When my food arrives, I eat at a leisurely pace and then stroll back to the office. Alistair and Nando aren’t sticklers for clock-watching. They expect you to do your job, do it right, and put in whatever hours are

necessary to make that happen. The rest of the time is yours. It's not quite flex time, but it's the next best thing.

When I finally step out of the elevator, the office is buzzing with activity. I head for Bethany's desk, keeping my voice low. "What's going on?"

She bites her lip and leans closer. "I'm not sure." She winces and pats my arm. "I think it might have something to do with you, though. Victoria was poking around your desk, and she, Alistair, and Nando have been shouting in Alistair's office for the past half hour. But nobody can make out what they're shouting. Or why."

"That's odd. And thanks for the heads-up." She nods, and I turn toward my desk. Before I even get there, Alistair's personal assistant, Rob, stops me. His expression, usually friendly and open, is unnaturally blank, and I get a sinking feeling in my gut. My delicious lunch roils and threatens to make a reappearance. "Jocelin, Alistair would like to speak with you. If you'll come with me, please?"

I nod, following silently as everyone stares. Rob opens the office door and what greets me has my anxiety spiking and my heart hammering. Alistair, Nando, and Victoria sit at the small conference table, all three focused on me. Alistair stands and motions me to one of the empty chairs. "Jocelin, please have a seat."

I approach cautiously, unsure what's happening, but the sinking feeling in my gut gets worse. "May I ask what this is about?"

Alistair clears his throat. “I’ve reviewed the Hansley project.” He pauses, like he’s trying to find the right words. “There were anomalies that we need to discuss.” He offers me a barely there but encouraging smile. “I’m hoping you can explain them so we can clear things up.”

The words don’t make sense. “Anomalies? Could I ask what you mean?”

Alistair sits on the edge of the table and rubs his eyes. In all my time working here, I’ve never seen him this frazzled, and dread begins to take over. He drops his hands against his thighs and shakes his head in disbelief. “Jocelin, the contract is terminally flawed. There are errors in language that commit Hansley Publishing, and in turn, our firm, to terms that are the opposite of what we’ve discussed. If I hadn’t caught them, we could have cost Hansley millions and exposed our firm to a lawsuit that could bankrupt us and result in you, me, and maybe a few others being disbarred.”

I shake my head, not believing what I’m hearing. “No. There is no way. Were you looking at the most recent version?”

Alistair nods, and my stomach drops. “Yes. And our IT consultant has traced the last revision to your laptop.”

Victoria scoffs, her arms crossed over her chest. “Incompetent. This is why the Hibernian account should never have been with you in the first place. You’ll be fired for this.”

Alistair glares at her and holds up a hand to stop whatever might come out of her mouth next. “Enough, Victoria.” He turns to me, his eyes pleading. “Jocelin, do you have an

explanation? Anything to tell us that might shed some light on this?”

Dazed, I shake my head, still unable to wrap my mind around what he’s said. “Alistair, I promise you, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. The contract I wrote is airtight and contains exactly the language that would protect both Hansley Publishing and Trumble, Santori, and Knobb.” It is, isn’t it? I didn’t forget anything, did I?

“The language is airtight. However, it’s not in our favor. There are a number of key clauses where the word ‘not’ is missing from the statements, giving them the opposite meaning and making the contract read as though we will expressly take on actions that are unacceptable. There are several instances in the reverse as well. ‘Not’ is a small but incredibly powerful word, especially in contracts. Had I not gone over the document carefully, the errors might not have been caught.”

I shake my head. “No. That’s not possible. I double-checked it myself this morning.”

“So you deny it?” Victoria rockets out of her chair and points at me with one red talon. “You’re lying. We have the proof.”

Alistair shoves off the table and crowds into her space, looming over her. “Victoria, if you say one more word, I will physically throw you out of my office and take great pleasure in doing so. Do I make myself clear?” She straightens and moves back a few steps, huffing disgustedly, but stays quiet.

Alistair turns back to me. “*Are* you denying it?” His voice is calm, like he’s asking me if I want sugar with my coffee. “I have to ask.”

Without hesitation, I nod. “Yes. If you’re asking whether I sent you a flawed document, exposing our company and our client to harm in any way, then I am absolutely denying it.”

I glance at Victoria and weigh my options. It’s not lost on me that she wants me off the Hibernian account, and Victor just... Can I say he threatened me? He didn’t. Not really. Though it certainly felt ominous. Is that enough to share with Alistair and Nando?

A pained look crosses Alistair’s face. “Okay. We’ll put that in the record.” The record? There’s a record? “I’m sorry, but we have to put you on leave until we can sort this out. You can’t be in the office while the investigation is ongoing.” I feel like I’ve been kicked in the gut, and my lunch threatens to reappear. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, Jocelin. I promise you that.”

Victoria mutters something under her breath that sounds like agreement but not the kind where I’ll be proven innocent. Alistair puts a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “We’ll need you to leave your laptop. Nando will escort you to the elevator. Is there anything you need from your desk? We can have someone retrieve it for you.”

“No.” I shake my head, trying desperately to wrap my mind around this. “Wait.” Alistair pauses and looks at me encouragingly. I pointedly ignore Victoria, take a breath, and

look Alistair in the eyes. “I’m not making any accusations, but there are a few facts I’d like to emphasize which might be important.”

“We don’t need anything—”

Alistair glares at Victoria and points at the door. “Out. Get out of my office now.”

She stands and leans over the table. “I am one-third owner of this company. You can’t tell me what to do. You don’t have the authority.”

Nando pushes up from his chair and clears his throat, his voice level and calm. “Victoria, it would probably be best if you gave us a moment. Thank you for your input, but we have it from here.”

She glares at both of them and whirls on her very high heels, storming out of Alistair’s office. I jump as she slams the door behind her. Alistair pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a moment, then meets my eyes. “I apologize for the unprofessional manner in which we’ve conducted the second part of this meeting. I shouldn’t have yelled, and Victoria...” His voice trails off, and I nod. There really is nothing else to say about that. “What did you want to tell us?”

I clear my throat and square my shoulders. “As you know, Victoria has been actively working to remove me from the Hibernian Press account so Victor can have it. She all but threatened my job. I mentioned the first part to you in a prior meeting, but I didn’t bother you with her insinuation. I didn’t think it would actually come to anything. Until now.” Alistair

and Nando exchange a look. “Also, Victor has been harassing me almost since he got here.”

That gets me their undivided attention. Nando leans over the table. “Please explain.”

“He has repeatedly asked me out. As I said, it’s been going on almost since the day he started. I’ve politely declined each time, until today, when I was very clear and told him I would never say yes. Full stop.” Would he actually sabotage my career over that?

Alistair sits on the edge of the table. “How did he react when you said that?”

“Not well. He was angry and reminded me his aunt is a partner here. Then he said, ‘That’s that.’ I have no idea what he meant, but the way he said it shook me up.”

Again, Nando and Alistair exchange a look, then Alistair turns to me. “Alright. Thank you for letting us know.”

Nando comes around the table and squeezes my shoulder. “We will investigate.”

“Am I being fired?”

“Not at all.” Alistair pats my arm reassuringly. “It’s a leave of absence, only. Paid, of course. And I’ll be in touch. Soon, I hope.”

“Thank you.” I follow Nando out of Alistair’s office. As we walk to the elevators, I can feel dozens of eyes on me, and it’s humiliating. I want to scan the room to see if Victor is watching because my gut tells me this is at least partly due to

him. Nando pushes the call button, and we stand in awkward silence until the doors open. In my anger, I barely register the ride down to the lobby or exiting the building. I must have hailed a cab and given the driver my address because I don't remember walking home. The next thing I know, I'm in my loft.

I toss my coat on the chair and head for the stairs, taking them two at a time, undressing as I go. The need to get out of this suit, to shed the taint of that humiliating meeting, is overwhelming. I spare a thought for how appalled my father would be to see my expensive suit in a heap on the stairs. Fuck. I probably need to call them and let them know what's going on. And Astrid. She'll never forgive me if I don't tell her right away.

Fuck, I need to wash off this feeling. Stumbling into my bedroom in nothing but boxer briefs, I head for the bathroom. Dracona jumps up on the bed and meows loudly. She knows I'm upset. I go to her, pull her close, and bury my face in her fur. "It's all gone to shit, *mon ange*. I'm not sure what happened, but I would bet quite a sum that Victor is to blame. Thank goodness I have you. And Gunnar." Just the mention of his name triggers the need to see him. I open my messaging app and fire off a text.

Me: Meet me here after work?

I don't have to wait long for the reply.

Gunnar: Absolutely, beautiful *wink emoji*

Me: It's been a bad day. I've been sent home

Me: Off work for the foreseeable future

Me: Too much info to go into in text

Me: I'll tell you later. But I need you

I toss my phone on the bed and settle Dracona on the pillow, flopping down next to her and mentally will Gunnar here as quickly as possible.

Gunnar

I reread Jocelin's texts and drag a hand through my hair. He's not one for dramatics, so something is very wrong. I get up from my desk and go into Tadhg's office, flashing the lights to get his attention. 'I'd like to take the rest of the afternoon off. Something's come up.'

Tadhg's brow furrows with concern. 'Is everything okay?'

'I'm not sure yet. It's Jocelin.' I use his name sign, which is "reading" in ASL. 'He's very upset. Something happened at work, and they've sent him home.' That gets me his full attention. 'That. Exactly. I want to go and make sure he's okay.'

He holds up a finger and raises his phone, I assume to try Jocelin. Moments later his full attention is on the screen. 'Gunnar is in my office. What happened?' I can't see Tadhg's phone screen as he watches Jocelin's reply, so I wait anxiously, hoping for more details. 'I understand. Call me when you can.' He signs ILY and hangs up, tossing his phone on his desk with disgust. 'He's on paid leave pending some

sort of investigation of misconduct. Seriously? What are they thinking?’ He makes a shooing motion. ‘I’ve never seen him this upset. Go. He should have someone there with him.’

That’s all the permission I need. Grabbing my laptop and coat, I fly out the door, wondering how things have gone from such a high point yesterday to Jocelin being put on leave today. I slide the strap of my messenger bag over my chest and swing onto my motorcycle, thankful I rode it to work today, because I practically sail through traffic, making it to Jocelin’s loft in half the time it would normally take. I may have bent a few traffic laws along the way.

I pull into the garage and give the guard my name, somehow refraining from desperately snatching the offered key card from his hand. The engine echoes through the concrete structure as I fly up the ramp, my tires screeching on the cement as I pull into Jocelin’s parking space. I kill the engine, run to the elevator, and fling myself inside as soon as the doors open. It takes two tries to get the damned control panel to recognize the key card, and the elevator creeps at a snail’s pace to Jocelin’s floor.

“Come *on*. Go *faster*.” When the doors open, I burst into the living room and almost trip over Jocelin’s suit coat. Snatching it from the floor, I toss it over the chair. “Jocelin?” There’s no answer, so I move further into the living room. “Joce?” When I see the trail of clothes, my stomach drops. For him to treat clothing like this, things are dire. I dump my messenger bag on the table and toss my coat over his, then follow the designer

breadcrumbs, picking up the pieces as I climb the stairs to his bedroom.

The shower is running, so I dump his clothes in the corner and hurry into the bathroom. Jocelin is standing under the spray, his head down, with the water pouring over him. “Baby?” He doesn’t look up. “Joce. Sweetheart, look at me.” When he lifts his head, his red-rimmed eyes are so full of pain, I want to hurt whoever did this to him. I don’t even care if it’s Alistair. I take a calming breath, banking those feelings for later. Right now, Jocelin needs me more. “What happened?”

His hands clench into fists. “I don’t really want to talk about it.” His voice is hoarse and monotone. “Maybe later.”

I nod. “Alright. Is there anything I can do?”

“Would you hold me? I just need you to hold me.” He looks like he might fly apart, and god, I know that feeling all too well.

Without hesitation, I unbutton my dress shirt and slacks, drop everything to the floor, then step into the shower, pulling him tightly against my chest. Jocelin sighs and leans into me, resting his head on my shoulder. I nuzzle his wet hair, kissing his temple. “Better?”

He nods, and I take a moment to relax my muscles so he doesn’t feed on my tension. “I’m here, Joce. I have you. And I’m not going anywhere.” Jocelin takes a deep breath and nods. “Can I get you anything? Do anything for you?” His hands are tucked between us, crossed over his chest like he’s trying to hold himself together. “Joce.” He loosens his death-

grip on himself, sliding a hand across my chest and down my torso. I grab his wrist as gently as I can, stopping its downward movement. “Joce.”

He turns his face up to me, pulling me into a searing kiss that I try to return, but it’s all teeth and anger. “Please, Gunnar. I need you.”

I move back and cup his face with my hand. “Sweetheart, look at me.” He meets and holds my gaze, and I can see the pain in his eyes; The anger he has bottled up inside. That’s a feeling I know intimately. He needs some way to let it out or it could turn destructive. I know all about that, too. I caress his face. “Tell me what you need.”

“You. I need you to fuck me. I’m so—” He clenches his hands into fists again, staring down at the pebbled floor as rage pours off him like the steam from the shower. “I just need you.”

I rest my hands on either side of his face and tilt it up until he’s looking into my eyes again. “Tell me you know what you’re asking. Tell me you won’t regret this later.”

He doesn’t drop my gaze as he replies. “I know what I’m asking. It’s nothing that I haven’t wanted since the moment I saw you at my office. And I won’t regret this, ever.” He places his hands over mine, gripping tightly. “Please, Gunnar. Don’t make me beg.”

I nod. “Okay, baby. Okay. I got you.”

I lean in and kiss him softly, but he's having none of it. He grips my hair, deepening the kiss, all but devouring my mouth. "I want you to fuck me." He drops his hand to my already stiffening cock. "I want this inside me, Gunnar."

"We don't have lube or condoms."

He reaches onto one of the shower shelves and thrusts a small unmarked bottle into my hand. "Lube." He steps forward, pressing against me, grinding his cock against my hip. "And we're both negative. I need you, Gunnar. Please."

Under ideal circumstances, we'd already have discussed this. In fact, tonight we were going to have that talk. But right now, he needs this from me, and I'm more than willing to give it to him. We can talk later. "Okay, babe." There's a slight easing of tension around his eyes, and god I wish I knew what happened. "How do you want me?" He wraps his hand around my cock again, stroking me with long, hard pulls, and fuck, it feels so good.

"Hard and fast." Spinning around, Jocelin thrusts his ass out, arching his back. He looks at me over his shoulder, his gaze pleading with me to help defuse his tumultuous emotions. "Please."

I nod and step in, shoving him against the tile wall, thrusting my thigh between his legs as I grind my hard cock against his ass. "Like this?"

"Fuck yes. Please." He reaches behind my head and grips my hair, pulling me down so we're cheek to cheek.

I squirt lube into my hand and slide my fingers down the cleft of his ass, pressing against his hole. “Fast and dirty, babe? You sure?”

“Yes.” He thrusts back against my hand, and I push in, letting my fingers open him up. “Fuck, yes.”

I try for a measured pace as I slide my fingers into him, but Jocelin thrusts back again until my palm is flush against his ass. He moans and grips my hair tighter. “Fuck, yes.”

He urges me to go faster, but I make him wait until I’m sure his body is ready. No matter how much he needs this, I won’t hurt him. Once my fingers glide into him without resistance, I lube up my cock and press the tip against his hole. “Okay?” He shoves back against me with a growl. “So, that’s a yes.” I press forward, feeling him open for me, pulling my cock inside. His fists tighten in my hair, and I stop. “Breathe, babe.”

He nods and slides a hand down to grab my hip, thrusting his ass back against me, groaning as I slip all the way in. Fucking hell, he feels so good. Jocelin is done waiting. He fucks himself on my cock, and I grab his hips and slam into him, making him moan loudly. I do it again, and again, until he’s chanting yes with every thrust. He wraps his hand around his cock, stroking furiously as I give him exactly what he asked for.

With a shout, his body tenses, his back muscles flexing as he gasps for air before slumping forward against the wall. I carefully pull out and press against his back, holding him upright between my body and the smooth tiles of the shower.

“You okay?” He nods, slowly relaxing his grip on my hair just as the water starts to cool. I turn the shower off, and he pushes up to stand on his own, so I reach for two towels, tossing one to him. We dry off, and I wrap my damp towel around my waist, but Jocelin shakes his head, tugging it off before dropping it to the floor with his.

He takes my hand and pulls me into the bedroom. Standing beside the bed, he turns to face me, wrapping his arms around my neck, pulling me in for a slow, soft kiss. All the fight has gone out of him, and my heart feels tight in my chest. I’m about to burst with... something... some warm, protective feeling for this beautiful, smart, kind man in my arms. I pepper light kisses down his nose, across his cheeks, and along his chin, finally lingering against his lips. “You’re so beautiful.” I nuzzle under his jaw, trailing open-mouthed kisses down his neck.

He moans and pulls me closer. “Kiss me again.”

I brush our mouths together, my tongue gently teasing the inside of Jocelin’s lip. He inhales sharply, clinging to me, his kiss almost frantic. “Lube?”

Jocelin grips my hair, barely stopping long enough to force out a response. “Side table.” Then his demanding mouth is on me again, rough and needy.

I’m quickly losing my self control to Jocelin’s demanding kisses, and my cock throbs, reminding me I haven’t come yet. “I’ve wanted you since that first kiss. You were so sweet and smelled so good, like summer and sunshine. We kissed, and I

just knew.” I try to convey all of my need and desire for him with my lips and tongue.

He whimpers softly, pulling me into another deep kiss, mouths desperate to connect, hands moving over warm, bare skin as we sprawl across the mattress. It’s been too long since I’ve felt this kind of connection or truly wanted someone this much, and my eager body responds to every move and sound Jocelin makes.

I reach for the lube, devouring his perfect mouth, as my fingers wrap around his leaking cock. Jocelin gasps, and I groan, loving the slight scrape of his nails down my back. “Joce, I’ve wanted to touch you like this for so long. I’ve been thinking about it since that first night.” He closes his eyes, gently thrusting into my hand. “Look at you. You’re so beautiful, baby.” I smooth my free hand down his length, slipping between his thighs to caress his balls, then further still, teasing his hole.

Jocelin watches me through half-lidded eyes and nods. “I knew the moment you kissed me.” He spreads his legs wider, pulling one knee up to his chest, giving me easy access. “Like this.”

I kiss him again, biting and pulling at his lips. Squirting more lube into my hand, I slick him up before sliding my finger inside him. His moan of pleasure and the blissed out look on his face make my cock ache. “God, I can’t wait to be inside you again.” I stroke my finger in and out of him, taking it slowly. “Good? Not too sore after?” I don’t need to clarify.

“I’m good.” He presses his hips up, undulating against my hand. “This feels so good.”

Damn, he’s gorgeous, and I can’t get enough of watching him. I want to give him everything he needs, to be the only one who makes him feel like this. “Ready?”

“Fuck, *oui!*” Jocelin strokes himself as he reaches up to grip the back of my neck, pulling me over him.

I slowly thrust forward, pushing the head of my cock into his warm body. This time, there’s no resistance. Even so, I keep things slow, kissing him deeply as he strokes his cock, pressing forward gently until his body pulls me in. “Fuck.” I drop my forehead to his shoulder and suck in a shuddering breath. “You feel so good, sweetheart.” His breathing is shallow and fast, and his fist hasn’t slowed. He moans as he pushes his hips up off of the bed, and I slide all the way into him. We fit perfectly, like his body is made for mine. I prop myself on my elbows so I don’t crush him, rolling my hips in slow, deep thrusts. “Fucking hell, Joce, you feel so good.”

He hooks an elbow around my neck and pulls me into a needy, sloppy kiss, his hips rolling against mine. I want to make this last, give him everything he needs, but his little gasping sounds and moans of pleasure stretch my resolve. Squeezing my eyes shut, I fight the growing need to come, but he feels too good. “Fuck.” I gasp for air, kissing along the column of his throat, losing myself to the rolling rhythm of my thrusts.

Jocelin's nails scrape along my back as he glides his hand down to grip my hip. I kiss and nibble at his pale skin, whispering soft words, drinking in his filthy vocalizations as I pick up speed, finally giving in to my own need. Jocelin's moans get higher and longer. "Gunnar. *Mon chéri*." His hand flies over his cock as I thrust up into him. "I'm coming."

"Yeah. That's it. Come for me, baby. Fuck. You feel so good."

Jocelin scrapes his nails over my hip before arching up, grasping desperately for the sheets, his head thrown back, lips parted in a silent scream as his body shudders, warm come exploding across his hand and stomach.

"Fucking hell, you're so damned hot." I thrust into him again and again, desperately turned on watching him wring out the last bit of come from his cock. When he collapses back onto the bed, I let go, slamming into him once more before my muscles clench, lights exploding behind my eyelids, and I spill deep inside him.

As my thrusts slow and I remember how to breathe, I fall forward, trying to keep my weight on my elbows so I don't crush him. Jocelin brushes the hair out of my eyes with his long, slender fingers, and smiles up at me for the first time since I arrived. "Hi."

I huff out a laugh, still trying to catch my breath. "Hi yourself." I lower myself over him and kiss his neck softly, the salty tang of sweat mixing with the warm scent of his skin. "I'm gonna move, sweetheart. You ready?"

Jocelin nods and groans as I gently pull out, then roll to the side. He hands me a few tissues, and I clean up, sliding out of bed to toss everything in the trash. When I lie back down, I reach for him and pull him against me. He slowly strokes my arm with his fingertips, seemingly peaceful and content. I kiss the side of his head, breathing him in. “How are you doing?”

Jocelin hums. “I’m good. Better than good. I knew we would be incredible together.”

The sex *was* incredible. It certainly seems to have put him in a better state of mind. “It was very good.”

Jocelin stifles a yawn. “We could try for great.”

I yawn sympathetically and chuckle. “Maybe we could try in a little while. Say, after a quick nap?”

“Mmm. And maybe some food. I’m hungry.” He stretches and rolls onto his side, pulling me around him like a blanket. I grin and slot my arm protectively across his chest. “I’m glad you’re here, Gunnar. Thank you for coming.”

Burying my nose in his hair, I kiss the back of his head. “You needed me. Of course I came. And I’m glad I’m here too.”

With a little sigh, Jocelin goes completely slack against me, and a few minutes later, his breath evens out. With one final kiss to his hair, I settle him against my chest and follow him into sleep.

Jocelin

I stretch, feeling worlds better than when I first got home. Strong arms tighten around me, and I grin like a fool, snuggling back against Gunnar. The room, *my* bedroom, smells like him and sex, and I'm ridiculously pleased about that. I slowly open my eyes and gasp, scrambling back into Gunnar. "Damn it, Dracona!" I press my hand to my chest and suck in air as my cat perches regally on the mattress next to me. Her steely blue eyes stare disdainfully in my direction, judging, and finding me lacking. I feel the rumble of Gunnar trying to stifle his laughter and smack his hip. "It isn't funny! She scared the life out of me." Though now that the adrenaline rush is ebbing, I do see some humor in the situation. I roll over and press my face into his chest, placing small kisses across his skin as I suck in lungfuls of his scent. "What time do you think it is? Poor baby is probably starving." My own stomach is making demands for food. Gunnar softly kisses my forehead, and I slip my arms around him and squeeze. "Thank you."

He brushes my hair out of my eyes and smiles at me. “You’re welcome. You okay? You had me worried.”

Cautiously, I poke around the bruised spots of my emotions and consider how I’m feeling. “Yeah. I’m actually better than okay.” It’s surprising but true, though Gunnar looks unconvinced. “Really. I’m still upset about what happened, but the shock has worn off. Now I’m more pissed than furious.” I know Gunnar wants the details of what happened, but I’m not quite ready to talk about it. After I texted him, I called Astrid to give her and Blake some forewarning in case Victoria tried to go around Alistair and Nando. Then I called my parents, who asked a ton of questions that I was in no mood to answer. I kept the conversation short, and I probably should call them back and fill in the details, but that can wait. “*Mon chéri*, I promise I’ll tell you everything. But later. Okay? Let me just be here with you and enjoy the feel of your skin against mine and your arms wrapped around me.”

Gunnar squeezes me tighter. “Not a problem. Letting go of you isn’t something I’m ready to do yet.” He cradles me against his chest and kisses my hair. “Except your cat is giving me dirty looks.”

I sigh, disgusted by Dracona’s dramatics. “I suppose I should feed her.” Though the last thing I want to do is leave this bed or the warmth of Gunnar’s body now that I have him here and naked. My stomach growls again, and I give in. “We probably should feed ourselves, too. How do you feel about Indian? I can call and have some delivered.”

“That sounds good.” Gunnar’s arm is still draped over my side, his hand slowly caressing my back.

“Gunnar, while that feels absolutely wonderful, and I encourage you to continue this later, if you want me to order food, you’re going to have to let me get up. The phone is too far away to reach from here.” I wait a moment, but Gunnar doesn’t let go. Grinning against his shoulder, I give him a little nudge. “Gunnar?”

He grumbles and holds me tighter. “I don’t want to let you go. I like it here, and you’ll be so far away over there on the other side of the mattress.”

I laugh. “I did notice you’re quite the snuggler.”

“That a problem?”

I kiss his chest. “God, no. I like it. Very much. It makes me feel safe. And cared for.” And I could get very used to it.

“Good. Because I like falling asleep with you in my arms and waking up with you still there.”

Dracona lets out a loud, highly displeased meow, and I groan. “Yes, *ma reine*. You’ve been very patient. I’m getting up now.” With a groan, I extricate myself from Gunnar, who reluctantly releases me so I can sit up. I give him a quick peck on the cheek and grab my phone. “What do you want from the restaurant?”

“You pick. Just please, nothing ‘I’m trying to kill you’ spicy. I like a little kick to a meal every now and then, but really spicy food doesn’t like me at all.”

I grin. “So on a scale from one to ten, with ten being ‘I’m trying to kill you,’ how hot do you like it?”

Gunnar wraps his arms around my waist and hauls me closer, nipping playfully at my hip. “Are we talking sex or food?”

Laughing, I swat at him and roll to the bottom of the bed. If he keeps touching me, my resolve will crumble and we’ll end up starving with an angry cat, and neither of those things would be good. “Both.”

Gunnar raises an eyebrow and smirks. “Food is a four at most.” He stretches across the mattress and grabs my ankle, which is the only thing he can reach from his position. “And I have a feeling that sex with you will always be a ten.”

I feel my cheeks heat, and my insides go a bit gooey. Who knew beneath Gunnar’s surly exterior was a soft romantic? “It was pretty amazing.” I crawl back toward him like I knew I would, and settle into his side. “So you’re okay with what we did? I didn’t pressure you into something you didn’t want because I was overwrought?”

He strokes my cheek and shakes his head. “No, you didn’t pressure me into anything, baby. I wanted that as much as you did. And I was kind of hoping we’d get there tonight, anyway.”

I nuzzle into his beard, happy to hear him say that. “Me too.” Dracona yowls loudly and headbutts my thigh a little too close to my manly bits, letting me know she’s at the end of her patience. “Alright, your majesty. I’m getting up. You win.”

Gunnar chuckles and sprawls back on the pillows, all muscly and relaxed, watching me as I pull on sweatpants and a T-shirt. God, he looks incredible. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to feed her and order food. Do you want anything from the kitchen while I’m down there?”

“For you to hurry back.” He winks and I laugh. “Nope. I’m good. You wouldn’t happen to have a spare toothbrush, would you?”

I nod. “Check the linen closet in the bathroom. Second shelf. Help yourself to whatever you need. I’ll be right back.” I practically skip down the stairs, feeling surprisingly light of spirit, and follow Dracona into the kitchen, opening a packet of cat food and pouring it into her bowl. “There you go, sweet girl. You’ve been very patient.” I stroke her back as she daintily nibbles her dinner. “Thank you for taking care of me earlier. I know you were worried.” She twitches her ear, acknowledging my words. “I’m okay now, though. You and Gunnar took good care of me.”

I leave her to her food, pouring myself a glass of water and drinking about half of it before refilling it and going back upstairs. I pick up my phone and dig my wallet out of the pile of clothing in the corner. After placing the food order, I step into the bathroom just as Gunnar turns off the shower.

“Just rinsing off. Hand me a dry towel?”

I pull one from the linen closet and hand it to him. “The food will supposedly be here in about forty-five minutes, but they always get here sooner.”

“Good. I’m hungry.” He dries off and steps out of the shower, wrapping the towel around his waist.

Moving closer, I weave my fingers into his wet hair as my other hand slides across the muscles of his chest and arm. “You have the body of a god. Look at you.” I visually devour him without an ounce of shame. A body like his should be appreciated, and his smirk tells me he agrees. “Will you tell me about your tattoos?”

Gunnar laughs. “All of them?”

“You can start with this one.” I poke him in the hip, wanting to know more about the vaguely familiar symbol of three interlocking triangles.

He chuckles and kisses my cheek. “It’s *Valknut*.”

I roll my eyes. “And that is?”

“Odin’s knot. It has to do with the transition from life to death and back again. I got it for my dad. And the roses on my arm are for my mom. They were her favorite flower.”

I trace the tattoo over his heart of eight spiked tridents radiating out from a central point. It’s another Nordic symbol of some kind. “What’s this one?”

“*Ægishjálmr*. The Helm of Awe. It’s supposed to defend against hostile forces.”

I can guess at the significance for Gunnar, and it breaks my heart. I lean up and kiss him softly. “Is that all?”

Gunnar nods. “Other than my arm, and you’ve seen most of that.”

“They’re beautiful.” I lightly kiss Gunnar’s shoulder and slide my hand along his hip to knead his perfect ass, pressing against him, pushing him back against the sink.

Gunnar chuckles. “I thought the food would be here soon.”

I nip at the muscle where his neck and shoulder meet, rubbing my still soft cock against his hip. “It is, but you feel good. And you’re standing here, mostly naked, looking incredible.” I mouth the words against Gunnar’s wet skin. “*Mon dieu*, I love touching you. I love kissing you.”

“Fuck yes. I love when you touch me.” Gunnar groans and wraps his arms around me. “But we don’t have time for exploring right now.”

I slide my other hand down his back to grab his other cheek. “What if I want to anyway?” His chuckle warms my insides, and I sigh, knowing he’s going to win this. Especially after my stomach growls loudly, betraying me. “Fine. But after dinner...”

“It can be playtime. I promise.”

I scowl, but he only laughs again. With one final nip at his shoulder, I let him go. “You’ll need to borrow some clothes.” I dig in my drawers for a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. He eyes them skeptically, then pulls them on. They’re a bit snug, but I’m not complaining. At all. “You can borrow my clothes anytime.” The security buzzer sounds. “Food’s here.” I kiss

Gunnar, and hurry downstairs like I'm twelve, and it's Christmas morning. I hit the intercom button, and Jim's voice comes from the speaker.

“Good evening, Mr. Allard. Your food is here. Should I sign for it?”

“Yes Jim. Thanks. And it's Jocelin. Mr. Allard is my father. Meet you at the elevator?”

“Yes, sir.”

I chuckle. “Say it with me, Jim. *Jocelin.*”

“Heading to the elevator, si... Jocelin.” He sounds like he chokes on the name but manages to force it out.

“Good man. Heading down now.”

I grab my key card and step into the elevator, pushing “G.” When the doors open, Jim holds out the sack of food. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, Jim. I appreciate it.” I step back into the elevator and tap my key card against the reader, then jam my finger on the button for my floor, waving at Jim as the doors shut.

When I reach the loft, the doors open to Gunnar in his borrowed sweats, leaning against the couch, looking at his phone. I inhale sharply, my mouth actually watering, and not because of the food. I try not to stare, but it's a lost cause, and Gunnar's self-satisfied smirk is deserved. “Like what you see, Joce?”

Nodding in spite of my hot cheeks, I step out of the elevator. “Dear god, yes. The whole ensemble leaves nothing to the imagination, and I adore it.” He pushes away from the couch, and I walk toward him, ogling to my heart’s content. “Those can be yours now. I gift them to you.” Or, really, to myself, since looking at him in that outfit is a very special kind of gift. “This is my favorite outfit you’ve ever worn.” I walk past him and brush my fingertips over his muscular ass. “Should we put on a movie and eat in the living room?”

“Sure. Sounds good.” Gunnar goes to the kitchen to grab utensils, and we set everything out on the coffee table.

Once we’re settled, I turn on some documentary because I know Gunnar likes them. He props himself in the corner of the couch, and I sit close, so we’re pressed together from shoulder to thigh. We eat and watch in fascination as the narrator covers the art of glass blowing, sharing bites of food and the occasional comment until the credits roll. I set down my empty container and lean into his warmth. “That whole show was hypnotic.”

Gunnar nods. “It really was. And fascinating.” He reaches over and takes the remote, turning off the TV. I sigh, knowing what’s coming. He pulls me into a hug and rests his head against mine. “Would you tell me what happened today?”

With a sigh, I settle against him, lacing our fingers together. “I guess now is as good a time as any. But to be completely honest, I’m not really sure I understand it myself. It’s like a fever dream.” He kisses the side of my head, resting his cheek

against my temple. It's centering and helps me stay focused. "When I got back from my late lunch, I was immediately called to Alistair's office. Nando and Victoria were there. Both Alistair and Nando looked confused, but Victoria was incredibly smug. She's never liked me, and I knew if she was looking at me like that, whatever the meeting was about, it couldn't be good." Anytime Victoria is happy, it's because someone else is not. That's a fact.

"Alistair said the contract that I'd been working on for weeks, the one for his big client, was flawed from start to finish. There were key pieces of language missing that exposed the client and our firm to potential lawsuits." I shift to look at Gunnar. "I know what I wrote. That contract was perfect. There were no flaws."

He frowns. "You ever have any issues like this before?"

"No. Contract law is something I've always been good at. The words always make sense to me. The errors Alistair described are pre-law level mistakes. If they hadn't been caught..." Fuck. The thought has my stomach clenching.

He scratches his beard. "What would you gain by doing that? And who would possibly believe you'd do it?"

I shrug. "Alistair and Nando seem to believe I had nothing to do with any of it, but their hands are tied. Victoria was gloating, though. She's out for blood." Indignation flares in my chest and I turn in his arms to look in his eyes. "She demanded they fire me on the spot."

Gunnar tenses under me. "That bitch!"

My chest swells with affection for his instant support. “Alistair told her to be quiet.” The memory makes me smile, and I tuck myself back against his side. “He and Nando agreed to paid leave pending the results of the investigation. So I’m off until further notice.”

Gunnar hugs me. “You seem to be in a better frame of mind about it.”

I tilt my head and grin up at him. “There have been a few moderating circumstances since the initial event. And I’m probably still on an oxytocin high.” His beard is soft against my lips as I brush a kiss to his cheek. “Plus, telling you about it and hearing the details makes me realize just how unbelievable the whole thing is. Someone deliberately set me up, and I’m fairly certain I know who. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.”

“What are you going to do?”

That is the question. “There really isn’t anything I can do. I wasn’t allowed to take anything home with me except my personal belongings, so my laptop is at the office under lock and key. I have no way of knowing what’s going on until they tell me the findings, or I’m brought in to answer questions.” I shrug. “I have to trust that Alistair will get to the bottom of it. Worrying isn’t going to make it better.” With a feather-light brush of my fingertips, I trace over the patterns on his forearm. “The good news is, I have my own very handsome distraction to keep my mind occupied.”

“Mmm. I like the sound of that. I’m absolutely willing to be your distraction.” He kisses the top of my shoulder, and I lean into him, wanting his touch. “In fact, what if I take tomorrow off? We could spend the day together *distracting* each other.”

I swivel around to face him. “You’d do that?”

“I’ll bet Tadhg won’t mind. He’s very worried about you. I’m pretty sure I’m at your disposal for the next day or so, but I’ll check.” He fires off a text, and a reply comes quickly. Before he responds again, Gunnar puts the phone down, meeting my gaze. “Is it okay to fill him in a bit? He’s really concerned.”

The fact he asked makes me ludicrously happy. That he asked unprompted gives me all kinds of giddy feelings. “Yes. Thank you for asking, *mon chéri*. And let him know I’ll call tomorrow and explain everything. I just want some down time with you tonight.” I have the best friends.

A few text exchanges later, Gunnar sets down his phone again and pulls me into his arms. “All set. It’s you and me tomorrow, babe.”

“Excellent.” I straddle Gunnar’s lap and wrap my arms around his neck. “Wanna sleep over?”

He slides his hands down my back to cup my ass, making my skin tingle and my cock take notice. “Mmm. I could be persuaded.”

“You need persuading?” Rolling my hips, I grind my quickly filling cock against his, kissing him languidly and deeply.

“How’s this?” I slip my fingers into his hair, gently tugging as I nuzzle along his jaw. The scratch of his beard against my nose and cheek sends sparks of pleasure racing through me. “Is that persuasive enough?”

Gunnar pretends to think about it. “Well...”

I gasp in mock outrage and swat lightly at his shoulder. “Gunnar!”

He chuckles and kisses me. “Yes. I’ll stay. If you want me to.”

“Good. Because I want you to.” I lean in, rolling my hips again.

He pinches my ass. “Enough, you. Let’s watch something else. You can pick.”

I huff a frustrated sigh, though I suppose now that we’re both off work tomorrow, we have ample opportunity for more sexy times. “Fine. But just for that, I hope you like reading subtitles.” I pick a French film I’ve been wanting to see and snuggle against him. “You can take a nap. You’ll need your strength later.”

With a chuckle, he wraps his arms around me. “Should I be worried that you only want me for one thing?”

I shrug nonchalantly. “Play to your strengths.”

Gunnar

Two movies and several hours later, we stumble up to bed. It's close to one in the morning and, as predicted, I fell asleep halfway through the first film. I'd rather crawl right into bed, but I follow Jocelin into the bathroom and grab the toothbrush I used earlier. I'm not too tired to rub myself against him as I reach for the paste. "Oh, sorry." He smirks at me in the mirror, and I grin, dropping a light kiss on his shoulder, trailing my lips up the back of his neck and into his hair. "Just needed the toothpaste."

He rolls his eyes and continues brushing his teeth, leaning over the sink, thrusting his ass against my semi. "Oh, no problem. I know how it can be when something you want is out of reach." He sidesteps when I grab for him, trailing a hand across my hip and over my cock as he exits the bathroom. With a groan, I squeeze toothpaste onto the brush and clean my teeth quickly before hurrying after him.

Jocelin is already in bed—on the left side, which makes me smile—and I crawl in on the right, gesturing to the

strategically placed bottle of lube on the nightstand. “You have something in mind?”

“Yes. A few somethings.” He smirks and tugs me closer. “Hope you don’t mind.”

Heat pools in my belly. “Seems you have a plan. Care to share so I don’t mess it up?”

“Oh, I could go *so* many places with that, but let’s just start with staying right there.” He slowly stalks across the bed on all fours, eyes never leaving mine. Kneeling in front of me, he slides his hands under my shirt to caress my chest. “I love touching your skin.” I shiver when his fingertips brush over my nipples. “Mmm. You like that?”

I nod. “Yeah. A lot.”

He pushes my shirt up my torso, and I reach behind my head, pulling it off and tossing it across the room. I’m helpful like that. Jocelin laughs as he licks up my body, sucking one nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue while pinching and flicking the other.

“Hnnnnnnggg.” I slide my fingers into his hair, holding his head in place. “Joc. That feels so good.” My cock throbs, demanding its own attention, but when I reach to palm myself, Jocelin swats my hand away. “Hands off. You are mine to play with tonight.”

I groan with anticipation and drop my hand to my side. “Bossy.”

“Yes. And you will love it.” And he’s right. He grabs my ass, his fingers strong as he firmly kneads the muscles. “Do you have any idea how hot you look in these sweatpants? They’re like a second skin.” He kisses up my body, his lips latching onto my neck, and I gasp, leaning into it. “They leave nothing to the imagination. Very distracting.” Like his lips.

Jocelin licks and sucks the muscle at the base of my neck, worrying it between his teeth, and fuck, it feels so damned good. “Marking your territory?” It comes out breathy, my voice full of gravel, my cock rock-hard and weeping with need.

“Yes. You’re mine. I am claiming you.”

Oh, fuck. That shouldn’t be as hot as it is. Jocelin continues to torture me with his wicked lips, and it’s getting more difficult to keep my hands away from my cock. “If I can’t touch myself, can I touch you?” It’s torture lying here with his mouth and hands working me up and not being able to do anything at all.

“Yes. Touch me.”

I groan, slipping my fingers into his hair, fisting a handful as I slide the other over his hip to grab his ass. Jocelin reaches for the lube, pouring some into his hand, thoroughly working it over his fingers. Watching him take his time is almost unbearable. The anticipation only makes it worse. And better.

Leaning forward to slide his hand down the back of my sweats, he dips his slick fingers between my cheeks and rubs

them against my hole. I swallow a moan, and Jocelin stops, almost making me whine.

“Gunnar.” When I don’t immediately look at him, his voice takes on a commanding tone. “Gunnar, look at me.” I glance up, meeting his eyes. “You are far too quiet. When I do something that you enjoy, something that makes you feel good, I want to know. I want to hear you. Can you do that for me?” I nod, possibly a little too eagerly, and glance away again, flustered by my reaction. Bossy partners are not typically something that gets me off. It reminds me too much of Bjorn, and the last thing I want is any of my siblings in my head during sex. Jocelin gently grabs my chin until I’m looking him in the eyes. “Use your words, *mon beau*.”

“Yes.” I take a shuddering breath as Jocelin strokes the sensitive skin, tapping my hole, until all I want is to feel his fingers slide inside me. “Joce, baby, please.”

His gaze sharpens as he teases me with little strokes. “Is this something you want? Do you like this?”

He strokes around my hole, and I gasp, nodding quickly. “Yes. I like it. I want this. Please.” Jocelin takes pity on me, and I groan as he presses the tip of his finger in. My hips jerk as I try to thrust against his hand, neither movement resulting in any kind of relief. “Joce. Fuck. Please!” I inhale sharply as Jocelin pushes his finger deeper. “Fuck, yes! That’s... fuck. So good.” He glides in and out of me with slow, teasing strokes, but I want more. I need it. Like he’s reading my mind—or my body—he adds a second finger, and my breath catches.

“Fuuuuuck.” It’s been a while since anyone did this to me, and I’ve almost forgotten how amazing it feels.

Sliding my hand into his sweats, I fist his cock, stroking him in rhythm with the thrust of his fingers. He leans into me with a soft grunt, resting his temple against my face, turning toward me until his mouth finds mine. The kiss is sloppy, all needy tongues and lips. It’s hot as hell, and I can’t get enough. “God, Joce, that feels incredible. I love this.” I thrust back against his fingers. “Fuck me.”

Jocelin’s body shudders against mine, and he moans. “Was that an exclamation or a request?”

“Request. Please, baby. I want you to fuck me.”

He shakes his head. “Fucking you will feel so good, *mon chéri*. But not this time. This time, I have other plans for you.” His voice is hoarse, and his accent is so seductive, my entire body trembles with anticipation.

Jocelin’s fingers slip free of my body as he sits up and pushes me back onto the bed. I don’t resist, flopping down onto the pillows as he scrambles to straddle my hips. “Just where I want you.” He reaches for the bottle of lube and squirts a lot into his hand. “You’re going to stay right there while I fuck myself on your cock.”

Jesus fucking christ. I groan, the crudeness of his words making my aching cock even harder. Still in his sweatpants, Jocelin reaches back, slipping his lubed fingers under his waistband. Even though I can’t see what he’s doing, I know what’s happening. The sound of cool gel against warm skin is

hot as fuck. “Christ, I want to see you do that, babe. Let me see you.” I’m dizzy with lust, more turned on than I ever remember being. I can barely catch my breath. “God, you’re so fucking sexy. You’re gonna make me come just watching you.” My cock is straining against the front of my sweats, a very dark wet spot growing larger by the moment.

Jocelin licks his lips and tugs at my fleece with his free hand. “Take them off. Now.” I scramble to comply as he shoves his own pants off his hips, one-handed, the other still moving behind him. As soon as I’m free of my own, I help yank his the rest of the way off. Jocelin slips his fingers free and pulls his shirt over his head, reaching for the lube. “Get ready. I need you in me now.” Faster than I’ve ever moved before, I obey, still surprised by how much I love this bossy side of him.

Once I’m slicked up, he slowly lowers himself onto my cock, taking all of me at once with a loud groan. I’m panting, fisting the sheets, trying to blink away my blurry vision. Giving up, I squeeze my eyes shut and attempt to maintain some control as Jocelin’s body squeezes me so fucking tightly. “Fuck, babe, you feel so good.” He clenches around my cock. “Oh, fuck.”

I let go of the sheets, grabbing his hips and holding on as he starts a slow grind. Leaning over me, Jocelin grabs the headboard, his hips picking up speed as his breathing grows ragged. “That’s it, baby. Fuck, you feel so good. God, I want to come in your tight ass, but I’m trying to hold back.”

Without warning, he slows his movements to a gentle roll, and I swear I'm going to lose my mind. "Jocelin!" I want to grab his hips, slam up into him, fuck him hard and fast until I explode. But that's not what Jocelin wants, so I keep my hips on the bed and try not to whimper in frustration.

He leans down and kisses me sensually, plundering my mouth with his tongue. I dig my fingers into his hips and whimper into his mouth, feeling his lips curve into a smile. "You're being very good for me, *mon chéri*. I think that deserves a reward." Sweat running in rivulets down his chest, Jocelin pushes himself up on his knees until just the tip of my cock is inside him. He looks into my eyes, then slams himself down. I see stars, my body trembling as my mind screams, 'Yes! Finally!' I roar with the intensity of the stroke, sure I'm going to explode into a million fragments at any moment.

On his next downstroke, I slam my hips up to meet him, the staccato sound of flesh slapping against flesh turning me on as much as the shout that it pulls from him. "Fuck! Oh! Fuuuuuuuck!" Jocelin moans one long, constant sound as I pound into him, over and over, each thrust of my hips forcing the headboard to bang against the wall in a rhythmic thud.

His moans grow louder and higher, pulsing with each thrust of my hips. "Come for me, babe. Fuck yourself on my cock and come."

"Oh, god! Fuck!"

Completely untouched, Jocelin shoots thick ropes of come all over my chest. It's so fucking hot that it only takes one

more thrust before all my muscles clench, sparks explode behind my eyes, and my orgasm rips through me.

Gasping for air, I collapse to the mattress, Jocelin's limp body draped over mine. We lie there, unmoving, for several minutes, as we try to fill our lungs and let the room settle. I'm utterly drained. Sated like I've never been, I'm teetering on the brink of sleep. Before I tip over the edge, I grab tissues, passing some to Jocelin, and clean myself up, tossing them off the side of the bed to deal with in the morning.

Jocelin cleans himself off, then turns to me, wiping off my chest before pressing close as he kisses me softly. "My god, that was... I have no words for that." He kisses me again and sighs, smiling tiredly.

My chest is tight with new and intense feelings, and though I fight to keep my eyes open, barely able to manage the small swipe of my thumb against his lower back, unfiltered words fall from my mouth. "You're the best thing that's happened to me in such a very long time. I'm happier than I've been... well, probably since my dad died." Jocelin goes very still against me, and I wonder if I should stop. But he deserves to know how he makes me feel. "When I'm with you, I'm truly happy. I love what we have between us. I love what we're becoming together." Nuzzling into his hair, I sigh, so incredibly content. "I just love being with you."

Jocelin's fingers slowly brush over my chest. "You make me happy too, Gunnar. I actually don't ever remember being this

happy before. Even with everything that happened today... Well, yesterday at this point.”

I kiss him on the forehead, and he sighs and cuddles closer. “We should get some sleep. We can talk about it more later, if you want.” I turn onto my side, pulling Jocelin against me, throwing a leg over his, then wrapping him tightly in my arms. He somehow kicks the blankets up over us and settles against me with a contented sigh.

My last thought before drifting off is of Jocelin and how right this feels.

Jocelin

I drift awake from a dream of mumbled French voices and a vague sense of unease but find myself smiling as I stretch, the weight of Gunnar's arm heavy across my torso. His warm body is pressed against my back, but my front is absolutely freezing. That probably explains the odd dream. The blankets pool around our feet, so we must have kicked them off during the night.

As the fog lifts from my sleepy mind, I hear muffled voices again. Are they coming from the living room? I listen harder, forcing my brain to engage, and *mon dieu*, I recognize them. My eyes fly open, and I scan the room. Sitting just outside the bedroom door are two black carry-ons that most definitely hadn't been there when Gunnar and I went to sleep. *Ostie de crisse de tabarnak!*

Very clear French drifts up the stairs.

"I don't know! How would I know? He didn't say anything to me."

“Well, he didn’t say anything to me either. And did you see the suit in a heap, in the corner? We taught him better than that.”

“You don’t suppose that’s a one-night stand in there, do you?”

“I have no clue, *mon trésor*.”

“I guess we’ll have to wait until he wakes up before we get answers.”

I whimper pathetically. All I want to do is roll over and snuggle into my gorgeous, warm boyfriend. Unfortunately, that’s no longer an option. Instead, I brush a light kiss against Gunnar’s shoulder and shimmy down the mattress, carefully slipping out from under his arm so I don’t wake him. That’s the last thing I need right now. Scooping up the sweatpants and T-shirt I wore last night, I tiptoe to the bathroom, softly closing the door. Trying not to panic, I quickly brush my teeth and use the toilet, glancing at my clothes as I wash my hands. They’re a rumpled mess and smell of Gunnar and sex. For a total of three seconds, I debate getting fresh clothes from my dresser, but that might wake Gunnar. Better to hold off on that for as long as possible. I pull everything on and quickly run my fingers through my tangled hair before slipping out of the bedroom, gently closing the door behind me.

Pausing at the top of the stairs to move the suitcases into my office, I take a deep breath and descend toward potential doom. By the time I reach the bottom, I’ve squared my shoulders and put as much confidence into my voice as I can,

given the circumstances. “*Bonjour, maman, papa.*” My parents are gazing out the window at Elliott Bay, but when they hear my voice, they turn around. I continue our conversation in French since it’s just us. “Not that it isn’t lovely to see you, but why are you here?” I cross the room, giving them each a hug and kiss, motioning toward the kitchen. “Coffee? Tea?”

My mother’s brown eyes, a mirror of my own, light up. “Yes, *mon chou*, that would be lovely. I’ll have tea. Shall we follow you in?”

I nod and stifle a yawn, wondering what time it is. “Sure. Dad? Coffee?”

“Yes, thank you.” He motions for my mother and me to precede him into the kitchen. My parents sit at the table while I turn on the kettle and the coffee pot.

“What is he wearing?” My mother’s attempt at a whisper fails miserably.

From the exasperated tone in my father’s voice, this is not the first question she’s asked like this. “Clothing, Livia. Probably picked from the bedroom floor, given how rumped it is.”

I pointedly ignore them and the look they’re exchanging. “Well, I have successfully used all of my culinary skills, and I haven’t even showered yet. Good start to my day. Oh, and again, this is me, glad to see you, but why are you here?” I sit down at the table, looking between them expectantly.

My father shrugs ever so slightly, his light blue eyes flicking toward my mother, who takes my hand and smiles. “Well, *mon trésor*, it’s been forever since we’ve had a visit. And we thought it would be lovely to surprise you.” I glance at my father, whose expression clearly states this wasn’t his idea. “So we packed our things, bought plane tickets, and here we are.” She spreads her arms wide like a game show hostess.

“I see. Well, that is terribly sweet of you, and I appreciate the thought, but some advanced notice of your visit would have been nice. I might have been awake when you arrived.”

My mother waves her hand, dismissing the suggestion. “Nonsense. We are your parents. There is no need to prepare for our visit. With family, you should be flexible.”

Tension creeps into my shoulders, and my left eye starts to twitch. I love my parents. I do. And I know they adore me. But part of the reason I moved to the US was to escape my mother’s suffocating way of showing her love. “Yes, but I don’t have any food in the house at the moment. Not that I normally do. We usually eat out.” I don’t miss their quick glance and am perversely glad that the “we” isn’t lost on them. Serves them right for the surprise visit.

My mother grabs my hand and squeezes. “Yes, about that, *mon chou*. Who is your friend?” Her attempt at nonchalance is laughable, and I’m not sure what I want to tell them.

I hate feeling cross-examined and judged, so my response is snappish. “Do you mean the gorgeous naked man upstairs in my bed? That would be my boyfriend, Gunnar.” The kettle

boils and shuts itself off just as the coffee finishes brewing. I use the distraction to collect myself, getting up and walking away from them before I say something I'll regret. I prepare three cups of Earl Grey tea, pour the boiling water into two, leaving a third for when Gunnar wakes. With a deep inhale, I breathe in the citrusy aroma. It calms my jangly nerves and helps me center myself. "Mom, your tea." I set one mug in front of her, pour milk into a small pitcher, and set that down next to her cup. Then I make a cup of coffee for my father and set it down in front of him. "Here's your coffee, dad."

"Thank you, *mon fils*." I squeeze his shoulder and collect my own cup of tea, then sit down again.

That seems to be my mother's cue to resume her interrogation. "So, a boyfriend. That's nice, *mon chou*. Tell us about him. What does he do for a living? Who are his family?"

Feeling like I've been slapped, I round on her indignantly. "Seriously, mom? These are your first questions? Not does he make me happy? Or even where did I meet him? You go straight to asking if he is the right sort." Leave it to her to be perfectly fine with my being gay but overly concerned that I might not pick the right social match.

Water runs through the upstairs pipes, and she looks at the ceiling as if she can see Gunnar. The frown she gives my father is infuriating, and right then, I decide exactly how I will play this. Footsteps sound on the stairs just as she responds. "Of course we care if he makes you happy, *mon chou*. It's just that, well, there is a motorcycle parked in the other parking

space, and he has quite a few tattoos, not that we were looking.”

“Then how did you see them?”

She has the grace to look slightly uncomfortable. “We took our cases upstairs, and your door was open.”

“True. I hadn’t thought I’d need to close it in my own home, when it is just Gunnar and me.”

“Livia.”

Whatever he’s about to say is cut off by a loud yawn before Gunnar shuffles into the kitchen. I don’t bother hiding my grin. I couldn’t have planned this any better if I’d tried. He’s obviously still half asleep and in a perfect state of half-dress. His muscular torso is crisscrossed with fresh love bites and scratch marks, the snug sweatpants from last night ride low on his hips, showing off that gorgeous V that drives me absolutely feral, and his hair and beard are just the right amount of ruffled. I smile and hold out my hand to him. “Good morning, *mon chéri*. How did you sleep?”

Gunnar rubs his eyes sleepily like a little boy, takes my hand, and leans down, kissing me on the top of the head. “Morning, babe. I slept incredibly well. You wore me out.”

At my mother’s sharp intake of breath, Gunnar lightly squeezes my hand, his gaze meeting mine. He raises one eyebrow in question, then steps back to face my parents. “Good morning. I didn’t realize we had company.”

I ignore my mother and choke back a laugh. “As if four hours of sleep isn’t what we’re used to.” Her look morphs from disapproval to horror as the meaning of the exchange sinks in. It’s worth every bit of the earful I’ll inevitably have to sit through. My father tries to hide his smile behind his coffee mug.

“*Mon chéri*, may I introduce my parents?” Gunnar’s eyes dart to mine, and I squeeze his hand reassuringly. “Sorry, it was a surprise visit. This is my mother, Livia, and my father, Guillaume.” I stand and slip my arm around Gunnar’s waist. “*Maman, papa*, this is Gunnar Osouf, my absolutely gorgeous, brilliantly talented boyfriend, who makes me deliriously happy.” Gunnar shakes their hands and looks at me, then down at himself, panic flickering in his eyes.

“Very nice to meet you both. Sorry, I was half asleep when I stumbled downstairs. I didn’t realize there was company.” He kisses my temple. “I’ll go throw on a shirt.”

I sigh, only slightly pretending to be disappointed. He has a beautiful body, and it’s a shame to cover it up. “If you must.”

Gunnar excuses himself, and I turn, pouring hot water into the third mug. Slipping back into French, I face my parents, feeling the need to reinforce boundaries yet again. “So that’s Gunnar. He’s adorable when he first wakes up. He’s like a big bear.” They don’t need to know that this is the first time I’m seeing it, too.

My father smirks. “He has enough facial hair to qualify.”

I raise my brow at him, wondering if he's teasing or has decided to side with *maman*. "Seriously? This is where you have a problem?"

My father shakes his head and is about to say something when he's cut off by my mother. "No, *mon chou*. The problem is we know nothing about him. You still haven't told us anything. And without knowing more, based on what we've seen, I'd guess he's a construction worker or mechanic."

Fists clenched, I take a deep, calming breath. "*Maman*, I love you. Please remember this as I tell you that snobbery isn't an attractive look on you."

Gunnar clears his throat and reenters the kitchen, wearing the tee from last night. It accentuates his muscles and tattoos, and his clenched fists and tight jaw add an air of danger about him. "Sorry if I'm interrupting." The last thing he sounds is sorry.

I glare at my mother. "Not at all." I slip my arms around his waist, and he kisses me softly. He retrieves his tea from the counter and pours a dash of cream into it before addressing my parents. "What brings the two of you to Seattle? Will you be staying long?"

That almost does make me laugh. Leave it to Gunnar to take two innocuous questions and fill them with such disdain.

My father, finally able to get a word in, speaks up. "Livia missed her son and insisted we make a surprise visit. We will be staying here for a few days." My ears perk up. Did 'here' mean here in Seattle or here as in this loft?

Like he's reading my mind, Gunnar addresses the question directly. "Here in the loft or at a hotel?" He doesn't wait for a reply before walking over to the refrigerator and peering inside. "Babe, if your parents are staying, we really need to get to the store. We're out of everything." I almost laugh out loud. At this point, we're already telling people I work with that we've been dating for months. Why not my parents, too? Gunnar turns an innocent look my way.

"Well, you did monopolize most of our free time this past weekend. We barely made it out of the loft. Not that I'm complaining. At all." I wink at him and blow him a kiss.

He flashes me a salacious grin, playing along. "You know I can't resist you."

From the corner of my eye, I see my mother turning eight shades of red and my father laughing quietly. I shrug. "We'll have to make a grocery run at some point today. We need more laundry detergent, too. You're running out of clothes. I don't even know why we have separate houses anymore. We're both always here or there."

Gunnar's eyes sparkle mischievously, sending a quick rush of heat straight to my cock. "Babe, are you asking me to move in with you?" He crosses the kitchen and sweeps me into his arms, kissing me soundly. "Are you sure? I mean, it's kind of a big step. But if you're sure, I'm game. We'll just have to figure out if I should move here, or if you'll move into my house. Or, we find something brand new that's ours."

I'm quite proud of myself for keeping a straight face as I reach out and card my fingers through his hair. "We can talk about it later, *mon chéri*." I kiss him softly before turning to my parents. "Why don't you stay here? I'll stay at Gunnar's house. We're usually there on the weekends anyway, and since I'm on indefinite leave from work, there's no need to be downtown during the week." I don't give my parents time to respond, not that it matters what their answer is. They can stay here, or they can go to a hotel. I've decided I'm going to Gunnar's, regardless. Hopefully, he's on board with that. "Should we go get some breakfast?"

Gunnar looks down at his clothes. "Well, everything I have here is dirty, including what I'm wearing. I probably should head back to my place to shower and change. That might give you some time to catch up with your parents."

Pouting dramatically because, right now, that's the last thing I want, I wrap my arms around his neck and nibble at his ear. "But I don't want you to go. We were going to spend the whole day together."

He smirks and murmurs just loud enough to carry across the room to my parents. "We were going to spend the whole day together in bed, babe. But obviously those plans have changed."

My father laughs and covers it with a cough. "Why don't you two go to Gunnar's? Your *maman* and I will go to the grocery store and stock up on items to get us through the next few days. We can all meet up for dinner later."

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” I glance at Gunnar to see where he is with this plan. “I’ll throw a few things into an overnight bag, and we can gather your dirty clothes and do laundry at your place. You can feed me when we get there.” I smooth my hands across Gunnar’s chest and drop my voice seductively. “I’m starving.” Gunnar growls, low and soft, and damn, it goes straight to my cock. I’m not sure if I want to laugh or devour him. Both? Definitely both. At the same time.

My mother clears her throat and stands, a fake smile plastered to her face as she addresses my father in French. “Guillaume, why don’t we head out now? Jocelin, *mon chou*, we will call you later and let you know when and where to meet us.”

Without hesitation, I correct her in front of Gunnar. If she is going to be so overtly rude, I can be as well. “In English, *maman*.”

She turns her fake smile to Gunnar. “It was lovely to meet you, Gunnar. I guess we’ll see you both later.” She sweeps out of the room, leaving my father to make a proper goodbye.

He takes my hand and squeezes it firmly, giving me a wink. “Don’t be too hard on her, Jocelin. She loves you, and only wants what’s best for you.” Turning to Gunnar, he holds out his hand. Gunnar hesitates and then grasps it, and I let out the breath I’ve been holding. “Gunnar, this has truly been a pleasure. I look forward to getting to know you better. Please don’t let my wife’s behavior put you off. She means well. It’s the execution that needs work.” He looks between us and

smiles. “*I think you are very good for my son.*” And with that, he turns and follows my mother out of the kitchen.

Gunnar

“You are trying to starve me to death. I know it.” Jocelin stretches lazily, draping himself over my chest. His dramatics make me laugh because it’s so different from how he usually is, and it’s kind of cute.

I ghost my fingertips along his bare back, and he arches into my touch like a cat. “As I recall, you were the one pressing himself against *me* on the ride home. And I believe it was your hand working me up while we sped down the highway.” I tap him on the tip of his nose. “A very dangerous move, I might add. And who was it that yanked their clothes off and walked naked through my house? Oh yes, that was also you. And I’m sorry babe, but I’m only human. You, naked? Yeah, that’s gonna pull my attention away from anything else, including feeding starving boyfriends, every time. Soooo... technically, you’re the cause of your own hunger.”

Jocelin nuzzles into my beard and sighs. “I can’t seem to help myself. I am always hungry for you.”

I laugh and smack his ass. “Enough. You’re trying to kill me. Three times in less than twenty-four hours—on very little food or sleep—is all you get. At least until I get one or the other.” I kiss his forehead. “But we probably should get moving. We have a lot to do before we meet your parents for dinner.”

Jocelin sighs. “Yes, I probably should find a hotel. I don’t really feel like sleeping on the couch in my office until my parents leave.”

“Wait, why would you need to do that?” I do my best to stay relaxed and keep my voice casual in case wanting him here seems too needy. “No sense spending money on a hotel when you’ll be here most of the time. Or with your parents.”

Jocelin pushes up on his elbows and frowns at me. “I said that to annoy my mother. I wouldn’t want to impose. Also, neither of us is used to living with someone, and I don’t want to put a strain on things while it’s still new.”

I take a deep breath to slow down the hammering of my heart. The thought of having him stay here in my space is scary, but not having him here, and knowing he could be, feels infinitely worse. And *that* is the truly frightening part. “Well, we could maybe kind of consider this a test. You know, to see if we could ever legitimately live together. At some point in the future, of course.” I focus on forcing air into my lungs as I wait for his response. If I’m honest, I’ll give way too much weight to whichever choice he makes. And the longer he takes to answer, the deeper my worry gets.

He toys with the hairs on my chest. “Would you want to live together? At some point.”

Before I overthink it, I answer honestly. “Yes. More than I probably should.” Sooner than I probably should, too. But it’s par for the course in our relationship. Everything has been faster than typical. But I wouldn’t change a thing. Being with him makes me happy. I feel grounded in a way that I never have. And he knows about my past, but he isn’t *part* of it. Yeah, he’s heard about my fuckups and surly behavior, but he seems to be giving me the benefit of having grown up and learned from my mistakes. That means more than I can ever quantify. “So, will you stay here with me? I’d like you to stay.”

Jocelin studies my face for a long time, and I prepare myself for his no. Then a small smile starts at the corner of his mouth, spreading until it eventually lights up his entire face. “Yes. I will stay here with you until my parents leave.”

Relief washes through me, and I squeeze him tightly. “Good.” I take a moment and hold him against me, pressing my nose into his soft hair, breathing him in. “We really need to get moving, though. Do we have any idea where or when we’re meeting your parents for dinner?”

Jocelin pushes up onto his elbows. “No and no, but if I had to guess, somewhere criminally expensive and very late. According to my mother, the average dinner time is seven-thirty or eight o’clock at night. Real people don’t eat before

then.” He frowns. “I certainly hope they don’t expect to eat on eastern time.”

That makes me laugh. “So, I guess I’m not real people.” I pull my fingers through my hair and groan. “I’m gonna have to wear a suit, aren’t I?” It’s a rhetorical question. I already know the answer. “Fuuuuuck.” I wrap my arms around him and roll so he’s under me. “The things I do for you.” Then I remember my new suit is at the dry cleaner. “Fuck. I probably should see what I have in my closet. The navy one is at the cleaners.”

“Is that your only suit?” He sounds partly scandalized and partly awestruck.

I laugh again. “No, but I don’t have many. In fact, I only have three, and I’m not really sure if the third one even fits anymore. I rarely wear them for work.”

His face lights up, and his lips quirk into an eager smile. “Let’s see. You can give me a fashion show.”

I groan and drop my forehead to his. “Do I have to?”

“Yes. Come on.” Pushing me until I roll off him, he bounds out of bed and heads right for my closet. The sound of hangers sliding on the crossbar is accompanied by Jocelin’s running commentary of gasps and tisks of disapproval. “*Mon chéri*, your wardrobe is...”

“A disaster? A disgrace? Horrifying?” Chuckling, I haul myself out of bed to stand in front of my closet. “Why do you think Astrid took me shopping before Gary’s event? I’m not

big on shopping or fashion.” He walks out of my closet and places his hands against my chest, looking up at me with his soft, brown puppy eyes, and I groan. I feel a shopping trip in my future. “Gunnar, will you let me do something for you?”

“I thought we just covered that. I may be young, but I still have a refractory period. Give me some time to recover.”

Jocelin swats my chest and laughs. “You know that isn’t what I meant.”

I shrug. “Well, then I guess it depends on what the ‘something’ is.”

“Let me take you shopping.”

He bites his lower lip and furrows his perfect brows, and I throw my hands up in defeat. “Fine. But last time, it took a few days for the tailor to fit the suit.” It doesn’t take a genius to know that his parents would completely disapprove of an off-the-rack suit, not to mention I’m not your average off-the-rack size.

He nods. “It must be a very exceptional suit to wear *tonight*. Which means we need an exceptional tailor who can work fast. I happen to know just the person.”

Groaning dramatically, I pull him into my arms and kiss the tip of his nose. “Only for you. I suppose I should get a haircut and a shave, too.”

He rears back, horrified. “Don’t you dare!” He drags his fingers through my beard. “I love your facial hair just how it is. And I like how long your hair is getting. Have you ever

considered growing it much longer?” He gives it a little tug. “You’d look really sexy with it pulled up in a messy bun.”

I pinch his hip. “I look really sexy regardless.”

“True.” He leers at me, waggling his eyebrows. “But if it was longer, I’d have something to hold on to.”

I laugh. “Okay. No haircut and no touching the beard. Tell Astrid you like it that way, though. And it grows pretty fast, so it will be grippable in a few months.”

Jocelin hums appreciatively. “Definitely let your hair grow. The beard is good right where it is, I think. Any longer, and you’ll start to look like a recluse. But I like it full, not just scruff.”

“Noted.” I tap my phone and check the time. “If we’re getting a new suit, we’re going to have to make that happen quickly. We should get a move on.”

With a flirty smirk, he drapes his arms over my shoulders. “We could save time and shower together.”

I smack his ass. “Don’t start with your seductions. Go.” I point to the bathroom. “I’ll round up some food. You can eat while I shower, and then we’ll get going.”

“Fine.” In a final attempt at seduction, he stretches his arms over his head, arching his slender, toned body against me.

I stifle a groan and pull on a pair of sweats. “You have a beautiful body, Joce.” I smack his ass again. “But get in the shower!”

Gunnar

Jocelin steps up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. “You look edible in dark gray. Thank you for buying this.”

I lean back against him and kiss his temple. “You’re welcome. You have exceptional taste in clothing. And boyfriends.” Jocelin snorts. “Would you hand me my cufflinks, babe?”

He gives me one more squeeze and walks to my dresser, pulling the sterling silver *Ægishjálmr* shields from their velvet box, depositing them in my hand. I roll them around my palm. “Thank you for these as well. I love them.”

“You are welcome. How could we not get them? It’s *Ægishjálmr*.”

I slip them through the French cuffs of my sky-blue dress shirt and reach for my tie. “Since you are the expert, would you like to help me with this?”

Jocelin smirks, takes the offered plum-colored silk, and stands in front of me. With minimal effort, he wraps the fabric around my neck in an intricate knot. “This brings back fond memories.”

I settle my hands on his hips and squeeze gently. “Good ones.” The warm, citrusy smell of his cologne and his soft breath against my skin calm the nervousness I was beginning to feel. He steps back, and I survey the tie in the mirror. “What’s this one called?”

“A Balthus knot.” He helps me into my jacket and smooths the fabric over my shoulders. “You look incredible.” I smile at him in the mirror. “Are you nervous?”

I shrug. “Maybe a bit. I’m not used to dealing with parents. I haven’t had much practice.” Guillaume and Livia are important to Jocelin, and that makes them important to me, like it or not.

“Just be yourself. Everything will be fine.”

I look at my reflection in the mirror and shake my head. “Your tailor truly deserves the title of best in the city for altering this so beautifully and so fast.”

Jocelin nods. “He does amazing work. I’ve known him for years. He’s good people, and I’m always happy to send whatever business I can his way.”

I stand next to Jocelin and admire us in the full-length mirror. “I’d say we look quite dashing together.”

He beams. “We do. Your dark gray complements my dark plum beautifully.”

With a quick wink at him in the reflection, I turn to ogle him from behind. “Mmm. I’m going to have trouble keeping my eyes off your ass. The cut of those trousers is perfect. Reminds me how good you look out of them.”

Grinning, he adjusts the collar of his paisley dress shirt, making sure the oriental knot of his black, narrow tie sits properly. “I think we’re ready.”

“Not quite.”

Jocelin looks at me in the mirror. “What’s left?”

I drag my hand through my hair and bite my lip. “I got you something.”

He turns away from the mirror and looks directly at me. “Gunnar, you didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I wanted to. And when I saw them, I thought of you and, well, I had to buy them.” I pull a small box out of the top drawer of my dresser and offer it to him, glad that my hands aren’t shaking too badly.

His eyes sparkle with excitement, and his grin is adorable. I hold my breath as he slowly opens the lid. When he stares at the contents, not moving or saying anything, I clear my throat and run my hand through my hair again. “If you don’t like them, I can take them back.” Jocelin looks up, wide-eyed, and blinks rapidly, shaking his head. His sweet smile gives me hope that I chose well. “Do you like them?”

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me down, pressing his forehead to mine. “I love them. I absolutely love them. They are beautiful and will remind me of you. Thank you.” I huff a sigh of relief and hold him tightly until he sniffs and steps back, futzing with my collar. “Look, I’ve rumbled you.” I shrug but keep my arms around him. Nothing else matters because Jocelin loves his gift, and it made him the good kind of emotional.

He gently removes the two small, silver hoops from the box and works them into his ears, looking at himself in the mirror. “*Jörmungandr!* Like the tattoo around your wrist.” His eyes sparkle. “It’s been a while since I’ve worn earrings in front of my mother.”

“I noticed the piercings, and I figured I’d take a chance that you still wore them. I haven’t seen you wear any, though.”

He nods. “My mother hates my pierced ears. She thinks it’s unprofessional.”

I squeeze him again. “I think you look very professional... but maybe with a bad-boy streak. It’s very sexy.” I kiss his neck. “I’m not going to be able to keep my hands to myself.”

“It was my one act of youthful rebellion. Well, other than moving to the U.S.” He leans against me. “I love them. They are gorgeous.” Shaking his head from side to side, he watches them in the mirror. “I love how they catch the light.” He turns and presses his lips to mine, and all my nerves settle with that one kiss. “Thank you, *mon chéri.*”

“You’re welcome.” I kiss the tip of his nose. “Now I think we’re ready.”

We opt to take the car, and the drive to the restaurant is quiet. I want to be confident and unworried, but Jocelin’s mother definitely doesn’t think I’m good enough for her son, and I wish that didn’t hurt as much as it does. I take comfort in the firm grip of Jocelin’s hand in mine and his reassuring smile. “Gunnar, it won’t change anything if it doesn’t go well. My parents will leave in a few days, and our lives will go back to being what they were before they arrived.”

I don’t disagree. I’ve actually considered the same thing. But if he’s thinking it too, then things are worse than I imagined. “Absolutely. No big deal.” It feels like a big deal, though, and I can’t seem to figure out how to change that. I pull up in front of the restaurant, and the valet opens our doors. Handing over my keys, I meet Jocelin on the other side of the car and take his offered hand. “Ready?” He nods, and we walk into the restaurant, our bodies close as we approach the maître d’.

“Good evening sirs. How may I help you?”

Jocelin squeezes my hand. “I believe there is a reservation for four under Allard.”

The maître d’ nods and gestures into the dining room. “Very good, sirs. The rest of your party is already seated. Please follow me, and I’ll take you to your table.”

As predicted, Jocelin’s parents chose the most exclusive restaurant in the city. *Le Grand Jeu* is known for excellent French cuisine, expensive wines, and tasteful decor. At least

tonight I don't have to worry about food so spicy I'll sweat through my suit.

The maître d' escorts us to the table, where Guillaume and Livia are enjoying cocktails. It might be my nerves or the seed of what Jocelin planted in my mind earlier, but it certainly feels like they're appraising my outfit. I'm now very grateful Jocelin insisted we go through the hassle of buying and tailoring a new suit.

As we approach the table, Guillaume stands, pulling Jocelin into a hug, kissing his temple in another unexpected gesture of true affection. Jocelin smiles and moves around the table to Livia, leaning down to kiss her on both cheeks. "Good evening, *maman*. You look lovely."

Disapproval radiates from her as her gaze locks on his earlobes. "Earrings, *mon chou*?"

Jocelin winks at me. "Gunnar got them for me. Aren't they beautiful?"

Livia purses her lips, and her voice drips with sarcasm. "*Charmant*."

I step forward, extending my hand to Guillaume. "Mr. Allard, good evening." His grip is firm but not overpowering, and he offers me a smile that seems genuine. I had expected a crushing grip and a glare, but I'm pleasantly surprised. I greet Livia, who presents her hand. Taking it, I bend forward to kiss her knuckles. "Mrs. Allard, you are radiant this evening." A quick flash of surprise crosses her otherwise inscrutable face, and I mentally flip her off for her snobby assumptions. Jocelin

takes the seat directly to Livia's right, briefly squeezing my hand under the table as I settle into the chair next to him.

Our waiter appears with menus, and describes the specials, then disappears into the background. With a smile, Guillaume hands me the wine list. "Gunnar, would you pick something for us? Red or white, doesn't matter which." I briefly review the selections, wondering if this is a test of some kind, or if it's Guillaume's way of including me. Thankfully, I've picked up a few things from Tadhg and Quinn. At least enough to make this choice simple.

"How was your shopping trip, *maman*?" Livia responds to Jocelin with innocuous comments about adequate food options and missing brands from home.

When the waiter appears, I hand him the wine list. "We'll have the Celestial Cabernet Sauvignon from Jupiter Winery." I catch Jocelin's smirk from the corner of my eye and fight the urge to wink.

"Very good, sir. An excellent choice. The sommelier will be by shortly with your wine." The waiter drifts off to retrieve the bottle.

Guillaume nods his approval. "I've heard excellent things about Jupiter Winery. And cabernet is one of my favorites. I look forward to tasting it."

Livia turns to me, ignoring her menu. "Gunnar, what is it you do?"

I smirk and consider telling her I'm a bike mechanic just to watch her lose her shit, but for Jocelin's sake, I want her acceptance, so I need to behave. "I'm an architect, ma'am."

"And who do you work for?" I don't know if it's the suit or her attitude, but this feels very much like a job interview for a position I'm not qualified for, and everyone knows it.

Jocelin glares at her. "*Maman!*"

I take his hand and squeeze, but my eyes never leave Livia's. "Nah, it's fine Joce." Grinning, I watch her twitch at the nickname. "I work for MRB Concepts. It's a local architectural firm, owned by Tadhg Byrne, Quinn MacDougall, and Tom Randall. They focus on high-end single family homes and properties." I turn my attention to Guillaume. "They actually designed the facilities at Jupiter Winery. Quinn's brother is one of the owners."

Livia cuts off any answer her husband might have made. "I've never heard of them."

"And do you know the names of many architectural firms, *maman?*" Jocelin's voice is tinged with annoyance. "Tadhg actually designed the master bath in the loft. He's had many articles written about him and has a stellar reputation. MRB is a sought-after firm, and Tadhg has told me personally that they are thrilled to have Gunnar working with them."

I'm speechless. Not in a million years did I expect Jocelin to defend me like that to his mom, and my chest aches with gratitude and affection. Astrid and Tom have always had my back, but this... I have no words, and I'm a little choked up. I

clear my throat and address Livia, though I can't stop smiling at Jocelin. "Tadhg has taught me so much since I've been working with him. Any promise I have is a direct result of his tutelage."

She waves her hand in dismissal and turns back to her menu. "Nonsense. If Jocelin says you have talent, then you have talent." I feel like I can't win here. "Where did you study?"

The sommelier appears with our wine and uncorks it, offering me a sample. I don't roll my eyes, but it's close. I cursorily go through the motions of smelling and tasting the sample before nodding my approval, then return my focus to Livia, letting the sommelier pour for everyone.

"I received both my undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Washington."

Guillaume sets down his menu, and for the first time this evening, takes an interest in the conversation. "Ah! Where Jocelin earned his *Juris Doctor*. What made you choose to go there?"

"I earned a scholarship, and my family is from the area."

Guillaume actually looks impressed. "I'm sure your parents are very proud of you."

For a moment, everything stops as my emotions fly from hurt to anger to bitterness and then resignation. I smile, though it probably looks as forced as it feels. "My dad died when I was thirteen, and my mom was killed when I was seventeen.

But I'd like to think they'd be proud of the person I've become."

The table goes silent, and Jocelin squeezes my hand. "I'm certain they would be. I know I am. And I'm very proud to be with you." He lifts my hand and presses my knuckles to his lips.

Guillaume clears his throat. "I'm so very sorry, Gunnar. That must have been quite difficult for you."

I nod. This is not the dinner conversation I imagined we'd have, but here we are. And I'm not going to shy away from it. "It was. It was difficult for all of us. Me and my brothers and sister."

"*Papa*, you remember me telling you about my friend Astrid. She and Gunnar are twins."

Guillaume smiles at Jocelin, obviously grateful for the change in topic. "Ah! So is that how you two met?"

I have no idea which details of our initial meeting Jocelin might want to share with his parents, so I take the opportunity to look over the menu and let him answer.

He seems to understand and jumps in. "We met at a book event for Gary Atkinson's latest novel. Astrid is his editor. Gunnar and I hit it off immediately and have barely been apart since." Jocelin's beautiful face turns a soft shade of pink, and it's utterly charming. I caress his jaw, and he turns his face into my touch, pressing his lips to my palm in a soft kiss. I don't look at his parents, mostly because I don't care what they

think about these brief displays of affection. Screw them if they don't like it.

Our discussion halts again as the waiter appears to take our orders. The atmosphere around the table is more relaxed after the interruption, and the conversation goes much better.

“So, *papa*, how is business?”

“Currently, it's good. The economy is doing well, and the government seems to be playing nice for the moment, so financial markets are up. The latest crop of analysts is as frustrating as ever. Not a standout in the bunch. But the older generation always thinks that of the younger generation, no?” A fond look passes between father and son, and I find myself liking Guillaume even more despite his wife.

“So, Mr. Allard, what is it you do?”

Livia bristles, but Guillaume seems to take no offense at my ignorance. “I own a global investment company in Quebec.” He winks at Jocelin. “I had thought perhaps my son might follow me into the field. He always had a gift for finance. But he found his passion in law, and I am very proud of him for being true to himself.” He turns his attention to me. “I have never been able to deny my son what makes him truly happy.”

Meeting his gaze, I nod, feeling the weight of the evening lift from my shoulders. Is that his way of giving his approval? I glance at Livia, who shrugs and looks affectionately at her son. “Jocelin, your happiness has always been what is truly important.”

When I look over to Jocelin, he's staring at his drink but smiling. He lifts his gaze to me, trying to blink away tears, and places his hand, palm up, on the table between us. Without hesitation, I take it, wondering what I've missed. Jocelin squeezes once but doesn't let go, and neither do I. I'm perfectly happy to hold his hand anytime. "Okay, babe?" He nods and smiles.

Our dinner conversation flows smoothly, and by the time we finish dessert, the topic has meandered back to me.

Livia stirs cream into her tea. "Gunnar, Jocelin has told us about Astrid. She is your twin? And you mentioned brothers. How many?"

"Two. Both are older. My oldest brother, Bjorn, is a police officer."

Jocelin interjects. "He's a member of Seattle's S.W.A.T. team."

"Yes. He's training to go into hostage negotiations. And my other brother, Erik, runs a Seattle-based hiking and camping tour company with his fiancé."

Jocelin chuckles. "We have quite the family dinner each week. There are seven of us, usually. And it's rowdy and fun... and the food! *Maman*, you would love the cooking. Everyone makes the most amazing dishes. And the wine!"

I turn to Livia. "I swear, Jocelin and Bjorn are both trying to kill me with the spicy dishes."

Jocelin interrupts excitedly. “He’s going to make something authentically Indian for us this Sunday.”

Wincing, I press my hand to my chest. “God help me. Hopefully there are more mild dishes involved.”

I’m startled when she reaches out and places her hand on my arm. “A glass of milk will cool the heat, if it’s too spicy.” Livia leans back in her seat and sips her tea.

The gesture is shocking, given her earlier behavior, but I can’t deny the relief and very tiny kernel of hope growing in my chest. “Thank you. I’ll remember that.”

“So, you grew up in Seattle? Which part?” And with one question, my wariness is back.

I squeeze Jocelin’s hand, and he squeezes back. “I grew up in Duval. It’s about twenty-five miles northeast of Seattle.”

He turns to his mother. “It’s the kind of place you think of when you imagine a small town. Lots of mom and pop shops, the old time clock on main street, and it’s close to Seattle but not so close that you feel stifled. Gunnar’s brother and his fiancé live out that way.” Then he focuses on me again like he’s orchestrating the conversation. “I know you said you moved to Yarrow Point after you inherited your mother’s house there.”

Livia’s eyes take on a gleam of interest. “What was your mother’s family name, if that’s not too bold?”

I give her my full attention. “Jacobi. Her father was Aristide Jacobi.”

“Ah, interesting.”

I can see her mentally filing the information away, and I’m sure she’ll be researching my family in her next spare moment. I shrug it off because none of that is important. I never met the man, and from what I heard, he was an asshole. No one worth anything disowns their child because of who they choose to be with.

Before the conversation can take yet another turn, Jocelin yawns behind his hand. “I’m afraid lack of sleep is catching up with me.” He looks between his parents. “*Papa, maman*, thank you for a lovely meal. I think we are going to head out now, though.”

“Yes, thank you both. It was very nice of you to include me.” I’m incredibly relieved that the evening is almost over. I’m tired, and now that I’ve gone to sleep and woken up with Jocelin in my arms, all I want is to curl up with him and sleep for days.

Guillaume puts down his empty coffee cup. “It’s been quite a long day for us as well.” Once the bill is settled, we make our way to the lobby. Jocelin kisses and hugs his parents, and I hold my hand out to Guillaume. He grasps it, pulling me into his strong embrace. “I’m very glad we had a chance to get to know you, Gunnar. You obviously make my son happy, and that’s all I ask.”

He lets me go, and to my complete surprise, Livia wraps her arms around me in a less intense, but still warm, embrace. “Be good to my boy.” Her tone isn’t hostile, but it’s not warm and

fuzzy. Since it's probably as close as I'll get to actual approval from her, I'll take it.

She slips her arm around Jocelin's waist and kisses his hair. "*Mon chou*, we'll be in town for a few more days. Why don't we try to get together again before we leave? Maybe for dinner? You could invite your friend Astrid."

Jocelin nods. "Sounds good. Either Gunnar or I will ask her tomorrow. Perhaps Gary can join us, too."

I take Jocelin's hand. "That should work for us. Thank you both again. We'll see you soon." I gently guide him outside, and hand the ticket to the valet, wrapping Jocelin in my arms while we wait for the car. "I guess that went well."

He relaxes into me, resting his temple against my cheek. "Better than I'd hoped. Thank you for putting up with all of this. I know it was probably the last thing you wanted to do."

I kiss the side of his head and pull back so he can see my face. "They are your parents, and they obviously love you very much. They just want to make sure you aren't dating some delinquent." I lean in, pressing my forehead to his. "And there really isn't anything I wouldn't do for you." Jocelin brushes his lips to mine in a soft, tender kiss, stealing my breath away. The sound of a throat clearing brings an end to the sweet moment. Stepping back, I meet Livia's amused gaze. Guillaume, however, is ignoring us in favor of ogling my car. "Is that a classic Mustang?"

I grin. "Yes. It was my dad's."

Guillaume nods. “Beautiful car. Incredible condition. You don’t find too many on the road that are still this stunning.”

“Thank you, Guillaume. I do my best to take care of her.”

Jocelin slips his arm around my waist. “Gunnar can fix it himself. He knows all about cars and how to repair them.”

Guillaume raises a brow and smiles, obviously amused by Jocelin’s pride in my mechanic skills. “Is that so? Very impressive.”

A Mercedes with a rental logo on the windshield pulls up behind the Mustang, and Jocelin kisses his parents one more time before they leave. Once again, the ride home is relatively silent. We’re tired, both from the stress of the past few days and from lack of sleep. Jocelin yawns and reclines his seat. “I think I’m going to pass out for a week.” He closes his eyes and reaches for my hand.

I lace our fingers together, enjoying how right it feels to be with him. “Do you want to hang out at my house tomorrow? I can see if Tadhg will let me work from home after lunch. Or do you think you’re going to go do something with your parents?”

“If it’s okay with you, I think I’ll hang out at your place, even if you can’t work from home. I’ll watch TV or something. Maybe read. I’m not sure I can take more of my parents so soon.”

I squeeze his fingers, loving the idea of Jocelin in my house, like he belongs there. “I’d like that.”

I don't bother to turn on any lights as we step into the house, feeling for Jocelin's hand in the dark and guiding us through the labyrinth of living room furniture and up the stairs to my room. He swaps his suit for sweats and a T-shirt and sighs contentedly. "There is nothing better than changing into comfortable clothes after dressing up."

Forgoing anything but my boxer briefs, I follow Jocelin into the bathroom to brush my teeth. I chuckle as he straightens the toothpaste tube, forcing all the paste to the top. It's little things like this that I love learning about him. I want to know what makes him tick, what makes him... him. His staying here will afford me that opportunity, and I can't wait.

Back in the bedroom, I cock an eyebrow at him as he slips into the right side of the bed. He shrugs. "I need to sleep on the side nearest the bathroom."

I chuckle tiredly. "No problem. I'm adaptable." He buries himself in the down comforter and multitude of blankets, making a little nest. Dropping my boxer briefs to the floor, I slip between the sheets, snuggling up behind him. "I love holding you like this, falling asleep with you pressed against me."

Jocelin hums happily. "I love that, too. It makes me feel all cozy and safe."

I reach over him to turn off the bedside lamp, pulling him close as I settle back onto the mattress. "I think it went well tonight. Better than expected."

He rolls over and settles against my chest. “Yes. I’d say it definitely went better than I feared it would. Thank you for putting up with them. Though I don’t know why you did.”

I want to tell him I did it for him. That I’d do it over and over again because I want him to be happy, and I want him in my life. And they are a part of his life, so that means they’ll be a part of mine. Instead, I take a deep breath and fight against unexpected emotions. “You are very important to me, Joce. I would do anything for you.”

There is no immediate response, and I wonder if I said too much. Maybe I’m going too fast. Then Jocelin’s fingers dig into my beard and cup my jaw. “Gunnar.” There’s a tightness in his voice, and worry constricts my chest. Gentle lips softly caress mine. It’s undemanding and unexpected but absolutely perfect, and the ache in my chest eases.

I cup his cheek, surprised at the wetness under my palm. “Are you okay, baby?”

Jocelin nods against my hand. “Yes. It must be the stress and adrenaline catching up with me. I’m fine.”

I kiss his forehead and tighten my arms around him. “It’s been a rough few days. Close your eyes, and try to sleep. I’ll keep you safe.”

He snuggles against me and sighs. “Night, *mon chéri*.”

“Night.” I lie there and breathe in Jocelin’s scent, happier than I’ve been in such a long time, and it’s completely because of the sweet, kind man in my arms. I nuzzle into his hair, his

soft snores sounding like gentle purrs, and I wonder at what point I lost my heart to him. And isn't that frightening. That's a lot of power for one person to have over me. But it's too late now. I can only hope that he takes care of it, like I want to take care of him. And maybe someday, he'll gift me with his heart in return. I drift to sleep, wrapped around the man I've fallen in love with, and hope I don't screw this up.

Jocelin

The blaring of an unfamiliar alarm jolts me awake, and I slap my hand to my chest in surprise. Only it's not my chest I make contact with. It takes a moment for my sleepy brain to realize it's Gunnar's arm slung across me and Gunnar's obnoxious alarm beeping incessantly. I shake him. "Gunnar. Your alarm is going off."

Grumbles and grunts are his only response. He pulls me closer, tucking me into his body, but he makes no move to turn off the alarm. Now wide awake, I stare at his chest, absolutely stunned by his lack of attention to the alarm. I shake him harder. "Gunnar. Your alarm." He grunts again and rolls over, slapping at his phone, silencing the noise before rolling back and nuzzling into my neck, seemingly going back to sleep. I shake him again. "Gunnar. Your alarm went off. Don't you have to get up?"

"No. I hit snooze. Shhhh." He wraps me in a tangle of arms and legs.

“*Saint-ciboire*... Gunnar. You need to get up. Your alarm went off.”

Instead, he burrows into my neck. “I’ll get up with the next one.”

“*Ostie*, you’re a snooze-abuser.” This is not going to work for me at all. “Are you saying you set your alarm with the sole purpose of hitting the snooze button? How many times?”

The reply is muffled by my neck and the pillow. “Once.”

“Really?” Somehow I don’t believe him.

“...ish.”

I bite my lip because he is not amusing and laughter will only encourage him. “Once-ish? Is that even a thing?”

Gunnar sighs and flops onto his back. “Okay. I’m up.” He rubs his eyes with his knuckles and lets his arms drop back onto the bed like this whole thing has exhausted him.

I elbow him gently. “That makes two of us. But only one of us needs to be up.” I take a deep breath and remember that it was my choice to stay here.

He groans and pulls me against him. “Sorry, baby. Tomorrow I’ll get up with the first alarm. Can I have a kiss anyway?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I will kiss your cheek. I’m absolutely certain we both have morning breath, and that’s... well, icky.” With a quick peck to his cheek, I roll out of bed and pad to the bathroom. Grabbing the toothpaste, I squeeze some onto my

brush, then recap it and push the remaining toothpaste to the top of the tube.

Gunnar hollers from the bedroom. “So I take it you’re one of those people who wakes up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed from the moment they roll out of bed.”

I brush my teeth, rinse my mouth, clean out the sink, and use the toilet. After washing my hands, I go back into the bedroom and finally answer his question. “I suppose. I’m not exactly a poor sleeper, but I do sleep lightly. And once my brain kicks in, that’s it. I’m up.”

Gunnar nods silently and presses the heels of his palms into his eye sockets. “So, let’s say you don’t have to get up in the morning. What constitutes sleeping in for you?”

“Oh, I’ve been known to sleep until eight in the morning when I’m really tired.” That makes Gunnar chuckle, which turns into a laugh, and then he’s overcome with a full-blown laughing fit. “Gunnar, are you okay?”

He nods and tries to get himself under control. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. Sorry. I just have a boyfriend who’s a morning person.”

I drop onto the bed next to him and prop my head in my hand. “I take it you are not?”

“Oh, god no. If I could sleep until noon every day, I would. I can also nap at the drop of a hat. It’s a male Osof gift. Astrid complains about it, but I know she’s just jealous.”

I snort. “Oh, I’m sure that’s exactly what it is. It couldn’t be because you’re wasting the day away with sleep.”

“No, that’s just the excuse she uses.” His alarm goes off again, and he fumbles to silence it. With a groan of protest, he rolls toward me, burying his face in my chest. “Take a shower with me?” He slides a hand around my hip and squeezes my ass.

“I don’t think Tadhg would really understand if you were late for work today, since you played hooky yesterday. So I’m going to have to decline. But you shower, and I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

Gunnar grumbles against my skin, but he rolls away and stands, swaying a bit. “Deal.” He stumbles off toward the bathroom, and I make the bed, then go downstairs to the kitchen, fumbling for a light switch as I avoid shin-high obstacles along the way. I find the electric kettle and fill it, turning it on before rummaging through cupboards in search of mugs, tea, and spoons.

Gunnar may have been scandalized to find that I’m a morning person, but it’s equally disconcerting to discover that he is a slugabed who squeezes the toothpaste tube from the middle. He probably leaves his clothes on the floor and dirty dishes in the sink. It doesn’t dim my smile, though, because who cares? After such a long time of wanting and waiting, I finally have someone to fight with about the silly stuff. And that’s all it is—silly, unimportant stuff. We’ll figure it out and compromise and come up with a system that works for us

both. It's what you do when you love someone. Not that I love him. Which is not to say that I couldn't love him. But it's way too fast for love. Isn't it?

The kettle clicks off, and I jump, startled out of my thoughts. I prepare the tea and carefully carry the mugs back to Gunnar's bedroom in time to see him exiting the bathroom, towel slung low around his hips. I don't even bother to hide my appreciation as I set the mugs on the nightstand. "Nice outfit. Just cream, right?"

Gunnar groans and hurries across the room, hands outstretched toward the mug. "Oh, god. Joce, you are a treasure." He takes the cup from me, blowing on the tea to cool it before sipping tentatively. "Perfect." He cups my jaw and strokes his thumb across my cheek. "Sorry I woke you. I'll get up tomorrow. I promise." He leans down and softly kisses me. "And I'll make it up to you later."

He kisses the words into my lips, and I can't hide my smile. "I'll hold you to that."

"Mmmm." One more quick peck, and he turns toward his dresser. "I'm going to try to work from home this afternoon, but I can't make any promises. I'm not sure what projects we're going to get and what Tadhg has planned. But I'll try. Just make yourself at home. Snoop around. Open cupboards and look under lids. I want you to be comfortable here, just like you're at your place. Okay?"

"Alright, *mon chéri*. I'll probably read or something. Don't worry about me." Gunnar walks to his closet, I assume to pick

out what he's wearing to work. "You don't do that the night before?"

He glances at me over his shoulder. "Do what?"

I blink. "Pick your clothes for the next day so you don't stress about it in the morning."

Gunnar turns and stares at me. "I take it that's what you do?"

I nod. "Yes. It cuts down on the morning pressure."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "Well, you probably have to care a lot more about what you wear to work than I do. Plus, I'm not really that into clothes. If I could wear the same thing every day, I'd love it. Then I wouldn't have to think about it at all."

I stare at him, stunned, as he turns back around and seems to pull random pieces of clothing from the closet. He dresses, and I'm shocked when his outfit coordinates and doesn't look as haphazard as his selection process suggests. "Okay, I'm off. Anything you'd like me to pass along to Tadhg when I see him?"

"No. Thanks. Do you still want to call Astrid and ask her about dinner with my parents? Or should I?"

"I can. Though you'll probably be talking to her today, too. Maybe mention it in case you talk to her first."

I hum contentedly as Gunnar softly presses his lips against mine. "Have a good day, *mon chéri*. Drive safely."

Gunnar winks and leaves the bedroom, whistling as he moves through the house. When the door from the kitchen to the garage shuts, and the outer garage door opens, I head for the bathroom to take my own shower and shave. Then I'll have breakfast. That's as far as my plan goes, and I'm feeling good about it.

Gunnar

I drop my coat over my chair and turn on my laptop, thankful that I haven't yet run into Tadhg. I need more caffeine before I get into the details of the past two days with him. I'm just taking my first sip of tea when Tom pokes his head in the kitchen. "Thought I heard you come in. How's Jocelin?"

"He's alright. Had a bit of a shock, but overall he's doing much better." My cheeks burn, and Tom steps into the room, giving me his full attention.

"I know that look. Spill it, Osouf. No mincing words." He leans against the counter and crosses his arms over his broad chest.

I shrug. "What am I supposed to say?"

"Well, let's start with your blush." My cheeks heat again, and I sip my tea so I can look at something other than his all-too-knowing eyes. "Yes, that one. What's that about?" He's wearing a shit-eating grin, so I'm certain he already has a good idea.

Before I can answer, Tadhg steps into the kitchen. ‘How is Jocelin?’

‘He’s doing much better. It was a bit of a shock at first, but he’s past that and more curious about what really happened.’

‘So he’s on leave for now?’ I nod. ‘Well, hopefully he doesn’t lock himself in his loft. He should get out and keep himself busy.’

I rub my neck and feel my cheeks blazing. With my somewhat slow ASL, I manage to explain. ‘He’s not actually staying at his place. His parents came into town, so they’re staying there.’ Under the intensity of their expectant stares, I cave. ‘He’s staying with me while they’re in town.’

Tom frowns. ‘Why didn’t his parents just get a hotel room instead of making him find someplace to go?’

Tadhg gestures to get his attention. ‘I believe what Gunnar isn’t saying is that he and Jocelin have taken the next step in their relationship.’ He turns to face me, smirk firmly in place. ‘Right?’

Tom cocks an eyebrow at me, grinning wolfishly. ‘Oh, really? Not my place to tell you how to manage your days off, but if asked, I’d say that’s an excellent use of your free time. Explains the whole relaxed look about you, too.’ He turns to Tadhg. ‘Do you think he’s going to get anything done today? Or is he going to moon at his desk and be all distracted?’

‘Distracted would be my bet. And tired. Very tired.’ He turns to me. ‘Unless you two managed to get some sleep yesterday

or last night?’

I clear my throat, unsure that Jocelin would like to be the topic of conversation like this. But I’m fully in the middle of it now, and the only way out is through. ‘As I’m sure you know, Jocelin let his parents know what happened at work, and his mother insisted on coming to visit.’

‘So sleepovers and meeting the parents.’ Tom winks. ‘Things *are* moving along quickly.’

Tadhg leans against the counter and cocks an eyebrow. ‘And how did that go? Meeting the parents.’

I cover my embarrassment with my own smirk and look him right in the eyes. ‘Not too badly, considering the first time they knew I existed was when they discovered me wrapped around their son, both of us asleep and naked.’ That takes a lot of fingerspelling on my part, but I get my point across.

Tom throws his head back and laughs wildly. ‘No! God, Gunnar, you know how to make an impression!’

‘It all ended well, though. They insisted we go to dinner last night. Things started off a bit rocky, but I think it’s fine now. Jocelin’s father seems great, and I think he likes me. The best I can say about his mother is that I’m pretty sure she doesn’t hate me at this point.’

Quinn walks into the now crowded kitchen, a grin on his face. ‘I wondered where everyone had got to. Then I heard Tom’s laugh. What am I missing?’ He fills a coffee mug and hands it to Tadhg, then makes himself one.

‘Gunnar was just giving us some of the details about his days off.’ Tadhg’s eyes sparkle playfully over the rim of his cup.

‘Oh? I thought you were with Jocelin.’ It’s obvious the moment he catches on. ‘Oooh.’ Quinn blushes to the roots of his hair but grins impishly at me.

Laughing, Tom grabs my shoulder and squeezes. ‘I think we’ve embarrassed Gunnar enough for one morning. We probably should all get to work.’

I give him a grateful look and hurry back to my desk. I’m just opening my current project when Tadhg wanders over and places a hand on my shoulder. ‘Thank you for taking care of him.’

‘Thank you for letting me.’ Remembering how devastated Jocelin had been makes me frown. ‘He needed someone there. I’m glad it could be me.’

‘I am too. And I’m happy you’ve hit it off. I know you both, and you are a perfect match. I should have thought of it myself. But you’re together now.’ Tadhg pins me with a penetrating look, and slows his signs even more, so I understand what he’s telling me. ‘If you hurt him, I’ll take it very personally. I understand not everything will be smooth sailing. But he’s a close friend, and a real sweetheart. If you break his heart, we’re going to have a problem. Understand?’

I nod. ‘Yes. Understood.’

Tadhg pats my shoulder. ‘Good man. So, he’s staying at your house until his parents leave?’

I fidget under Tadhg's knowing smirk. 'Yeah. Any chance I can work from home this afternoon? I'm not sure how comfortable Jocelin will be by himself all day in my house, when we haven't really spent a whole lot of time there.'

He doesn't hide his grin. 'Sure. Not a problem. If I need you, I know where to find you. *Try* to get some work done this afternoon, though.' He winks at me and walks into his office.

Only slightly embarrassed now, I take out my phone and send Jocelin a text.

Me: Got the OK to work from home this pm

Me: See u around 1?

Jocelin: Can't wait. xxxooo

The text exchange is briefer than I anticipate. I figured he'd be bored out of his mind by now. I would be.

Me: everything okay?

Jocelin: *thumbsup emoji* Just busy. *kissing heart emoji*

I have no idea what he could possibly be busy with, but I shrug it off. If Jocelin needs me, he'll text. And I'll see him in a few hours. Turning back to my laptop, I get to work.

Jocelin

After breakfast, I wander around Gunnar's house, looking in all the places I'd been hesitant to during my last visit. There's a small office area just off the living room, but other than that, there isn't anything out of the ordinary. I sit down and turn on the TV, scrolling through every channel twice before turning it off and throwing the remote on the couch in disgust. I'm unused to idle days. Even when I'm not working, I usually have errands or plans with friends. There's no way I can sit and read, like I told Gunnar. My brain isn't in a calm enough place for that.

Wandering into the kitchen, I stare out the window over the sink into a decent-sized backyard. There's a cute patio with a few chairs, a fire pit, and a two-seater swing. The rest of the yard is covered in red and orange leaves, and since it's currently not raining, I grab my coat and wander out to explore. The air is fragrant with dirt and decomposing leaves. Winter doesn't seem in any hurry to get here this year. The weather has stalled in a perpetual state of autumn, and I'm fine

with that. Even though I'm from Canada, I still don't like snow or cold. This is about as chilly as I want it to be. I tilt my face up to the sky and close my eyes, letting the sun warm my skin.

“Hello dear. Jocelin isn't it?”

My heart leaps in my throat as my eyes snap open, and I glance around. Mrs. Clarke is in her kitchen, waving to me through the open window. I take a deep breath and try to calm my racing pulse. “Good morning, Mrs. Clarke. Yes, it's Jocelin. How are you?”

“Oh, I'm fine. Thank you for asking. Do you have today off, or are you not feeling well?”

“Just have the day off. Bit of a vacation. Thought I'd hang out at Gunnar's.”

Mrs. Clarke nods. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

I shouldn't be so excited over a simple invitation for tea, but I am. “Absolutely. That sounds lovely.”

“I'll just meet you at the front door.”

She shuts the window and disappears into the house, so I get up and walk down the side yard to the little gate in the fencing and reach her front door just as she opens it. “It's a beautiful day, but I think it's still cold enough for a nice warm cup of something. Do come in, dear.”

I wipe my feet and step into one of the coziest places I've ever been. The room is all warm colors and overstuffed furniture, and there's a little fireplace with an orange and green

rag rug in front. Everything is immaculate, and I start to take off my shoes, but Mrs. Clarke waves me off. “No need. Just hand me your coat, and I’ll hang it up. Then we’ll go into the kitchen.” I pass her my coat and follow her through the house. “Why don’t you have a seat at the table? What kind of tea do you prefer? I have several varieties of black tea and green tea and even a red one if you’d like.”

“Red please, if it isn’t too much trouble.” I sit at the table, enjoying the sun streaming through the window.

“No trouble at all.” She flips on the kettle and gets out two mugs, adding a tea bag to each. “You have a bit of an accent. May I ask where you’re from?”

“Montreal. I grew up there and came to the US for university.”

“Oh, Montreal! I’ve never been. But it sounds lovely. Everyone speaks French there, don’t they?”

“It *is* lovely. Especially this time of year. And yes, it’s a French speaking province. But French spoken in Quebec is different from the French spoken in France. My accent is Quebecois. And there are those who speak English, of course.”

Mrs. Clarke sits down with me and puts her hand over mine. “Now, tell me all about yourself. You come from Montreal. What brought you to Seattle?”

“Work. I studied law at the University of Washington and was offered a position here with a very prestigious law firm. So I never went home. I’ve been in Seattle for ten years.”

“And are your parents still with us?”

I smile at her use of the plural. “Yes. In fact, they are visiting me now. I’m staying with Gunnar while they are at my place. You know, just a little too close for comfort if I stayed there as well.”

Mrs. Clarke’s lips quirk into a small smile, and her eyes sparkle. “Hmmm. Yes. So, what do your parents think of Gunnar? I’m sure they love him to pieces. He’s such a sweet boy. He had his troubles when his mother passed, God rest her soul.” She shakes her head, obviously upset at the memory of the murder. “She was stabbed, you know. Such a horrible thing to witness, and at such a young age. And then, it was all over the local paper, and he had to testify in court.” She sighs and takes a sip of her tea. “But he came through, and he’s done quite well for himself. Though he’s been lonely.”

I’m not sure if I’m more surprised at how much she knows about Gunnar, or that she thinks he’s been lonely. “Oh?”

“Yes, well, he never said that specifically, but the whole time he’s lived next door, he’s never been romantically attached to anyone. And I know all about asexuality and aromantics. My granddaughter keeps me up to date.” She gives me a knowing wink. “She’s *pansexual*. That means she’s attracted to people regardless of their gender identity, or their bits and bobs. And she has a girlfriend named Daria. They’re very sweet together.” She takes my hand again. “I asked Gunnar if he was asexual or aromantic, and he blushed like you’re doing right now.” I try not to choke on suppressed laughter because I can

only imagine Gunnar's reaction to Mrs. Clarke's questions. The kettle shuts off, and she pushes up from the table, and pours the water into our waiting mugs. "Sugar or milk, dear?"

"No, thank you. I drink the red without either. But if you have it, cinnamon would be very nice."

"Oh! I've never had it that way." She rifles through her spice cupboard and sets a round, glass jar on the table next to the steaming mugs. Sitting back down, she watches as I add the cinnamon, then puts the same amount into her own mug and blows on it to cool it off. "It smells quite delicious. Just like cookies."

"Yes. Our chef used to make cookies that had a lot of cinnamon in them. It's one of my favorite spices."

"Do you cook with it a lot?"

Laughter bursts out of me, and her eyes widen. "Oh, Mrs. Clarke. I don't cook at all. I'm useless in the kitchen, past making hot beverages."

She waves a hand at me. "Nonsense. No one is useless in the kitchen. You've just never been shown how to do it."

I shake my head adamantly. "Honestly. I'm not exaggerating. The thought of cooking actually terrifies me. What if I burn something? What if I catch the entire place on fire?" I get nervous just thinking about it.

She eyes me speculatively. "What are you doing today? Do you have any plans?"

I think about my boring morning so far. The idea of more of the same seems overwhelming, and I'm enjoying her company. "No. Gunnar will be home after lunch, but I'm on my own until then. Did you need some help with something?"

Mrs. Clarke smiles and pats my hand. "No dear. You and I are going to bake Gunnar his favorite cookies." Sweat immediately beads on my forehead because I truly am horrible in the kitchen. "Don't worry. They're very easy, and we'll take our time. I'll be right here with you. Think how impressed Gunnar will be! And you know what they say... the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." She winks at me, and I smile, wondering if 'they' still say that. "If Gunnar will be home after lunch, then we probably should get started. We have to chill the dough for an hour. But it just so happens that I was going to bake something today anyway, so I already have the butter and eggs out to come to room temperature." I give her a blank look, and she pats my hand and smiles. "It'll be fine. Let's wash our hands and get started."

She stands, and I follow blindly. "Um, maybe I should just watch this time. And next time I could help." But I'm already soaping up my hands under the warm water of the kitchen sink.

"Nonsense. It's very easy, I promise." She pulls a big mixer to the edge of the counter, flipping up the body even though it looks very heavy. "Now, we need two sticks of butter and an egg. Will you get them for me?" She gestures to the waiting ingredients neatly arranged on the counter next to the refrigerator. I cross the kitchen while taking deep breaths,

clamping down on the panic that threatens to send me screaming back to Gunnar's house. It's just an egg and some butter. I can handle that.

"Right. Now we need sugar and flour. They're in those canisters, dear." She points to a tidy set of ceramic containers lined up on the other side of the kitchen, and I bring them over to her. If I just fetch ingredients while she makes the recipe, this could be alright. "Now, if you'll go into the pantry over there, I need the salt and the bottle of vanilla extract." I nod and hurry to get them, relieved to perform another easy fetch quest, returning to Mrs. Clarke with the treasures.

"Now comes the fun part." Before I know what's happening, she grabs a floral print bib apron from a hook on the pantry door and pulls it over my head. Then she moves back and motions for me to step in front of the mixer.

I shake my head. "No, really, I definitely should watch this time around. What if I break your mixer? I'd feel awful."

She laughs but insists. Like I'm being led to the gallows, I step up to the counter. Mrs. Clarke walks me slowly through measuring and adding the ingredients, making me do all the work. Surprisingly, it's not as dreadful as I feared. "You are a natural! You're doing so well."

We scrape the dough out onto waxed paper and put it in the refrigerator. "Now, we wait for an hour, and then we bake them! It's that simple." I can't stop smiling. I've made cookie dough all by myself. Well, sort of by myself. I feel ridiculously pleased and can't wait to tell Gunnar.

“Let’s have some more tea. Red again?” I nod, and we sit at the kitchen table, Mrs. Clarke picking up the conversation where we left off. “So, how did you meet Gunnar? Don’t tell me he was in some legal trouble, and you represented him.” Her eyes twinkle teasingly.

“Oh, no. I’m not that kind of lawyer. I work on contracts. Literary ones, mostly. You know Gunnar’s sister is an editor?” She nods. “Gunnar and I reconnected at an event her company hosted. I work on their author contracts, so they invited me.” During the hour or so we have to wait, I tell her our whole story, going back to how Astrid and I are best friends and ending with this morning, obviously omitting the more spicy parts.

“How romantic! Chance meeting, he rescues you, sweeps you off your feet, and you fall head over heels in a whirlwind romance.” She sighs happily, and I don’t have the heart to tell her we aren’t in love. Because we aren’t. Are we? It does feel like a whirlwind... but love? I’m a bit lost in pondering that when she pulls me back to the present. “Alright! Time to pull the dough out and make those cookies! Do you know how to preheat an oven?” She laughs at my blank look.

Without judgment, she walks me through the rest of the process, and in an hour, we have a few dozen butter cookies, neatly packaged in a disposable container. I help her clean the kitchen, and hang my apron back on the pantry door. “Mrs. Clarke, thank you so much. This was exactly what I needed today. I’m going to go now and let you have your house back.

Gunnar should be home soon, and I want to be there when he arrives.”

She beams up at me, patting my arm. “Anytime, dear. And don’t be afraid of the kitchen. If you take your time and think it all through, it’s simple. You did so well!”

She walks me to the door and hands me my coat. Leaning down to kiss her cheek, I tuck the cookies under my arm, then head around the fence to the backyard and the unlocked patio door. I set the cookies on the kitchen counter and go into the living room to watch TV until Gunnar gets home. Not even half an hour later, my phone buzzes.

Gunnar: Leaving now. Want me to bring lunch?

Me: Yes please! Whatever you want xxxooo

Gunnar: OK. C U in a bit *kiss face emoji*

Gunnar

I pull into the garage, gather my laptop bag and our food, and go into the kitchen, surprised to see Jocelin waiting for me. “Hi.”

“Hi yourself.” I set the food on the counter and my laptop bag on the floor, then pull him into my arms, brushing my lips against his. The kiss is supposed to be a quick peck, but the moment our lips touch, I don’t want to stop. And when Jocelin wraps his arms around my neck and presses into the kiss, I don’t even try. Why fight the inevitable?

It’s Jocelin who finally pulls back. “Mmmm. That’s a lovely greeting.” He glances at the food bags. “What did you get?”

With one arm still around his waist, I drag the bags toward us. “Just sandwiches and chips from the deli. Nothing fancy.”

“I made you something.” The unexpected change in subject makes me pause, but before I can respond, Jocelin continues. “Well, baked something. Not by myself. Mrs. Clarke helped. But I did most of it.”

I can't contain my grin. "You baked something for me with Mrs. Clarke?" He's just too adorable. I glance around the kitchen, trying to spot the 'something.'

"Cookies." Jocelin points to a container tucked in the corner of the kitchen counter.

He now has my undivided attention. "Cookies? What kind of cookies?"

His grin is huge, and he's practically bouncing in my arms. "Your favorites."

"Butter cookies?" If he says yes, I'm not sure this day can get any better.

He nods and pulls me over to the container. "Do you want to try one? I tried one, and I think they're good. Mrs. Clarke says you have to try everything you make, otherwise you won't know if it's good. And you don't want to serve anything that you wouldn't eat yourself."

I can't help myself. I lean down and kiss him, quieting his excited rambling. He sighs against my lips and wraps his arms around my neck. My hands drift to his perfect ass, and I give it a squeeze. "I would love to try one."

Almost instantly, I have an armful of air as he lunges for the container, shoving the box at me. Laughing, I carefully open it and grin at the layers of golden brown cookies nestled inside. They look exactly like the ones Mrs. Clarke usually bakes. Curious, I pluck one out of the box and pop it in my mouth.

And moan. The sweet, sugary goodness melts on my tongue, and I'm in heaven. "Oh, god. Joce, these are amazing!"

I steal another before Jocelin snaps the lid closed and pulls the box out of reach. "These are for after lunch. Mrs. Clarke's orders."

"You two have become very chummy." I pop the second cookie into my mouth and close my eyes for a second as I moan again. "These are really good, babe. I mean it. I thought you didn't cook."

He shrugs. "I don't. Or I didn't. This was my first attempt."

"Well, it was a successful first attempt." I kiss the tip of his nose and grab the food bags. "Let's eat so we can get to the cookies." I hand the sandwiches to Jocelin and pour two glasses of water, then follow him into the living room. We set up lunch on the coffee table and dig in as I tell him about my conversation with Tadhg and Tom. He blushes as much as I did but thankfully finds the humor in it, too.

"At least it's over. And you get to work from home this afternoon. It was very nice of Tadhg to let you. I'll have to thank him next time I see him."

"He says hello and to text him when you feel like talking. For now, he and Quinn are respecting your privacy, but they wanted me to tell you they're here for you if you need them."

Jocelin nods, and his eyes go a little glassy, but he shakes it off and concentrates on eating. When we finish, I gather up all

the trash, shoving it into one of the bags, then give Jocelin my best ‘I’m a good boy’ face. “Can I eat cookies now?”

He laughs and gives me a playful shove. “You are such a little boy. A charming little boy, but still.” He grabs the bag of trash and heads for the kitchen, and I trail behind, turning on the kettle. Once the water boils and we’ve fixed hot beverages, we go back into the living room, the box of cookies carefully tucked under my arm.

“So how did you end up baking with Mrs. Clarke?”

He takes a sip of his tea and settles back against the sofa. “She saw me in the backyard and invited me in for tea. Somehow, we ended up making cookies. It was terrifying and exciting, all at the same time.”

I devour another cookie. “Well, they turned out perfectly. You’re a natural.”

Jocelin bites his lower lip and scrunches up his nose. “I think I want to keep cooking and try different recipes.”

His hesitance is adorable, but I want him to know I support him. “Maybe you’d like to try making something else with me?”

Jocelin smirks and side-eyes me. “Are we talking cooking or... *something else?*”

I laugh. “Both? Initially, I meant cooking, though I’m all for trying some non-kitchen related cooking after that.” I waggle my eyebrows at him.

He nudges my shoulder again. “What would we make?”

What do I know how to cook that won't overwhelm him? "How about something simple for dinner? Something a little more advanced than jelly sandwiches but less complicated than a souffle."

Jocelin frowns, his eyes wary. "Like what?"

"How about stew? You throw a bunch of things into a pot with some broth and let it cook for several hours. That's about it."

"And it's really that simple?" His tone says he doesn't believe me.

"Absolutely. We can run to the store, get what we need, then come back here and make it together."

His whole body relaxes. "That sounds nice. I'd love to cook with you." His beautiful grin lights up his face. "I'm having such an adventurous day!"

His joy is infectious, and I can't help but pull him into my arms. "My sweet Jocelin. I utterly adore you." I cup his cheek with my hand. When he leans into my touch and smiles, I swear thousands of butterflies take flight in my chest. I love being with him like this, and I know it's something I want. Something I'll continue to want. Emotion clogs my throat, and I have to swallow a few times before I can speak. "Okay, well, let's eat more of these delicious cookies, then I'll get changed, and we can go to the grocery."

Jocelin doesn't seem to have noticed my momentary side-trip into sentimentality. "Perfect. Oh, did you text Astrid about

dinner with my parents?”

Shit. I knew I'd forgotten something. “No, but I'll do it right now.” I take out my phone and fire off a text, leaning into Jocelin so he can see.

Me: Jocelin's parents are in town

Me: Are you and Gary free for dinner tomorrow night?

It takes a minute for her to reply, but eventually the little dots appear.

Astrid: Why are his parents in town?

Astrid: He told me he was doing fine!

Me: He is. But he called them when he wasn't

Me: They flew in to be here for him

Astrid: *sob emoji* That's so sweet!

Me: Yeah, I guess. The visit could have started sweeter

Me: *Facepalm emoji*

Astrid: Oh? Shit! You met them, and it didn't go well?

Me: Well, I may have been naked at the time

Astrid: OMG WTF?!

My phone rings before I can even reply, and Jocelin shakes his head and chuckles. “I knew that would happen.”

I answer the call. “Hey, Bean.”

“Spill. Where did you meet them, and why were you naked?”

I laugh. “I really hope you’re in your office with your door shut.” Jocelin raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, shit. Hold on.” There’s silence until I hear a door slam. “Okay. Tell me everything!”

I scratch my beard and grin sheepishly at Jocelin. “Well, they showed up at Joce’s place unannounced, *very* early in the morning the day after all the shit happened. They let themselves in, and I guess they just walked into his room. We were still sleeping at the time.”

“Wait! You were in bed together? Naked? You didn’t tell me you’d progressed to naked time!”

I roll my eyes. “Not the point.”

“True. Okay.”

“Anyway, I woke up alone and heard voices. I went downstairs, still half-asleep, to find Joce and his parents chatting in the kitchen.”

“Please tell me you were wearing pants.”

I laugh. “Yes, at that point, I was wearing pants. Do sweats count as pants?”

Jocelin huffs. “Barely. They didn’t hide any of your assets.” He leans close to the phone. “And he wasn’t wearing a shirt, so all his gorgeous tats and muscles were out there for everyone to ogle.” He runs his hands over my arms appreciatively, and I consider hanging up and showing him how much I appreciate his appreciation. I’m jerked back to the conversation by Astrid’s shout.

“Oh, my god, Gunnar! Really?”

I shake my head at Jocelin and silently mouth ‘thanks’ at him. He laughs. “Let me say again that I was still half asleep.” I wink at Jocelin. “We were up kinda late.”

Astrid makes a retching sound. “I don’t want to know details. Lalalalala.”

I snort. “Don’t worry. I wasn’t planning on sharing details. Anyway, we went to dinner with his parents that evening, and I think I smoothed things over. Now that they’ve met their son’s boyfriend, they want to meet his bestie. And we suggested bringing Gary along as well. So, will you come to dinner with Jocelin’s parents tomorrow night?”

There’s a pause on the other end, and I hope it’s because she’s checking her calendar. “Okay, I’m a definite yes. I need to check with Gary to make sure he doesn’t have plans, but I’m pretty sure he’s a yes, too. Tell Jocelin I’ll text him after I talk to Gary.”

“Thanks, Bean. I appreciate it. You’re a good egg.”

She laughs. “I’m doing this for Jocelin.”

“I take it back. You suck.”

Jocelin rolls his eyes, but he’s grinning. “Are you two done?”

I nod. “Okay, gotta go. Jocelin and I are making stew for dinner. No, you’re not invited.” I can hear her pout through the phone.

“That’s just mean, Gunnar. I may have to bring a photo album with me to dinner tomorrow night. Jocelin’s parents might enjoy it.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Her laughter is wicked, and before I can say anything else, she says goodbye and hangs up.

I shake my head, wondering what I’ve just unleashed.

Gunnar

Going to the grocery store with Jocelin is an adventure. He's been inside one before, but only to grab the bare necessities, like milk or laundry soap. I spend half the time explaining what things are or why someone would even want whatever it is, and the other half telling him we don't need whatever he's picked up and to put it back where he found it. It's like shopping with a five-year-old. I manage to control most of Jocelin's impulse buys, but we do end up with several kinds of fruit and a few bottles of wine, which weren't on the original list. By the time we get back to the car, I'm laughing but vowing never to grocery shop with him again.

We carry everything into the kitchen, and I wash the produce while Jocelin opens one of the bottles of red wine. "This I know how to do." He pours us generous glasses, and I load the strawberries and grapes into the colander to dry.

"How about a little music while we cook?" I turn on the Bluetooth speaker and scroll to my favorite playlist.

Jocelin peers at my phone screen. “You called the list ‘Tunes’? That’s so very creative, Gunnar.”

“Hey. I wasn’t at my creative best. But it’s good music, so lay off.” I feed Jocelin a grape and kiss his cheek, before arranging all the stew ingredients on the countertop next to the cutting board and chef’s knife. “Okay, ready?”

Jocelin takes a huge gulp of wine and nods, instantly serious. “Ready.”

“So, the first thing we need to do is chop the vegetables into bite-sized pieces and put them aside. Let’s start with the carrots.”

Jocelin looks at them and then at the chef knife and wipes his damp hands on his pant legs. “Okay, sure.”

I try to hide my smile as he picks up the knife like he’s going to cut a steak. “Here, let me help you.” Reaching around him, I lean over his shoulder so I can see. Jocelin hums and rubs his face against my beard, and I kiss his cheek. “Behave. We have sharp implements, and you’re very distracting. Focus on the carrot.”

He snorts. “Is that a euphemism?”

“No. Not yet, anyway. Now pay attention.” I help him hold the knife properly and get a safe grip on the carrot. “You should always start with a very sharp knife so it does all the work. You’re just guiding where it cuts. But make sure you keep your fingers away from the blade.” We chop a few of the carrots together, and Jocelin gains confidence with each one.

Eventually, I move my hands to his hips, letting him continue unassisted. I snag a strawberry from the colander and bite into it. “You’re doing beautifully.” Jocelin’s smile is sweet, and I can’t resist kissing him softly on the neck before feeding him a berry. With a happy hum and a mouth full of fruit, he turns his attention back to chopping.

We work through the potatoes before I carefully take the knife from his hand and set it on the counter. “Is that all we need to chop?” I don’t answer, pulling him into my arms and slowly dancing him around the kitchen. His grin is sappy and probably matches my own. “I thought we were cooking.”

“This is a great song, and I want to dance with my boyfriend.” I rest my cheek against his temple. “Cooking can wait a minute.” He relaxes into my arms, and we move in a slow circle. “I’m having a wonderful afternoon with you. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m happy being anywhere with you, *mon chéri*.” Jocelin slides his fingers through my beard, scratching softly and swaying in my arms. “And it has been an amazing day.”

“What do you think of cooking so far?”

“It is actually kind of fun when done with someone else, especially a handsome someone.”

I brush the tip of my nose against his cheek. “Oh? Any handsome someone will do? I see.”

He tugs teasingly at my hair, and an unexpected rush of desire sweeps through me. Fuck. I guess I’m into hair pulling

now. “Only incredibly gorgeous boyfriends who know how to cook—in and out of the kitchen.” He grins, obviously proud of himself, and I groan at the cheesiness.

“Joce, that was just awful.” I spin him toward the vegetables. “Finish chopping. No dessert until your chores are done.”

His head snaps to look at me. “There’s dessert?”

“Maybe. If you behave.” I smack him on the ass.

“Gunnar.” Jocelin nibbles a strawberry, slowly tracing his lips with the tip, staining them red with juice. “What would dessert be?” I can’t tear my eyes from his lips or his tongue as it licks at the juice.

“What do you want for dessert?” My voice is rough, my mouth dry, and other parts of my anatomy are very interested in his response.

His steady gaze as he bites into the fruit has my heart thundering in my chest. Confidence is sexy on him. “What are my options?”

He meets my eyes and slowly sucks the ripe berry into his mouth, red juice dribbling down his chin and fuck, I want to lick it up. “Whatever you want.”

Jocelin crooks a finger at me, and I move toward him as if under his spell, my attention focused on his lush, juice-drenched lips. I stop inches away, waiting for some kind of sign. The tension is palpable as he grabs the front of my shirt and closes the distance between us. His breath smells sweet with strawberries and red wine, and it’s intoxicating. “I want

any number of things, *mon beau*.” He trails his fingers along my throat. “I want your hair longer so I can yank your head back and devour your neck.” My cock pulses against his hip, and I stifle a groan as he brushes the tip of my nose with his. “I want you to stop silencing your responses to me.” As if his words have given me permission, I moan audibly when his palm slides over my cock, squeezing firmly. “And I want you. On your knees. Your hot, wet mouth wrapped around my cock.”

I slide my arms around him, his lips devouring mine as I grind against his palm. Fuck, it’s so good, and I need more. I’m dizzy and achingly hard. “Whatever you want, babe. Anything.”

And then there’s space between us. Jocelin’s sweet mouth is gone, and I blink in confusion, barely containing a whimper of frustration.

He picks up the knife and turns back to me. “Well, we obviously have to finish dinner first. What’s the next step?”

I grip the edge of the counter, knuckles white, and breathe, trying to get control of my confused body. I desperately want to snatch the knife from his hand, bend him over the counter, and fuck him silly. Or let him bend *me* over the counter. Either would do. After a few deep breaths, I step closer and lean in so my lips brush against his ear, my voice rough with lust. “That was just plain mean, Jocelin Allard. And you will pay for that later.”

His grin is wicked and absolutely stunning. “Promises, promises.” He gestures to the food on the counter. “Before things spoil, we probably should continue.”

With more control than I feel, I relax my shoulders and will my dick to take a time out. I can be patient, if the reward is worth it. And Jocelin is definitely worth it.

The next twenty minutes are a struggle. I can’t stop touching him, nuzzling his hair, or caressing some part of him. Dinner prep is the last thing I want to focus on, but I promised I’d teach him the recipe, so I do. “Now it all goes into the pot, we pour in the stock, and then let it simmer for a few hours until the meat becomes tender.”

Jocelin hasn’t struggled at all. His focus has been on cooking, and I’m caught between admiration and annoyance. He pours in the stock and turns to me. “And that’s it?”

“That’s it. You’ve made dinner. What do you think?”

He beams. “That wasn’t difficult at all.”

“Told you. Cooking doesn’t have to be difficult. Next thing you know, you’ll be in Bjorn’s kitchen, making all kinds of fancy dishes for Sunday dinner.”

Jocelin laughs. “No, I don’t think that will be happening. I like cooking with *you*. I’m still not sure I’m fond of cooking in general. Takeout is easier.”

We wander into the living room, leaving cleanup for later. “It’ll be a few hours until dinner. And I think there were a few

things you mentioned wanting.” I pull him against me, nuzzling into his neck.

Jocelin groans and leans into me. “I love when you do that. Your beard feels so good against my skin.”

I rub his cock through his jeans and feel him hardening beneath my palm. I love how quickly he responds to my touch. “Mmm. That’s good to know. Should I keep doing this, or should I move on to something else?”

He tilts his head to the side, his mouth falling open in a soft gasp. “Like what?”

A possessive growl burbles in my throat. “I want to suck you. It’s all I’ve thought about since your little speech in the kitchen. I want to feel your cock heavy on my tongue, lick and suck you until you ache. Make you crazy with my mouth, bringing you right to the edge, over and over, until the only sounds you can make are whimpers of frustration. Then I’ll tease and stroke you until your entire world is my mouth and your need to come. And when I finally let you, it’s gonna hurt so good, baby.” Jocelin whimpers and ruts against my thigh. I nuzzle his ear, nipping at the lobe. “You gonna make it upstairs, or you want me to suck you right here?”

“Here.” Jocelin grasps my shoulders and digs his fingers into the muscle, pushing me onto my knees. With quick movements, I have his belt undone and the front of his jeans open. Hooking my thumbs into the waistband, I shove his jeans and boxer briefs past his hips to pool at his feet. He kicks them across the room, and I run my hands up his thighs, wrap

my fingers around the base of his cock, just behind his balls, and swirl my tongue around the already leaking head. He leans against the back of the couch and sinks his fingers into my hair as I suck him into my mouth, alternating between light licks at the tip and taking him deep until I'm nuzzling against his tight abdomen, the tip of his cock just pushing into my throat. The sounds he makes are so fucking sexy, I have to squeeze myself through my jeans just to get a little relief.

When I swallow, Jocelin shouts, his hips thrusting forward, shoving his cock a little farther down my throat. The unexpected move makes me gag, and I slowly pull back, increasing the suction as I do. Jocelin perches on the back of the couch, his knees wobbling as he gasps for air. He's a mess, but not quite where I want him, so I push forward again, sliding my lips up and down his cock, listening to his beautiful gasps and whimpers. When he holds his breath and pulls my hair, I release him, sitting back on my heels. He whines so prettily.

"Shhh. It's alright." I slide my hands up his muscular thighs, caressing his hips and flat stomach, letting him stagger back from the edge. He yanks his shirt over his head, tossing it onto the couch, and locks his eyes on me, silently begging for what he needs. I look up his long, lean body, lightly pinch his nipples, and glide my hands across his chest as I tuck my nose into the crook of his hip and nuzzle his balls. His musky scent is intoxicating. I want to stroke myself, get off, but I want to get him off more. So I ignore my aching cock and gently suck one of his balls into my mouth, swirling my tongue along the

soft skin, loving the velvety texture. I give a soft tug, then release him, mouthing and nuzzling against his sack. He moans and slides off the couch, dropping to his knees, his legs splayed wide, giving me more room to play. “*Mon dieu, chéri, your beard feels so good.*”

His voice is rough and blissed out, but I’m slightly disappointed he can still think in English. I engulf his cock in my mouth and hollow my cheeks, stroking him firmly with my hand and lips. Soft moans and heavy breathing accompany his ever-tightening grip on my hair. “Shit. Oh, *shit.*” A tremor ripples through his torso as he thrusts into my mouth, and I quickly release him. He wails plaintively. “Gunnar, please! *Mon dieu. Je veux jouir.*”

I’m not exactly sure what that means, but I can guess. “No. Not yet.” Again, I bury my face in the hollow between his thigh and cock, inhaling deeply. “Fuck, you smell incredible.” My cock throbs in my jeans, the ache intensifying as I watch him. His head is thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, his plump lower lip caught between his teeth as he whimpers. “You look so fucking good, babe. God, I’m so hard for you.” I drag my nose up the side of his shaft and suck him between my greedy lips, my mouth soaking his beautiful cock with every dip of my head. I slide a hand up his thigh and hook his balls between my fingers, pulling slowly. Jocelin’s whole body quivers, and he groans from deep in his chest.

“Please, Gunnar. Please.” He sounds wrecked, so close, and I swear, one or two strokes is all I need to come right now, too.

“Please what, baby? What do you want?”

He whines as his hips strain against my hand. “*Je veux jouir*. Let me come, *chéri*. Please.” He looks at me, his eyes glassy and desperate. “I need to come.”

I wrap my arm around him, gently easing him onto his back, then hook one of his legs over my shoulder. “Fuck, babe, you’re gorgeous.” Tenderly kissing along his inner thigh, I lightly nibble the firm muscle of his ass before slowly pushing his legs up and apart, flicking my tongue across his hole.

Jocelin inhales sharply, groaning as he squeezes his eyes closed and spreads his legs wider.

I lick from his hole to his balls before burying my face between his cheeks, sucking and teasing him until he’s writhing against my face, tugging on a fistful of my hair. When I press the tip of my tongue into his hole, his grip tightens and his hips shake.

“Gunnar.” I kiss across his firm cheek and along his inner thigh. “Pleeeeeeeeeaaaaase!” His voice cracks as he sobs breathlessly, and I relent.

“Alright, baby. Come.” I swallow him down, sliding a finger into his hole to stroke his prostate, and he wails, his body arching off the floor. He grips my arm with one hand, pulling my hair with the other as salty warmth fills the back of my throat. I swallow until he collapses onto the floor, a wrung out, sweaty mess.

Crawling over his beautiful body, I lower my mouth to his, kissing and biting his slack lips. “Fuck, you look so good right now.” I rest my weight on my elbow and brush the hair from his sweaty face, gently stroking his cheek.

He opens his eyes and smiles up at me. “You are a sadist.”

“I’ve been called worse.” He huffs out an exhausted laugh and curls into me. I drape my arm over him, pulling him close. “How are you feeling?”

“Hmmm. Sleepy.” He frowns. “Cold.”

“Well, you do have time for a nap before dinner, if you’d like.” Jocelin groans, struggling to push himself into a sitting position. I help him up, then gather his clothes. “If you want, I can start a fire, and you can doze on the couch.”

He’s an adorably uncoordinated mess, so I help him dress, then head to the fireplace to demonstrate my fire-building skills. He flops onto the couch, tucking a throw pillow under his head, and snuggles against the cushions. Leaning down, I kiss his hair before grabbing the blanket from the back of the armchair, covering him with it. He’s mostly asleep by the time I head back into the kitchen to clean up. I’m still half-hard, but in no hurry to do anything about it. The slight discomfort is worth seeing Jocelin that wrung out and blissful.

Less than fifteen minutes later, I have the kitchen back in order and another glass of wine in hand. I settle on the couch, pull Jocelin’s feet into my lap, put Top Gear on the TV, and relax, unable to think of a better way to spend an afternoon.

Jocelin

I slowly wake to the sound of the TV and the delicious smell of food. My stomach rumbles, and I stretch, groaning as I push my hands above my head and straighten my legs, my feet unexpectedly hitting against something solid.

“Oooff!”

My eyes fly open, and I quickly retract my limbs as Gunnar rubs his stomach. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

Chuckling, he reaches for my feet, pulling them back into his lap. “I was until I got two feet in the stomach. Feeling better?”

I stretch again, this time more carefully, and nod. “Yes. I feel very good. But I’m starving!” My stomach growls loudly. “When are we eating?” I slip my toes under Gunnar’s shirt and sigh contentedly as his body heat warms my feet.

He squawks in protest but rubs them through the blanket and his shirt. “Who knew you were such a hedonist?”

“Thankfully, I have a wonderful boyfriend who indulges me.”

Gunnar pats my leg. “Do you want to eat here or at the table?”

Holding my arms out to him, I make grabby hands. “Here. We can watch TV. But I’m feeling a bit needy and want to hold you first.” With an indulgent smile, Gunnar crawls across the couch, carefully lying on top of me, with most of his weight on his elbows. I wrap my arms around him and pull him down, wanting his weight pressing me into the sofa. It’s comforting. “I missed you while I was sleeping.”

Gunnar kisses the tip of my nose. “I was right here the whole time, keeping your feet warm.”

He’s adorably sweet and so very handsome. I brush back his hair, unprepared for the intense ache in my chest. “We’ve only been together a few weeks, but already things feel *right* between us. What took me months to feel for someone else, I feel for you now. It’s a bit overwhelming.”

Gunnar’s smile fades a little, and he stares into my eyes so intently I’m worried I’ve misread things, and I’m going too fast. I open my mouth to apologize, to tell him not to worry about it, but he speaks first. “Is it less overwhelming if I tell you I feel the same? Those same thoughts have crossed my mind so many times over the past few weeks, but I thought if I said something, I’d scare you off.” He strokes his fingertips across my eyebrow and down my nose, and the gentleness of it settles my nerves. “We fit. It just works. And I’m not going to question it. I’m going to be thankful and try my best to be a good boyfriend and not fuck up, so you don’t leave.”

I hug him tightly, nuzzling into his hair. “I’m not going anywhere.” The tender moment is interrupted by my stomach making its demand for food. Gunnar chuckles and kisses the side of my head before pushing up and rolling off me. “Okay, dinner. Here on the couch. You stay put. I’ll be right back.”

I sit up and fold the blanket, laying it across the back of the couch before flipping through channels. I stop when I land on a classic cloak-and-dagger action movie. Gunnar comes back with a full tray, sets it down on the coffee table, and we sit very close, nestled into the corner, eating oversized mugs of stew and chunks of hearty bread. He kisses my cheek between bites. “This is really delicious, babe. You’re a natural in the kitchen.”

My cheeks heat, and I laugh. “There is nothing natural about me in the kitchen.” But I’m very pleased he’s enjoying the food. “*We* did a great job. It was a joint effort. But I agree, it is tasty.”

When we finish eating, Gunnar puts all the dishes back on the tray and stands. “I’ll clean up.” I’m not going to fight him on it. If he wants to clean up, I’ll gladly let him. I close my eyes and pucker my lips, turning my face up to his. Gunnar laughs, and I feel his warm breath against my cheek a moment before he kisses me. It’s loud and purposefully silly, and it makes me laugh. “I’ll be back soon. Don’t miss me too much.” My eyes slide open as he pushes to his feet, picking up the tray and carrying it into the kitchen.

It doesn't take long for him to load the dishwasher and put the leftover stew in the refrigerator. Then we spend the rest of the evening cuddling on the sofa, flipping through random TV programs, kissing and touching more than watching. It seems he craves the contact as much as I do. Hours later, I take the remote from Gunnar, turn off the TV, and hold out my hand. "Come to bed." I stand, tugging him to his feet, and we move silently through the house, shutting off lights as we go, then climb the stairs to the bedroom.

Moonlight streams through the windows, and I turn to him, reaching out to run my hands down his chest, silently lifting his shirt over his head. He pulls me close, placing soft kisses along my jaw and whispers into my ear. "Lights?"

His hands find my waist, then push my shirt up and off. It makes a soft thud as it hits the carpet. "No." There's enough ambient light to see and an intimacy in the darkness that I don't want to break. It's like no one else in the world exists.

I brush the backs of my hands down Gunnar's chest and feel his breath stutter. "Joce." His voice is quiet but heavy with unspoken words. It's then that I stop reining in my feelings. I give up telling myself this is happening too fast, too soon. It doesn't matter. What I'm feeling is real. I don't need to name it, but I know I've never felt this strongly about anyone else. I cup Gunnar's face with my palm and rub my cheek against his beard, pressing into his embrace.

His fingertips ghost down my back, sending shivers of pleasure rippling through me. "Baby."

“Shhhh.” Brushing my lips along his warm skin, I breathe in the spicy scent of sweat and cologne. I lift my face to his and tug him down until our foreheads touch, running my fingers through his hair. His arms tighten around me, and I tilt my face up to his, our lips meeting in a tender kiss. I pour everything I’m feeling into the press of our mouths, wanting him to know all that he is to me. Then I step back and take his hand, leading him silently to the bed. We slowly undress each other, our fingertips brushing over warm skin, our lips barely parting.

Gunnar wraps me in his arms and kneels on the edge of the bed, slowly lowering me to the mattress. He covers my body with his, slowly rolling his hips against me, and I moan into his mouth as his cock strokes against mine. “*Mon chéri*, I need you.”

He nibbles my lower lip and lightly rubs the tip of his nose to mine. “You have me. All of me.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him into another deep, languid kiss, reaching between us to stroke his cock. This time, he gasps and thrusts against my hand, and I let go, barely able to think, lost in the heady feel of Gunnar everywhere.

His fingers glide down my torso, dipping between my thighs, and I spread my legs wider, my gaze locked on his as his fingers tease over my hole.

With a soft kiss, he sits up, slowly stroking my cock as he pulls a bottle of lube from the side drawer. In moments, his slick fingers tease over my hole, then press inside. My mouth

falls open, and I arch into his touch, my eyes half-closed with pleasure. I pull him down, devouring his lips, needing more of him.

Gunnar tucks his knees under himself, spreading them and forcing my legs further apart with his knees, stroking his leaking cock before leaning forward and pressing into me. I gasp, and he covers my mouth with his, our tongues stroking in rhythm with his gentle thrusts. Our bodies move in tandem, synchronized on an intensely intimate level, and the pressure builds. I wrap my legs around him, riding an emotional high, feeling this connection like nothing I've ever known, so close to the edge, lost to the feel of him inside me, our intimate kisses and gentle touches. When he looks at me, full of wonder and peace, my heart wants to burst with everything he makes me feel.

“Jocelin. My Jocelin.” It's said with such reverence that I give myself to the connection, to this intimate feeling between us, not caring that I will probably drown.

His name falls from my lips as I arch off the mattress, clinging to him as my orgasm overtakes me. It's quiet but no less emotional than before, and as I surrender to the passion, I know I'm also surrendering my heart.

He moans, shuddering against me before his hips slowly roll to a stop. His eyes glisten in the moonlight as he searches my face, then slowly lowers himself onto me. I wrap him in my arms, holding him tightly, stroking my fingers along his damp

skin. When he tries to roll to the side, I hold him still. “Not yet. Please.”

“Okay.” He kisses me, wiping away tears I didn’t know I’d shed. “Are you alright? Did I hurt you?”

“I’m perfect.” I reach up and caress his face. “This was perfect.”

His smile is sweet and melts my already tender heart. “I’m crushing you, though.”

I shake my head. “You aren’t. You make me feel safe.” Loved? Yes. That too. Because after tonight, there is no denying that’s how I feel.

Gunnar leans down and kisses me on the nose. “Good.” He strokes his fingers through my hair and kisses my lips. “But I have to move, or we’re gonna end up cemented together.”

It’s not very romantic, but unfortunately, it’s true, so I nod. Gunnar rolls to the side and grabs a shirt from the floor, cleaning us up before throwing it in the general direction of the clothes hamper. In one smooth motion, he hauls me against his side and flips the blankets over us.

I snuggle into him, my head on his shoulder, utterly drained but floating in a blissful haze. “*Bonne nuit, mon cœur.*”

Gunnar kisses my forehead and buries his nose in my hair. “Night, sweetheart.”

Gunnar

My alarm startles me awake with an ear-splitting wail, and I slap at my phone violently until it stops. Burying my face in the pillow, I try to calm my racing heart and recall why the volume is so loud. Jocelin is a comforting weight across my back, which reminds me of my promise from yesterday morning. With a quiet groan, I reach for my phone and silence the alarm before it goes off again. It's tempting to go back to sleep, but Jocelin wouldn't approve.

As gently as I can, I roll over. He huffs disgustedly and tries to burrow against me. It's adorable and makes it that much harder to get up. Then he sighs softly and relaxes against my chest, and I give up, kissing his forehead, wrapping myself around him. I don't want to get out of this bed. I don't want to leave him. But if I don't get up now, I'll fall asleep again. Then Tom or Quinn will call, and then Jocelin won't be so adorable. Gathering the blankets with my free hand, I pull them over Jocelin and gently slide from beneath him. I stretch

and shuffle into the bathroom, closing the door before turning on the light.

Leaning heavily against the sink and willing my brain to wake up, I grab my toothbrush and squeeze paste onto the bristles. As I scrub my teeth, the tingling of the mint flavoring sparks something in my brain that helps me focus, and by the time I'm under the hot spray of the shower, I'm feeling more alert. Snippets of last night resurface. The quiet, intensely emotional connection with Jocelin is new, and the fact I'm not freaking out about it is shocking, really. But I'm calm, happy, excited even, and not worried at all. Because it's Joce, and he's amazing.

I wash quickly, towel off, finger comb a dab of pomade through my hair, and use a few drops of the beard oil that Jocelin loves. Normally, I'd clean up the bathroom later—or not at all—but it'll bug Jocelin if I don't. So I pick up my towel from the floor and hang it on the bar, flatten the toothpaste tube, pushing the gel to the top, wipe the toothpaste out of the sink, and put all the items back into the medicine cabinet before quietly opening the door. The light from the bathroom is enough for me to see to get dressed, and Jocelin doesn't seem to stir. Once I'm done, I watch him sleep for a minute before leaning down, brushing a soft kiss on his hair. “Have a good day, babe.” Jocelin mumbles something incoherent as I quietly leave the bedroom, closing the door behind me.

I'm not usually a breakfast person, so I make a quick cup of tea in a to-go cup, grab my keys, and hope the garage door

doesn't wake Jocelin. I finally breathe once I'm out of the driveway and heading to work. By the time I reach my desk, I'm whistling and ready to take on the day.

"So, how much work did you get done yesterday afternoon?" I turn around and grin at Tom, who is leering at me from the doorway. "My bet, based on that blush and cheeky grin, is not much." I flip him off and turn back to my laptop. It doesn't faze him. "I remember when Josie and I were still a new couple. Couldn't keep our hands off each other."

"TMI Tom. Really. I don't need to hear about that." I hide my smirk and try to focus on my schematic.

"She'd just give me a look. You know the one. And that was it. My brain would shut off, and my dick was in charge."

I snort. "That would assume your brain was on in the first place."

Something bounces off my shoulder, and a paperclip lands on my desk. "Funny, Osouf. Come on. We haven't talked in weeks."

I turn around and scrub my fingers through my hair. "Yeah, I'm sorry, Tom. I've been a bit preoccupied."

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad, Gunnar. I'm just trying to make sure you're okay." I raise an eyebrow at him, and he grins. "Okay. And giving you a little shit, too." He drops into the empty chair next to my desk.

"I *am* sorry we haven't hung out lately. But yeah, I'm okay." I grin sheepishly. "Better than okay, really."

“Good. I’m happy for you.” We’re both quiet for a few beats, and then Tom clears his throat. “So, you two have been seeing a lot of each other.”

I roll my eyes. “Is that your way of telling me to slow down, you think I’m moving too quickly?”

He holds up his hands. “It’s just an observation. I get not everyone wants to take a year or two to pine over someone before asking them out. I think I have the corner on that market.” His self-deprecating laugh fills the room. He picks up the paperclip he flicked at me and fiddles with it. “Jocelin still crashing at your place? Or have his parents left?”

I groan, thinking about his parents. “They’re still here. We’re having dinner with them, Astrid, and Gary tonight.”

There’s a knock on my office door, and Tom and I glance up to find Tadhg in my doorway. ‘Good morning.’ Tom and I wave. ‘Everything okay with Jocelin?’

I nod. ‘Yes. His parents are still at the loft, so he’s still staying with me for now. But he’s in good spirits.’ I grin. ‘He baked cookies with my neighbor yesterday.’

‘What?’ Tom looks around. ‘Where are they?’

Tadhg smirks. ‘Yes, why don’t we have any cookies?’

‘Because they were made for me, and I don’t share my cookies.’

It’s at that point that Quinn pokes his head in my office. ‘Good morning. How’s Jocelin?’

Tadhg kisses his cheek. ‘Jocelin made cookies with Gunnar’s neighbor, and he didn’t bring us any.’

Quinn nods. ‘Understandable. Why share when you don’t have to?’

‘Says the youngest of five siblings.’ Tadhg rolls his eyes at Quinn and turns back to me. ‘Tell Jocelin, if there’s any more baking, we expect to reap the rewards.’

I shake my head, laughing. ‘Sure.’

Tadhg grins and pushes off the doorframe. ‘Why don’t I believe you? Anyway, I suppose it’s time to get to work. I’ll see you later.’ He takes Quinn by the hand and they head down the hall.

“Yeah, that’s probably my cue to get to work, too. If I don’t see you at lunch, have a great time this evening.” Tom laughs as he leaves my office.

I groan and call after him. “Yeah, right.”

Anything else I might have said is cut off when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I slide it out and thumb open the message.

Jocelin: Good morning gorgeous

Attached is a selfie of Jocelin, still in bed, chest bare, hair tousled, looking adorably sleepy.

Me: Good morning beautiful. Wish I was there with you

Jocelin: Wish you were here too. *kissing_heart emoji*

Jocelin: Thinking of things I'd like to do with you rn

Me: *weary emoji* I have so much to do in the next 2 days

Me: Your body is too much of a distraction *hot_face emoji*

Jocelin: Oh. You mean this body?

Attached is a photo of Jocelin's torso, muscles flexed to show off a tight six-pack. I groan and wipe my hand over my face. He's going to be the death of me.

Me: *sob emoji hot_face emoji fire emoji* Not fair!

Jocelin: *stuck_out-tongue_winking_eye emoji*

Jocelin: Sorry, mon chéri. I shouldn't distract you

Another picture appears, this time a close-up of Jocelin's naked hip, with just a hint of dark curls edging into the shot.

I swallow and move a little closer to my desk to hide my burgeoning semi from anyone walking in.

Me: OMG. You're trying to kill me. *sweat emoji*

Me: Fuck, babe. *biting_lip emoji* Now I'm half hard

Jocelin: Oh. *frowning emoji* Only half hard?

Jocelin: I'm so disappointed

Jocelin: You'll have to catch up, mon chéri

A fourth picture comes through, and I groan, palming my now hard dick through my dress pants. Jocelin's sweatpants are shoved down around his thighs, his hand fisting his hard cock.

Me: Fuck Joce. *drooling_face emoji*

Me: I'm gonna be *eggplant emoji* all day

Me: Now how am I supposed to concentrate?

Me: *sweat_drops emoji*

Jocelin: A reminder of what's waiting for you at home

Me: I'm going to be useless today. I know it

Me: My brain is officially offline

Jocelin: Sorry. Not sorry

Me: *laughing emoji* I hated leaving you this morning

Jocelin: But you were very quiet *heart emoji* TY

Me: You're welcome. You were looking very cute

Jocelin: I'm just a cute guy. Hurry home. I'll be waiting

Jocelin

“We’d just learned how to write our names. Of course we wanted to write them on everything, but Mom was very clear about what we could and couldn’t write on.”

Gunnar chuckles wryly. “Write on paper, not on each other.”

Astrid winks at him, then turns back to my parents. “So, we’re outside playing, and Bjorn is *supposed to* be watching us.” She makes air quotes with her fingers.

I’m grinning so hard my face hurts. Astrid has been amazing with my parents, charming them like she charms everyone. And Gary has been just as delightful. “How old were you?”

She turns to me, her eyes sparkling in the candlelight. “We were four, I think. And Bjorn was around ten. So, we knew what we could write on and what we couldn’t.”

Gunnar interrupts. “To be fair, it was summer, and we were just told we could draw on the sidewalk, which is definitely not paper.”

Her face lights up with mirth, and she gives him a little shove. “With chalk!” She turns to my parents. “So, we’re all out in the yard, and my mom is in and out of the house, keeping an eye on us but relying on Bjorn to help. And suddenly, Bjorn groans and asks where Gunnar is. We all look around, but no Gunnar. It took about five minutes, but eventually we heard Bjorn shout, ‘Gunnar! No!’”

I glance his way, and his cheeks are a little pink, but he doesn’t look uncomfortable.

“We all run out to the street, where we are most definitely not supposed to be. Gunnar is crouched down next to my dad’s car, with a rock in his hand, writing his name in the fender.”

“Oh, shit!” I slap my hand to my mouth, but I can’t help my laugh. “You didn’t!”

Gunnar nods, grin firmly in place. “Yup. In big letters. Dad drove around with my name on his car for a good six months before he got it repaired.” His smile falters, and his eyes get wistful. “He said it was like having me with him all day.”

Astrid squeezes his arm, and they share a sweet smile. “Mom was furious, but Dad could never be mad at us. Especially at you. You were his little buddy.”

Gunnar chuckles. “She sent me to our room without supper.”

“Or coloring books.”

Gunnar nods. “I remember I was bored and so hungry.” He grins impishly. “And then Dad snuck dinner to me later.”

I lean forward, eager to hear the rest of the story. “What did your mom say about that?”

Astrid laughs. “Mom was furious when she found out.”

Gunnar shrugs. “Dad said I was a growing boy and needed to eat.”

My parents are just as enthralled with Astrid’s story as they’ve been with all the others. Their body language is relaxed, and their smiles are open and genuine. We’ve had a lovely meal, even though it started out a bit tense. Thankfully, Gary is a master at putting people at ease, and he had my parents smiling within minutes of being seated. By the time we reached after-dinner drinks, they were laughing, and I could stop holding my breath. Now, I’m ready to call the evening a success. “Well, I think it’s time that Gunnar and I head out. He has work tomorrow, and his bosses aren’t likely to accept the excuse of hanging out with his boyfriend’s family until all hours of the morning.”

Astrid laughs. “I don’t know. His bosses seem like pretty cool guys.”

Gary gently removes the wineglass from Astrid’s hand and guides her to her feet. “I think it’s time we head out, too.” He turns and winks at Gunnar. “I might turn into a pumpkin.”

We all stand, and when my father opens his arms, I step into them, returning his tight embrace. “Thank you for dinner. And for coming into town. I do appreciate the gesture.”

“Of course, *mon chéri*.” He kisses my cheeks and steps back.

“What time are you leaving tomorrow?”

“Our flight is at ten, so we won’t see you before we leave, unfortunately.” My father sighs. “You know, you could always come home for a visit. Maybe for Christmas?” He glances meaningfully at Gunnar. “You could show Gunnar where you grew up.”

“Yes, do. We would love to have you.” My mother smiles at Gunnar, and it makes my heart full, especially after their initial meeting. I slip my arm around her waist and pull her into a hug. “I love you, *maman*. Thank you for coming in. I promise I will visit soon. As soon as things settle down here.”

She kisses my cheek. “I hope so, *mon chou*. We miss you.”

With a lump in my throat and a smile on my face, I watch as my father kisses Astrid on her cheeks and hugs Gary, then walks around the table to pull Gunnar into a hug. “Take good care of my son. And please come visit. We’d love to have you.”

Gunnar looks a bit overwhelmed but recovers quickly, returning the hug. “Thank you, sir.”

“Guillaume. Please.”

“Guillaume. *Merci*.”

My father slaps him on the back a few times and steps back.

I lean my temple against my mother's, and she sighs. "I can see how much he cares for you, *mon chou*. And how much you care for him. I'm very glad that you've found someone. It makes me worry less about you here. I know you have friends, but it's not the same."

"Thank you, *maman*. That means a great deal to me."

She squeezes my hand and lets me go, moving toward Gunnar. When she pulls him into a hug, he glances at me, wide-eyed and somewhat panicky. "You make my son very happy, so I am happy, too. I apologize for my earlier behavior, and I hope we can start fresh."

Gunnar wraps an arm around her shoulders. "There is no need to apologize. You were already upset, and you knew nothing about me. Let's just call it extenuating circumstances and move on." Smiling, she pulls away, and Gunnar takes her hands in his. "I care for your son very much, Mrs. Allard. And I would never intentionally hurt him. I promise you, I will always try to make him happy."

"Please call me Livia. And that's all a mother can ask." She leans in and kisses his cheek again, then turns to say goodbye to Astrid and Gary.

Slipping my arms around Gunnar's waist, I rub my cheek against his beard. "Are you okay? You look a bit dazed."

I feel his chuckle rumble against my chest. "Yes, I suppose I am. Your parents love you very much, Joce."

I snort. “Sometimes too much. They can be overly protective.”

“Yes, but that’s what family does.”

Resting my cheek against his, I’m hit by an overwhelming need to be home with him, wrapped in his arms under the blankets. Socializing is fun, but I’ve had enough for one night. “I’m ready to go if you are. I feel like we haven’t had any time to ourselves today, and I want to get into bed and let you wrap yourself around me.”

“Oh, yeah?” I feel his smile against my temple. “I would very much like that, too. Holding you is the best part of my day.”

We say another round of quick goodbyes at the entrance, while the valet brings our cars. Once we’re on the road, I take Gunnar’s hand, close my eyes, and let my head fall back onto the headrest. He gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “You okay?”

“Mmmm. Just tired. Maybe a little tipsy.”

“Dinner went better than I expected.”

I nod, though he can’t see it in the dark. “Mmm. I knew it would be fine with Astrid and Gary there. They are like sunshine and charm personified.”

That makes Gunnar chuckle. “That’s it exactly.”

“Astrid’s stories helped, too. They showed your sweet side.”

The sound he makes is almost a growl. “I don’t have a sweet side.”

“Well, that’s not true. You’re always sweet to me.” He brings my hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to my fingers. “See? Just like that.” He grumbles a bit but doesn’t try to convince me otherwise, and the rest of the ride home is pleasant silence.

When Gunnar pulls into the garage, I moan pitifully. “I’m too tired to walk. Carry me.”

“Come on, you. The sooner we get inside, the sooner we can get into bed and snuggle.”

With one more groan of protest for good measure, I push my car door open. “*Chérie*, who knew you were such a teddy bear?”

He prods me out of the car. “First you tell me I’m sweet, and now you’re calling me a teddy bear. Geez, babe. You can’t tell anyone. It’ll ruin my reputation.”

Laughing, I let him lead me through the house and up the stairs. As we get ready for bed, I can’t help the bubbly feeling in my chest. We have a routine now. We know where each other will be and what we’ll do next. It’s so coupley, and it makes me happy.

I pull on sweats and one of Gunnar’s T-shirts and climb into bed, hauling the comforter up to my chin. “*Chérie*, I’m cold. I need you to warm me up.” Gunnar drops his clothes into the hamper and crawls into bed, tugging me against his chest. The heat pouring from him is heavenly. “How is it that you aren’t freezing?”

He wraps his arms around me, slotting his legs through mine. “I’m part bear. Remember?” Tucking his face into the crook of my neck, he nuzzles his beard against my skin, and holds me tightly. Things are quiet for a minute before Gunnar pulls back to look at me. “I like having you here. Even though your parents are leaving tomorrow, you could just stay the weekend.”

I smile and hug him, melting into his warmth. “Yes, please. Or we could stay at my place. Either is fine with me.” I yawn so widely it threatens to crack my jaw. “We can talk about it tomorrow.” And we will. I’ll make sure of it. Because I’m not ready to go back to sleeping alone. I’d miss him too much. Burrowing closer, I sigh, absolutely content. “*Bonne nuit, mon nounours.*”

Gunnar kisses my temple. “Sometime when I’m not exhausted, I’m going to ask you what that means.”

“It means good night, my teddy bear.”

He snorts and growls into my neck, making me laugh. “Night, babe.”

Gunnar

I turn off the bathroom light and tiptoe into the bedroom, trying to be as quiet as possible. Jocelin had a rough night, tossing and turning through most of it. I'm not sure if it's because his parents are going home today, or because there isn't an actual need for us to spend so much time together, or something else entirely. I know the idea of not seeing him as much makes my stomach feel icky.

“Morning.”

“Shit!” I slap my hand to my chest and suck in air. “Babe, what are you doing up? You should be sleeping.”

He sighs. “Just lying here, thinking about how my career has turned to shit and could be completely over any day now. I'm also trying not to hyperventilate. You know.” He waves a hand in the air. “The usual.” I eye him warily because he's not usually this pessimistic. Maybe it's the lack of sleep. He holds out his arms and makes grabby hands at me. “Hold me. I need you.”

Even when he's being dramatic, Jocelin is too adorable to resist. "Aww, baby." I drop the towel from around my waist and climb into bed, pulling him against me. "It'll be okay. Alistair loves you. He'll figure out what happened."

In a move I'm growing quite fond of, he tucks his face into my neck. "It's so nerve-racking. I'm not good at having nothing to do all day. And I know they're probably backed up at work. Plus, I didn't do anything wrong. It's all so ridiculous."

I hold him closer, desperately wanting to make things better. "I wish there was something I could do. But I'm sure Alistair will have answers soon."

He sighs and relaxes against me. "You're right." He kisses my neck and rolls away. "Why don't I make you a cup of tea while you finish getting dressed?"

"You don't have to, babe. Why don't you go back to sleep?"

He laughs. "That isn't going to happen. My brain is in high gear. There's no shutting it off now."

I get it, but it still seems so foreign. I'd have no problem crawling back into bed right now and falling asleep. "Okay, well, I'd love a cup of tea."

"Perfect." He kisses my cheek and heads out of the bedroom, leaving me to finish dressing, this time with the lights on.

Less than five minutes later, I stroll into the kitchen. Jocelin hands me a steaming mug, and I kiss his cheek. "Thank you, babe." I blow on the piping hot liquid, inhaling the rich scent

of the black tea. “It’s Friday. How about we do something fun tonight? Give you something to look forward to. What do you think?”

Jocelin eyes me skeptically. “Like what?”

I lean against the counter. “Well, what’s something you haven’t done in a while that might cheer you up?”

“Dancing.” He grins mischievously at me. It’s something he’s mentioned a few times, but the idea holds zero appeal.

Clubs have never been my scene. The few times I’ve gone with Astrid haven’t been pleasant, with more than one evening ending in a fistfight with some sleazy fuck who wouldn’t take her ‘no thank you’ as an answer. Plus, there’s the dancing. “I don’t dance, babe.”

He wags his finger at me. “That is an outright fib. You danced with me in this very kitchen. And you were quite good.”

I look sternly over the rim of my mug. “That’s different, and you know it. Dancing with my boyfriend in the kitchen while making dinner is not the same as going to a club. Plus, we were slow dancing.”

He winks at me but lets it drop. And that, of course, means I can’t stop thinking about it. It would be a great way to get all of his friends together. Stef would be a yes in a heartbeat, and so would Astrid and Gary. Blake might come too, and I could probably hang out with him. And if Blake and Stef are there, Tadhg and Quinn would definitely come. If Jules is up for it,

maybe he and Erik would tag along. He's doing much better with his social anxiety, but a club might still be too much. Maybe I could see about getting a private room or something... I glance at Jocelin and groan inwardly because I know I'm going to try to make this happen for him. He looks so sad, and I can't have that. A club would allow him to let loose, have a few drinks, and forget about everything for a bit.

"I don't know. We could always just stay in and watch movies or something."

I set down my tea and wrap him in my arms. "It's a date." I kiss his nose. "It'll be okay, babe. Try to stay positive."

"You better get going, or you'll be late." He presses up on his toes and kisses me softly. "Don't work too hard."

"I'll try not to." I squeeze him tightly and grab my keys from the bowl. "See you tonight, sweetheart." I'm almost out the door when his phone rings. Glancing back, I watch his smile fade as he stares at the screen. Then he blinks and hurries to answer the call. "Alistair. Good morning." Motioning to myself and then the garage, I raise my eyebrows, but Jocelin shakes his head and gestures for me to come back into the kitchen. I set down my laptop bag, and he grabs my hand, holding it in a vice grip. "Alistair, please don't beat yourself up over it. You did what was necessary to protect the firm. If our roles had been reversed, I would have done exactly the same." There's a pause before Jocelin's eyes widen, and his mouth opens and closes a few times, like he's struggling to form words. "Alistair, that is completely unnecessary! Really!

I'm just glad things have worked out. Are you able to tell me what you found?" His brows knit together, and he glances at me. "The authorities? Is that really necessary?" There's another pause, and then Jocelin sags back against the counter, looking a little stunned. "I see your point. Okay. Thank you for calling, Alistair. Goodbye."

He ends the call and looks at me, eyes blinking rapidly. "I've been cleared."

I launch myself at him, grabbing him in a tight hug. "Joce! That's fantastic! What did Alistair say?"

"If you want me to tell you, you'll have to let go so I can breathe."

Laughing, I kiss the side of his head before relaxing my grip and taking a step back. "Okay. What did he say?"

A slow grin spreads across his face. "He said the IT report came back, and they have everything they need to prove I wasn't at fault. He couldn't really tell me details because several things are happening at once, but he promised me at least a few answers when I'm back to work."

I grab him again and kiss him soundly on the lips. "Yes! I knew you'd be cleared. I don't think Alistair ever believed you were to blame."

"He said that, actually. And he apologized for the stress this caused me." His excitement fades, and he winces. "He wants to give me a bonus of two months' pay. I told him no."

I laugh until I realize he's serious. "What? Why?"

“Because it’s excessive when he had no choice in the matter.”

“But you were innocent and put through the embarrassment of being escorted publicly out of work. And Joce, I saw what it did to you. No offense, but you were a mess. For that alone, you deserve a ridiculous amount of compensation.”

He chews at his bottom lip and still looks dubious, but hopefully he’s considering it. “At least the stress is over.”

I squeeze him tightly. “Are we allowed to tell people?”

“I’m not sure. I should probably check with Alistair before we tell anyone. Let’s just keep it between the two of us for now.”

“Well, this calls for some kind of celebration. I’ll have to think of something.”

Jocelin grins up at me, holding my gaze. “I’m very glad I have you in my life, Gunnar Osouf. Thank you for being with me through this ordeal.”

I grab his hand, bringing his palm to my lips. “I’m very glad to be in your life, Jocelin Allard. And you are welcome. I’m grateful you let me be here for you.” I stroke his cheek. “You make me very happy.”

With him going back to work soon, all our lovely domesticity will probably come to an end, at least during the week, and I’m going to miss it. “Did Alistair say when you’ll be going back to the office?”

“Nothing specific. He just said another week or so while they deal with the fallout and cleanup. I’m guessing a week.”

“Well, I was thinking. Until you go back, we could still stay together. It doesn’t have to be here. It could be at your loft. Unless you need some space, which I totally get.”

Jocelin’s grin is instantaneous. “I love that idea.”

Relief washes through me. I was actually nervous he’d want space, and I’m kind of surprised he doesn’t. I’m also surprised *I* don’t. “Only if you’re sure. And if it won’t upset Dracona too much to be relocated.”

His head snaps up. “Are you sure you don’t mind me bringing her here? I could always get a neighbor to stop in and feed her.”

I raise my eyebrows and smirk. “Joce. You’ve already been away from her for a few days. And while she can probably handle one more, I’m not sure you can.”

He grins sheepishly. “I do miss her. As long as you’re sure.”

“Tell you what. Why don’t we head back to your place tonight after work, and we can pack up her stuff, and yours. Then we can come back here and watch a movie or something, let her get used to the place.”

Jocelin kisses me on the cheek. “Thank you, *mon cœur*.”

“You are very welcome. It’s the least I can do for my boyfriend.” I kiss him one more time, grab my laptop bag, and head to work.

Jocelin

“Jocelin, whatever you are comfortable wearing is fine. There’s no dress code.” I stare into my closet while Gunnar pulls his skin-tight gray T-shirt over his head, then slips his arms around my waist.

I lean back against him and sigh. “Why won’t you tell me where we’re going? Then I would know exactly what to wear.” His beard tickles my neck, and I laugh when he bites my shoulder playfully. “Seriously, Gunnar, I’m stressing about this!”

Sighing dramatically, he props his chin on my shoulder. “Fine. Casual is appropriate. You see what I’m wearing.” He lets me go and does a little spin with his arms outstretched.

I take full advantage and openly appreciate the way his T-shirt clings to his rippling muscles, and the jeans hug his perfect ass and thick thighs. I am one very, very lucky man. “You’d be sexy as hell in a burlap sack, *mon chéri*. But those black jeans look amazing on you.”

Gunnar kisses my temple. “Thank you, babe. You’re stressing over nothing. Wear jeans. Pick a shirt you like. Nothing too dressy. And wear comfortable shoes. We might be standing a lot.”

I wave a hand in the general direction of his biker boots. “And those are comfortable?”

He smirks and flexes his ridiculously sexy biceps. “Gotta keep up my bad boy image. And actually, yes, they are.”

I roll my eyes. “Hmm. Well, at least that gives me a little more to work with.” I pull several shirts from my closet, laying them out on the bed.

“Before I get roped into helping you pick which one, I’m going to grab a beer from the fridge. Do you want one? Or a glass of wine?”

I frown at his retreating back. “Aren’t you driving?”

“Nope.” He pops the ‘p’. “We’re taking a rideshare since we’re staying here tonight.”

We’re actually staying here in my loft this entire weekend so Dracona can settle in after our week at Gunnar’s, and I can get ready to go back to work this coming Monday. “Well, in that case, yes. I’d love a glass of red.”

Fussing over shirt options, I finally settle on a dark blue button-down with the cuffs rolled up my forearms, slim jeans, black belt, and black suede ankle boots. I accessorize with the snake earrings Gunnar bought me, and with significantly less anxiety now that clothing has been settled, I do a last check in

the mirror. Happy with my appearance, I go downstairs to get Gunnar's final approval. I do a little spin of my own, which earns me a wolf-whistle. "Looking good, babe." He snags me around the waist and pulls me against his chest. "Really good. I love the earrings. Nice touch."

I shrug like it's no big deal. "Thanks. My boyfriend got them for me. He's very thoughtful like that."

His grin is a mile wide. "And he has good taste."

"In earrings and boyfriends." I smooth my hands across his pecs. "Speaking of looking good..."

He tsks at me. "Careful. What will your boyfriend think?" Handing me my wine, he picks up his ale and offers a toast. "To finally clearing your good name, even though we knew it would happen, and to your reinstatement at work." We clink glasses and drink.

I hum at the delicious plum and cherry notes, then set down my glass so I don't spill any while I lean into Gunnar. I'd hate to ruin either of our outfits and have to choose again. "So you seriously won't tell me where we're going or what we're doing? Not even a little hint?" I give him my best puppy eyes.

Gunnar groans. "Don't do that to me, baby. You *know* that look is my kryptonite."

I love that he tells me things like that. He's so open with his feelings, and it's refreshing. "That's why I do it, of course. And don't even try to tell me you don't do it right back, when it suits you."

“Fair point.” He takes my hand and kisses my palm. Just that little brush of his lips sends shivers through me, making my belly swoop. “Baby, let me surprise you with this. Please? We’re celebrating. I want to do something nice for you. And I promise you’ll love it.”

I can’t even be annoyed because his motivation is just too sweet. Gunnar going to this much trouble to surprise me makes my heart feel far too big for my chest. “Fine. I’ll trust you.” I point at him. “But if it’s not a good surprise, I reserve the right to throw it back at you forever.”

“Forever, huh?” Gunnar’s grin is equal parts adorable and smug. “So you’re planning on us being together forever? I like that.”

The heat pouring off my cheeks could light the house on fire, but I don’t back away from the comment. “Let’s say I’m allowing for the possibility, and things look promising. *So far.*”

Gunnar’s fingers slide into my hair as his lips possessively claim a kiss that melts my brain and has my cock testing the integrity of my jeans. I moan and slip my hands under the hem of his T-shirt, gliding them over his warm skin, absolutely on board with taking things further. Unfortunately, the universe has other ideas.

An insistent buzzing breaks the mood. I’m all for ignoring it, but Gunnar obviously isn’t. He ends our kiss and pulls his phone out of his pocket, checking the screen. “Ride’s here. Ready to go?”

I wave him toward the elevator, a little disappointed I'm not distracting enough, when I have the bulge in my jeans to prove he obviously is. "Absolutely. Lead on."

We ride to the lobby and climb into the back of our rideshare. "You know, I should make you close your eyes, but I won't. You'll figure out where we're headed soon enough." Our driver pulls away from the curb, and Gunnar's phone buzzes again.

"Aren't you Mr. Popular this evening." He gives me a wink but doesn't explain. During the ride, he gets a few more texts, which he quickly replies to, smirking the whole time. It's infuriating but also kind of cute, and surprisingly, my anticipation is building. Less than fifteen minutes later, we pull up to the front of Club Cake, and I stare at Gunnar, my mouth open in disbelief. "Are you serious?" I point at the club entrance. "We're going in *there*? You're really going in there?" He nods. "You know this is a club. With dancing."

"Babe, I know what goes on in a club." Gunnar opens the rideshare app, pays the driver, then slides out of the car, offering me a helping hand. "This is a celebration, Joce. It deserves something memorable to mark the occasion." He slips his arm around me, pulling me toward the door, bypassing the line.

"Gunnar..." I gesture toward the waiting people. "Shouldn't we..."

He squeezes me around the waist. "Nope."

I hold my breath and wait for the bouncer to send us to the back of the line. Instead, Gunnar hands him a card, and we're waved through. My mouth drops open again, and I stare incredulously at Gunnar, who is quite smug as he leads me inside. A very large bald man in a black T-shirt with SECURITY written across the back ushers us up a flight of stairs, to a part of the club I've never seen before. When we step through a dark velvet curtain, a cheer erupts. I stop in my tracks, and gape at the grinning faces of my friends. Even Jules is here, and I'm overwhelmed by emotion. "Gunnar?" He meets my eyes, grinning excitedly, and I'm about to launch myself into his arms when Astrid grabs me in a tight hug. Laughing, I hug her back, blinking away the prickling in my eyes. "This was your doing, wasn't it?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. I just suggested the venue, and Gary got the room and the passes. But it was Gunnar's idea." I glance around curiously; I've never been in any of the club's private VIP lounges before tonight. It overlooks the dance floor and has its own bar, bartender, and bathroom, so guests don't have to mingle with the masses unless they want to.

"I need to thank them both profusely for this."

She tugs me further into the lounge. "Gary will accept a hug in payment. I don't want to know how you plan to thank Gunnar." I laugh, feeling lighter than I have since the whole work ordeal started. "Come on. Everyone wants to say hello."

I wander through the room, hugging my friends, catching up with each of them. Gunnar hands me a glass of red wine and

kisses my cheek but hangs back with Gary and Blake, giving me time to say hello to everyone. Once I've made my rounds, I find him and slip my arms around his waist. "Thank you for this. I know clubs aren't your thing, but I couldn't have asked for a better surprise." He leans down and kisses me softly, resting his forehead against mine. I don't even care that this is the first time most of my friends are seeing us together. I'm overwhelmed by the sweetness of his gesture, and he deserves to know. "You are too good to me."

"You went through hell for no reason, babe. You deserve some fun, now that you can relax." He gestures around the room. "And this private area makes it tolerable. No crowds. No line at the bar. No gross bathrooms, with people having sex in the hallway."

I squeeze him tight. "Well, thank you. And because you did this for me, I won't make you dance. Stef and Astrid are here, and they'll keep me company."

Gunnar wipes his forehead like he'd been worried. "Whew! Dodged that bullet."

I pinch his arm, and he laughs, then I pull him into another kiss, this one soft and slow, trying to show him how absolutely wonderful he is and how grateful I am for all he's done to make tonight happen. He hums against my lips, smiling as the kiss ends. "That was nice."

I wink at him. "Just wait until later, when I show you exactly how much I appreciate you."

Gunnar

Astrid pulls me aside, and we lean against the bar. “So have you told him yet?”

I groan internally and shake my head. “No. I’m hoping to get through tonight without him knowing.”

She rolls her eyes. “Not likely. You’re going to slow dance with him, at least. Right?”

I grimace. “Yes, Astrid. I’ll slow dance.”

Jocelin appears with drinks and hands me a glass of beer. It’s a rich golden brown color and smells strongly of hops. “What’s this?”

“The Immortal. Someone told Erik he looks like Thor, and once Erik found out this was on tap, he ordered one for you and made me promise to tell you it’s from your brother, the god of thunder.” I snort and take a sip, smiling at how smoothly it goes down. “Okay, he’s an ass, but I forgive him. This is pretty good.”

Astrid steals my glass and takes a sip, nodding. “Yeah, that *is* pretty good.”

I pluck it from her thieving hands. “Get your own.”

Jocelin gestures over his shoulder. “Gary has your drink, Astrid. He was right behind me.” As if on cue, Gary appears, hands Astrid a white wine, then slips an arm around her waist. Jocelin sways in place, glancing longingly at the dance floor packed with happy, laughing people.

Astrid nudges me and nods toward Jocelin, then jerks her head in the direction of the gyrating crowd. I take the hint. “Joce, you wanna dance?”

His smile is brighter than a thousand-watt light bulb and makes my heart race a little faster. “Yes, please.” I take another sip of my ale and reluctantly hand it to Astrid. “Don’t drink it.” Grabbing Jocelin’s hand, I lead him down the stairs and onto the dance floor. When I look back, Astrid takes a sip of my beer and laughs. I shoot her a scowl, but Jocelin bounces excitedly and starts moving to the music. As promised, I manage a passable shuffle. Jocelin closes his eyes, sinking into the music, swaying seductively. His body is like liquid energy, pulsing with the heavy base, primal in his movements. I’m captivated. My pulse races, and I step closer, drawn to him like a moth to a flame. A few other men turn to watch and I scowl, growling a warning, even if they can’t hear it. Jocelin isn’t my property, but hell yes, I’m marking my territory, and growling at them is better than pissing on them. I’m almost certain Jocelin would agree. As if he can sense I’m

thinking about him, he opens his beautiful eyes and smiles, utterly happy and completely focused on me. My hackles lower.

Stef, Josie, and Astrid join us on the dance floor, laughing and encouraging each other to more outrageous moves. Stef has several admirers, and so many people hug them and say hello, I wonder how Blake feels about it. When I glance over, he's watching Stef but he's smiling, and relaxed. Not at all jealous. Maybe that's the benefit of age, but I don't have that in me.

I turn back to the group in time to see my sister and Stef doing some kind of semi-choreographed moves. Astrid took years of dance classes and loves getting out and showing off. Stef obviously has training as well. I can't tell if Josie ever took dance, but she definitely holds her own. No one can accuse this crew of hating attention.

I touch Jocelin's arm, gesturing to myself and then to the spot near the downstairs bar, where Tom, Quinn, and Gary have staked out a spot. Joce is in the capable hands of his friends, so I don't feel guilty about leaving him. He nods, pulling me down for a quick kiss, and I slip away. As I approach Gary, he hands me my ale and nods toward the dance floor. "You haven't told him yet?"

I scowl. "My sister needs to keep her big mouth shut."

Gary smirks and points to his chest. "Boyfriend. I get to know everything." He nods toward our friends. "Looks like a few people have noticed them." I whip my head around and

scope out the crowd, my eyes immediately drawn to Jocelin. He's beautiful on a normal day, and tonight, lost to the music, he's stunning. He's giving fluid, sweet, happy energy, with a definite undercurrent of smoking hot. And there are three guys sniffing around the group. *This* is why I hate clubbing. There are always feral dogs cruising for fresh meat.

They don't make any moves, so I stay where I am and watch as Jocelin and our friends dance to a few more songs. Astrid eventually takes a break while Quinn and Tadhg join the others on the dance floor.

We've only been here about an hour when the feel of the crowd changes. A particularly beat-heavy song starts playing, and one of the guys who's been hovering around Jocelin makes his move. I growl but stay put. Jocelin is a big boy and can handle himself. He's also with our friends, and I trust them to keep each other safe. Astrid nudges me, grinning like she knows what's bothering me. "You gonna stand there and let that creep horn in on your man? Or are you gonna do something about it?"

I glare daggers at the guy but hesitate, not wanting to make a scene. The creep reaches for Joce, and before I know it, I'm handing Astrid my drink. "So much for keeping things a secret. But fuck it."

Astrid's smile widens, and she claps her hands. "Yes! Go get 'em, baby brother! Show them your moves!"

Jocelin

The music is electrifying, the beat thumping in my chest, and I let the rhythm move me. I'm energized, alive like I haven't felt in weeks, and I can't stop smiling. It would be nice if Gunnar would dance more, even if it's just his little shuffle, but dancing isn't everyone's joy, and he arranged this whole thing for me. I'm beyond thrilled about that, and Gunnar did dance with me. That means something.

Someone bumps into me, which isn't surprising, given how packed the dance floor is. I look over my shoulder, smiling an apology, but the guy must misinterpret my meaning. He moves closer, looming into my space in a way that makes me immediately uncomfortable. He's taller than my five foot eleven, and he obviously works out. He reaches for me and I step away, but he follows, trying to grind against me. He makes a grab for my hips, and I step back again, shaking my head. "I'm here with someone."

He smiles, but his gaze is more predator than friend. "I don't see anyone. C'mon, beautiful. Dance with me." As the current

song ebbs, blending into the opening notes of Rihanna's S&M, the guy grins, reaching for me again. This time, I turn toward the bar, ready to leave—and stop moving for the first time since stepping onto the dance floor. Gunnar is stalking toward us, with a pissed off look on his face. No, I'm wrong. Stalking isn't quite the right word. There's way too much swagger in his step for that... and is he actually striding toward us on beat? He meets my gaze, eyes devouring me, owning me, and good god, it's so damned hot. I'm mesmerized, my heart pounding louder than the music, and I can't look anywhere but at him.

He slides between the creepy guy and me, rolling his hips to the music and running his hands across his own chest, stroking his body like some Magic Mike dancer. My eyes drop to his hips as he seductively strokes his hands over his thighs before sliding upward. He slips his fingers into his hair, flexing, showing off his massive biceps and pecs before reaching for the back of his shirt. My mouth goes dry, and I swear I forget how to breathe. Shit, he's not going to...

Gunnar pulls the tight gray tee over his head and tosses it at me with a wink, his hips continuing to roll seductively. I'm so hard right now, it's making me a bit dizzy. Unashamedly, I gawk at the now naked expanse of tight muscles as he dances closer, his focus solely on me, as if no one else is in the club. I lick my lips and toss the shirt to Tadhg before stepping into Gunnar's space. I need to touch him, stroke his bare skin and trace the tattoos that move with his tight, gorgeous body. Fuck, he's sex personified, his hips surging with the beat, his

delicious scent filling my nose and calling me like the most potent musk. I swear, I'm going to lose my mind. Or come. Possibly both.

Gunnar grabs my hand, pulling me roughly against his chest, fondling my ass as he rolls our hips together. I groan and caress his pecs as his hard cock grinds against mine. He grins wickedly, flipping me around, grinding against my ass as his hand slides down my abs to cup my cock, giving it a light squeeze as he pulls me tighter against him. When Gunnar's other hand snakes up my torso, circling my throat, hips still gyrating against me, I really do think I'm going to come. I close my eyes and inhale, trying to calm my impulse to drag him off to a dark corner and fuck. His lips tease the sensitive spot on my neck, and I moan, tilting my head to the side. I'm not expecting the bite or the surge of lust that almost buckles my knees. He sucks and licks the spot as he strokes me through my jeans, our hips rolling to the beat. Bodies writhe around us as the song thumps out a primal rhythm. Gunnar fills all of my senses, and god I want him.

I slide my hand over my body and up his neck to weave into his hair, stroking the other down his arm until my hand covers the one cupping my cock. I lean against his broad chest, letting him lead. He controls how we move and where we go. I grind against his palm, and his mouth settles against my ear, his warm breath teasing my skin. "You're mine." He squeezes my cock, making me groan with pleasure. He growls in my ear. "Say it. Tell me you're mine." His possessiveness is a live wire connected directly to my balls, sending jolts of pleasure

zipping through me. Possessiveness never did it for me before, but this is Gunnar, and I trust him. And that makes all the difference.

The song melds into the sultry beat of Tov Lo's Talking Body. Gunnar spins me around again, pulling me against his chest, one hand in the center of my back and the other on my ass. We grind to the sensual rhythm, and I completely surrender to Gunnar's seductive movements, letting him lead, uncaring that people are watching. That our friends are watching. I need this like I need to breathe. I need him. "Say it."

Gliding my hands across his shoulders, licking his skin, tasting the sweat and salt, I inhale his sweet scent. "I am yours. Always." With little care for who can see, I slide my hand between his legs, cupping his cock, stroking him through his jeans. "But you're mine."

Gunnar groans and thrusts into my palm. "Fuck, baby. Yes. I am. And I'm so damned hard for you."

I look into his eyes, holding his gaze. "So come. Right here. Or take me somewhere and fuck me."

He turns on his heel, pulling me from the dance floor. I ignore Gary's wolf whistle and Astrid's cheer as I'm dragged past the group and up the stairs to the VIP lounge. We pass Erik and Jules, who are coming down the stairs, and Erik stops, concern on his face. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just gotta show Joce something." Erik laughs as Gunnar takes the rest of the stairs two at a time, and I hurry to

keep up. Thankfully, the lounge is empty, and Gunnar turns, reaching for me, but I shake my head. “Too exposed. Someone could walk in.”

He growls and glances around, then strides into the private bathroom, hauling me after him. Kicking the door closed, he spins me so my back slams against it. “Better?”

I turn the lock, then nod. “Much.”

“Good.” In an instant, we’re desperately fumbling at our zippers. The pulsing beat of the music through the bathroom door matches the throbbing in my cock, and I whimper as Gunnar yanks my jeans down to my knees. His are already around his thighs, his thick cock hard and leaking. I moan as he steps closer, forcing me back against the door as he wraps his big hand around us both, stroking firmly. I’m dizzy with need, desperate to have him inside me, but it’s too risky here.

“Fuck, that feels so good.” I pull my shirttails out of the way and thrust into his fist.

Gunnar’s rough voice rumbles in my ear. “Tell me you want me. Tell me you want *only* me.”

I’m so close I can barely think. “*Oui! Seulement tois. Personne d’autre.*” I thrust mindlessly against him, digging my fingers into his shoulders as my orgasm slams through me with a ferocity that almost buckles my legs.

“Mine.” Gunnar thrusts into his now slick hand. “Only”—he thrusts again—“mine.” His fingers dig into my hip as his eyes

squeeze shut, and his body shudders against me, warmth flowing over our already wet cocks.

“Yes.” I nod against the door as his strokes slow, and his hips stop jerking. “Only yours.” Gunnar drops his head to my shoulder and leans into me as we catch our breath. After a moment, he raises his head and kisses me softly before backing up. Weak-kneed, we stumble away from each other. Gunnar turns toward the sink, rinsing his hand and opening a small packet of wipes, taking a few and handing me the rest. Chuckling, I clean up and tuck myself back in my jeans. “Very convenient. I guess the club knows its clientele.”

“Probably makes more sense to have them than to try to clean up after.”

I grimace at the thought and make sure the used wipes go into the trash. Gunnar pulls me into his arms and brushes his lips against mine. “You okay?”

“Mmm. I’m amazing. How’re you?”

He grins impishly. “Also amazing.” He lets me go and opens the bathroom door. “You ready to face the ribbing from our friends?”

I snort. “Don’t think we have much choice. Even if we duck out now, we’ll see them all at some point, probably not together like this, and that means solo teasing. I’d much rather go through that as a united front and get it over with all at once.”

Holding hands, we walk back down to the bar, Gunnar leading the way. Tom starts whistling, and Erik and Gary both cheer while everyone else claps. Gunnar strolls through the middle of the group, leans against the bar, pulls me against his chest, and wraps his arms around me. “Go ahead, get it out of your system.”

Erik elbows Gunnar. “Just tell me you cleaned up after yourself. I don’t want to slip in anything when I go get my coat.” Gunnar just grins.

Stef smirks. “Don’t worry about it.” They share some kind of look with Blake. “It happens to the best of us.”

I hold up a hand and shake my head. “No. I don’t want to know.”

Stef laughs. “What do you think those little crystal bowls are for?”

Blake pulls Stef close and kisses them. “Stop giving away our secrets.”

Tom comes to my rescue, changing the subject. “Well, Gunnar.” Tom eyes him appraisingly. “Who knew beneath that grumpy exterior beats the heart of an exotic dancer?”

Astrid’s hand shoots up. “I did!”

Gary raises his as well. “Boyfriend privileges.”

“Gunnar took dance lessons with me for years, when we were younger.” Astrid grins. “He hated every minute of it, but I didn’t want to go alone. I made him come with me.”

I lean back so he can hear me. “Why did you hate it?”

Astrid chuckles. “He was one of only a few boys in the class, and all the girls wanted him to be their partner. He hated the attention.”

“Well, you obviously picked up some dance moves. Damn, Osouf, never in a million years would I have expected anything like that display.” Tom imitates a few of Gunnar’s moves, making everyone laugh.

Gunnar holds up a hand, wincing. “Please stop. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

We’re done dancing on the main floor, so we move the party back upstairs and spend the rest of the evening hanging out and dancing in the private lounge. A slow song plays, and Gunnar pulls me into his arms. Swaying to the music, we kiss softly, and I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy. “Thank you for tonight. This was amazing.”

“You’re welcome.” Gunnar looks over his shoulder. “Seems like everything is starting to wind down.” He chuckles. “We aren’t as young as we used to be.”

I snuggle against him and rest my cheek against his chest. “True. And I am getting sleepy. But let’s leave after this song. Because I’m not ready for this magical evening to end.”

Gunnar

Bjorn holds out a dripping pot, and I grab it, wondering again how we got stuck with dish duty. Laughter drifts in from the living room, and I crane my neck to see what's happening. Bjorn grins at me. "Jocelin fits seamlessly into our motley crew." It's on the tip of my tongue to ask why he thought that wouldn't be the case, but I stop myself. I must not do a good job of hiding my annoyance, though, because Bjorn drains the sink and shuts off the faucet, then leans a hip against the counter. "I'm glad you found him. It's nice to see you happy."

It's the last thing I expect him to say, and my annoyance fizzles away. "Thanks." I take longer than needed to dry the last pot so I have time to reframe our conversation. "He found me, though."

"Ah, that's right. You were fake, fake-boyfriends." We both grin. "He's good for you. And it seems like you're really good for him." Bjorn sighs and glances toward the living room before turning a bittersweet smile my way. "You've all found

your people. Everyone's a grown-assed adult now, with your own lives and shit."

I laugh and put the pot away in the cupboard. "You just notice that?"

He shrugs and then frowns at me. "Don't get mad when I say this, but I suppose this is how empty-nester parents feel when their last kid grows up and leaves home for good."

I resist making a dad reference, mostly because I can see he expects it, and we're having a decent conversation. I don't want to be the one to derail it this time. "Don't parents usually celebrate?" I hang the dish towel on the oven bar and turn to lean on the counter next to Bjorn, nudging his shoulder with mine. "The kids are gone! We get our lives back!"

He snorts and looks out the window into the dark. "You know I didn't step in so I could be in control."

"Yeah. I know." And I do. Bjorn had no choice but to be the adult figure in the family. Astrid and I were still six months away from turning eighteen, and the courts required it. "Aside from the legal reasons, it was your way of grieving as well as honoring Mom and Dad. You were trying to keep us all together."

Bjorn's head snaps around, shock plain on his face. "Yes. Exactly."

I shoulder bump him again. "I figured that out not long after Jules called me on my bullshit with Erik." I blush, remembering how I'd accused Erik of running away from both

his problems and me, and Jules' incredible bravery, defending Erik when Erik wouldn't defend himself. Jules basically shamed me into getting my shit together. "It got me thinking, if I had Erik's motives so wrong, what made me think I'd gotten yours right?" Bjorn's jaw drops, and I laugh. "Don't look so shocked. I may be pig headed sometimes, but I'm not totally clueless, regardless of how I might act. I also didn't do it on my own. Cassandra helped." My therapist never took my crap excuses and called me on my shit. I respect her immensely for it.

"Thank you. I mean that." Bjorn holds my gaze. "Hearing you say that means more than you know. I never wanted to fight with you."

I rub my neck and nod. "Yeah, I know. I'm just not always great at remembering that." I nudge him again. "But now you can go have a life. Find your own person."

That makes him laugh. "I'm way too much for one guy to handle."

I make fake gagging noises. "Okay, TMI."

"Fuck off." Laughing, he shoves me. "I didn't mean in bed." He sobers and shrugs. "I meant in general. I'm a lot." He snorts. "We all are, in our own ways, I guess."

"Except Astrid."

Bjorn nods. "Yeah. Except Bean. She figured shit out early."

"But to your earlier point, we each found our person, so why can't you? Maybe now that you're an empty nester, it'll be

your turn.”

He shrugs. “Maybe.”

When he nudges me again, it occurs to me that this might be Bjorn’s way of getting some human touch. I push off the counter and turn toward him, my arms open. “I love you, Bjorn. Thank you for putting up with me.” I pull him into a hug.

At first he hesitates—most likely from shock—but then he wraps his arms around me and crushes me to him. “I love you too.” His voice is thick and barely a whisper, but I hear him. It’s been too long since we’ve said those words as anything but an expected call and response. But tonight, they ring true. And it means the world.

Jocelin

“Shit!” I throw the razor in the sink and press a hand towel to my neck to stop the bleeding. “That’s it. I’m growing a damned beard.”

Gunnar pokes his head into the bathroom. “You okay?” Eyeing the towel pressed to my neck and the razor in the sink, he comes to stand next to me, slipping his arms around my waist. Our eyes meet in the mirror. “Nervous?”

I sigh and lean back against him. While I enjoyed spending time at Gunnar’s house, I’m grateful to be back in my own space. Waking up in my bed, surrounded by my things calmed some of my nerves. Unfortunately, it didn’t fix all of them. “You’d think this was my first day ever instead of my first day back.”

“Nerves are understandable, babe. You don’t know how it’s going to go today. But just remember, I’m thinking about you, and I’ll always have your back. Plus, Astrid is only an elevator ride away, if you need someone’s ass kicked.”

That makes me chuckle. “True. I would never want to be on Astrid’s bad side.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” Gunnar kisses my foam-covered cheek, and I laugh at his now white splotched beard and mustache. He’s going to be a sexy as hell silver fox someday. “Want me to take a look at your cut?”

I smirk. “Is cut a euphemism for something else? Because I don’t have time for that.” Gunnar pulls the towel away from my neck and examines the nick. I watch in the mirror, not seeing much bleeding, so I pick up the razor and finish the job.

“Nope. Not a euphemism.” He uses the towel to wipe the shaving cream from his face. “And it looks like you have things under control here, so I’m going to finish getting dressed.” He puckers up, carefully kissing my un-foamy lips, and leaves me to it.

I manage the rest of my morning routine without incident, and when I get to the kitchen, Gunnar has a fresh cup of tea waiting for me. “I have to take off, if I’m going to make it to the office on time. I’ll need to figure out the whole rush hour commute times, I guess.”

I snap my gaze to his. “Oh?” I don’t want to jump to conclusions. Especially if he’s saying what I think he is.

Gunnar smiles shyly and wraps his arms around me. “Well, you work downtown. And live downtown. And you don’t have a car. But I do. You have a pet, and I don’t. So...” He shrugs. “I like being with you, Joce. Going to sleep with you pressed against me and waking up with you are the best parts of my

day, and I'm not ready to give that up." His cheeks redden. "Unless you need some space, which I get. And in that case, I can just stay at my house, and we can see each other on the weekends, or whatever."

"Gunnar." I put my hands on either side of his face. "Those are the best parts of my day, too. And I want you here. I don't need or want any space from you." My heart is soaring. He wants to stay with me. I wrap my arms around his neck and press my lips to his, trying to convey everything I feel for him in this kiss. Reluctantly, I step back. If I don't, then we'll both be late for work. "You'd better go." I grin. "Traffic."

Gunnar nods, looking a little dazed and a lot turned on. I may feel more than a tad smug about it. He strokes my cheek and grabs his laptop bag. "Call me later, and let me know how your morning goes."

"I will. Drive safely." As the elevator doors close, I glance at the time. Alistair wants me to come in earlier than usual to meet with him. He still hasn't filled me in, and he promised me answers this morning. I only hope my professional reputation doesn't suffer because of this.



Taking a steadying breath, I knock on Alistair's office door. Thankfully, his reply is quick, and he sounds upbeat. "Come in."

I poke my head in the office. “Good morning, Alistair. You wanted to see me before everyone else got here?”

He stands, coming around his desk to offer me his hand. “Jocelin, welcome back.” We shake, and I manage not to squawk in surprise as he pulls me into a quick hug. “Here, have a seat.” He motions to one of the leather chairs and drops into the one beside me instead of sitting behind his desk. “I’ll get right to the point. We know what happened, and things are going to be chaos this morning once the news gets out. That’s why I asked you to come in early. I wanted a chance to talk to you first.”

His body language is open and almost excited, and while it doesn’t necessarily put me at ease, it does lessen the concern for my own situation. “What news?”

“Victor was let go yesterday, and Victoria will no longer be a partner here. Nando and I are buying her out.” I’m stunned speechless, which is all well and good since Alistair isn’t finished. “According to what the IT forensic analysts found, Victor was responsible for the issues with the Hansley contract. Long story short, mostly because I can’t go into many details due to pending legal deals, Victoria instructed our IT company to grant Victor access to your client files, under the assumption that he would be taking them over from you. She didn’t specify which files, so IT granted him access to all of them, including the Hansley contract. Older versions of the contract were on the server and have been reproduced. It’s clear you had the correct language and clauses in your version, though it looks like you went in and removed several

key words the day you sent me the link to the file. However, the time stamp was while you were still at lunch. That was confirmed by several people, including your assistant, who saw you come back.” His sigh is long and exasperated. “Then it was a lot of piecing timelines together and figuring out who was where. That led us to Victor. When we confronted him, he eventually admitted to sabotaging the contract. He wasn’t aware it was for one of my clients.” Alistair rubs the back of his neck and ducks his head. “I’m not sure why he thought that was an important distinction. A contract is a contract. Anyway, I apologize. I had no idea he’d been pursuing you romantically until you said something, or we’d have put a stop to it sooner.”

I lean back in my chair, utterly amazed at the lengths Victor went to. “I assure you, I was very clear that I wasn’t interested.”

Alistair nods. “Of course you weren’t interested. You have a boyfriend.”

I do. And now I have a choice. I can continue the narrative that Gunnar and I were already dating before we really were, or I can tell Alistair the truth. There might not be any benefit to it, other than being honest with a man I respect. I clear my throat. “About that. Gunnar and I are absolutely together. And he is my boyfriend.” Alistair frowns, obviously confused as to where I’m going with my little speech. “But we weren’t officially dating until the Sunday after Gary’s book signing.”

Alistair looks confused and a bit hurt. “Okay. So why say you were?”

“Victor. He was very persistent, constantly asking me out, so I told him I had a boyfriend.”

“But you didn’t.”

I nod. “Exactly. Then at Gary’s book launch, Victor cornered me again, and I saw Gunnar and roped him into playing my boyfriend so Victor would leave me alone.” This time, Alistair stays silent, letting me finish. “But Gunnar and I hit it off, and by the end of that weekend, we were really dating.”

Alistair sits quietly for a moment and then sighs. “While I’m disappointed you didn’t feel you could tell me Victor was harassing you, I see how that could have made it challenging to mention your arrangement with Gunnar. It’s clear how things might have gotten away from you. Thank you for telling me now.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

Alistair nods and slaps his thighs. “In the end, everything is working out for the better. Between you and Gunnar as well as with Victoria and the firm. She granted Victor access to your client files, in direct violation of the company confidentiality and client protection policies. It’s a breach of ethics, and rather than have that information become public, she’s agreed to allow us to buy out her share of the company. Thank god. She’s been a toxic force here long enough.”

I’m amazed and elated. This is so much better than I could have hoped for. “I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you. Everything else is under non-disclosure agreements.” He holds out his

hand, and I take it. “Glad to have you back, Jocelin. You were missed.”

“Thank you. I’m very glad to be back. So what happens now?” I can imagine the amount of chaos that will erupt once this gets out to the firm. I’ll probably need to review every one of my pending contracts.

“Damage control. It’s not going to reflect well on us, and we could lose several of Victor’s clients because of it. Nando and I are already in negotiation with our cyber security firm to put new protocols in place. We’ve kept things quiet, so there isn’t much concern about clients finding out. You should be prepared for an onslaught of questions and try to answer as vaguely as possible. The less that gets out to the office, the better. The only reason I’m telling you is because you were directly involved. As of now, you’re back on contracts, and I’m putting you in charge of that department.”

I stare at him, replaying the words in my head, because I must have heard incorrectly. “Excuse me?”

“Nando and I have every confidence you’ll be perfect for the role.”

Words fail me. I’m not sure what to say, as this is the last thing I imagined happening. “Thank you. I’m overwhelmed by your faith in me. But I’m going to make sure you don’t feel it’s misplaced.” I gesture toward the door. “I’ll go back to my desk and get started reviewing my other contracts.”

“Well, about that.” Alistair smirks. “We’ve moved your things to your new location. As head of the Contracts group,

it's important for you to have somewhere private to discuss sensitive negotiations. Your office is just down the hall on the right. You can't miss the nameplate."

My jaw drops. "What?" I must have heard incorrectly. "My office? Alistair, I'm not sure I deserve any of this after lying to you."

"It was more a stretching of the truth since you are, in fact, dating Gunnar. And you do deserve it. This isn't just because of what happened with Victor. It's a position that we've needed for a while. You've put in the time and effort, and earned it. With Victoria no longer here to block your promotion, we finally made it happen."

I'm stunned, and I'm sure it shows on my face. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Let me know if you need anything once you've settled in."

I nod and leave Alistair's office in a bit of a daze, finding my own midway down the hall. As promised, my name is on the door, and my things are neatly arranged on the shelves and desk. I cross to the windows and look out onto downtown Seattle. Gunnar is never going to believe this. I pull out my phone, take a picture of the view, and send it to him.

Me: View from my office

There is no immediate response, which is a bit disappointing, but he'll reply as soon as he can. I sit at my desk and notice two things. I've been given a brand new, state-of-the-art laptop, and there is a framed picture on my desk which wasn't part of my personal belongings before I left. I reach for the photograph, swallowing the lump in my throat. It's a picture of Gunnar and me at Alistair's house, our heads together, smiling. It's incredibly intimate and exactly captures the way Gunnar makes me feel. The buzz from my phone startles me out of my sappy haze. Before I can pick it up, it buzzes again. And again. Curious why Gunnar is spamming my phone, I glance at the screen to see several texts from our friends. I guess he shared the news.

Gunnar: You have an office now? That's fantastic!

Gunnar: Congrats! *tada emoji confetti_ball emoji*

Tadhg: Gunnar told me the good news. Congratulations!

Tadhg: You earned it after what they put you through

Tadhg: Send more pics

Gunnar: Send pics. I want to see *eyes emoji*

Quinn: Congrats on the office! T n G are v excited

Quinn: Please send pics before they combust

Quinn: *exploding_head emoji*

Unknown: Hi Jocelin. This is Tom

Unknown: Just adding my congrats. Good for you!

I add Tom's contact information to my phone and hit save just before another text comes in.

Gunnar: Joce, where are those pics???

Laughing as I stand up, I get a full office shot showing the beautiful mahogany desk and matching hutch and bookcases along the back wall, as well as the gorgeous leather desk chair. I take a few more of the view out the window, then send them off, adding Astrid, Jules, Erik, Stef, and Blake to the group text.

Me: My new space at work

I sit down and take a picture of the photo on my desk and send that to Gunnar.

Me: This was on my desk when I sat down *sob emoji*

Gunnar: Damn! We look hot! *laughing emoji*

Gunnar: You look beautiful as usual *kissing_heart emoji*

Gunnar: Get a copy for home

Me: I'll try. OMG I forgot to text my parents!

Gunnar: Shit. They won't want to come visit again, right?

Me: LMAO

Astrid: Was in a meeting. Just saw the pics! OMG!

Astrid: *Seinfeld happy dance gif*

Astrid: Lunch is on me. I'll pick you up in your new digs

Astrid: So happy for you!

Me: Thanks! See you then

Gunnar

It's early. So early, my alarm hasn't even gone off yet, but I'm already awake. I've been lying in bed, watching Jocelin sleep for the past half hour, trying to think of how to tell him everything I'm feeling without going over the top, or even worse, throwing it out there like it's no big deal. How do you tell someone they mean everything to you and not screw it up?

He stirs, opening his soft brown eyes, and his smile is so sweet, it makes my heart ache. "Good morning, beautiful." I brush a knuckle across his warm cheek, and he snuggles into the blankets, sliding a little closer.

"Good morning. You're up early." He reaches out and cards his fingers gently through my beard. "Everything okay?"

I kiss his forehead and rest my cheek against his hair. "Everything is amazing, as long as I have you."

His arms snake around my waist as he settles against me. "Good thing I'm not going anywhere."

The words are on the tip of my tongue. I could tell him right now. But is this how he'd want to hear, 'I love you' for the first time? We have morning breath, and I'm sure my hair is sticking up every which way. He deserves better than a half-awake declaration that involves zero planning. "Maybe we could go away this weekend. Get out of town for a bit. Find a bed and breakfast somewhere. What do you think?"

His smile says it all, and I know it's the right decision. "That sounds wonderful. I would love that." He sighs contentedly, and with him snuggled against me, all warm and cuddly, I consider closing my eyes and going back to sleep. Then my alarm blares to life. With a groan, I kiss the top of his head and roll away to shut it off, catching his grin as I do. "See, that's how I know you truly care. You got up when your alarm went off the first time."

I roll back over and kiss him. "Yep, I care that much." I tap the end of his nose and slide out of bed, shuffling into the bathroom to brush my teeth and get a shower. I'm mid-shampoo when Jocelin makes his appearance, looking adorably ruffled and still sleepy, with his hair sticking up in several places. "Have I mentioned how cute you look in the morning?"

His soft smile makes my stomach swoop, and I think about telling him now. But he's not even awake yet. He brushes his teeth, grinning at me around the toothbrush. "Someone woke up in a good mood."

“How could I not, when I get to wake up next to you?” I finish my shower and leave the water running for him, kissing his cheek as we pass each other. “I even left you some hot water.”

He snorts. “You are too good to me.”

I’m toweling my hair dry when my phone rings. Jocelin and I both frown because it’s far too early for any phone call to be good. Astrid’s name flashes on the screen, and I swipe to answer. “Morning, Astrid. What’s up?” There’s a long pause, and then she bursts into tears. I try to follow what she’s saying, but she’s crying too hard, and I can’t make out the words. Fear twists my insides. Something is horribly wrong. “Astrid. Bean, take a breath and tell me again. I can’t understand you.”

Jocelin comes out of the bathroom, his bathrobe tied haphazardly and his brows drawn down in concern. I shrug, unable to tell him what’s going on because I don’t know. Gary’s voice cuts in. “Gunnar, I don’t want you to panic.” That, of course, is when real fear takes hold.

I definitely panic. All kinds of horrible scenarios flash through my mind. “You know that’s not actually helpful. Right?” I try for funny but fall far short.

“Right. Is Jocelin there? Maybe it’s better if I speak with him.”

“Gary!” Even *I* can hear the panic in my voice. Jocelin wraps his arm around my shoulder, and I lean into him and put the phone on speaker.

“Okay. There’s no easy way to say this. Bjorn’s been stabbed.” Ice cold dread freezes me in place. “They’re taking him to Harborview Medical Center. You need to get there ASAP, Gunnar.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I nod a few times, trying to remember how to breathe. “Okay. We’re leaving now.”

“Let Jocelin drive.”

I hang up and stare at the phone, my hands shaking.

“Gunnar? Baby, look at me.” I stare at my hands but see a sidewalk covered in blood. “Gunnar.” I can’t do this again. Please don’t let this happen again. “Gunnar, you’re scaring me!”

My head snaps up, and I look at Jocelin, his words finally seeping into my brain. “We need to go.” My voice breaks. “Joce.” The trembling moves up my arms, and my whole body starts to shake.

He takes my phone and pulls me against his chest. “Shhhh. Alright. Here’s what’s going to happen. We are going to get dressed. Then I’m going to drive us to the hospital. I’ll call Tadhg and Alistair once we get there to tell them what’s happened and that we won’t be in today.”

“I’m okay to drive.” I have no idea where the words come from because I don’t have any air in my lungs. Why is there no air in my lungs? I can’t breathe.

“Gunnar. Look at me.” Fingers slide under my chin, tilting my head up, and my eyes follow. “Gunnar, please take a breath

for me, *mon cœur*.” Jocelin cups my cheeks and looks me in the eyes. “Inhale through your nose.” I can’t remember how. “Gunnar. Focus on me.” I look at him. He’s so beautiful. So worried for me but still smiling. “Breathe, *mon chéri*.” And my lungs expand. “That’s it. Now exhale through your mouth. Can you take another breath for me?” I inhale again, and he nods. “Good. Okay. Let’s get dressed.” He gently turns me around and nudges me toward the drawers that hold my clothes.

Bjorn can’t die. He can’t. Not like this. Not so soon. Not when we’ve just figured things out. Somehow, I go through the motions of getting dressed, though I don’t really remember it, and make it downstairs and into my coat. Then I’m sitting in the passenger seat of my car, which feels all kinds of wrong. I haven’t ridden in this seat since the car belonged to Bjorn. I clench my fists, wanting desperately to hit something as the shock fades, replaced with a growing anger.

The ride to the hospital is quick since we’re already downtown. Jocelin barely stops the car before I fling myself out of it and sprint across the parking lot to the emergency room entrance. Bursting through the doors, I scan the waiting room and spot Astrid and Gary tucked into a corner. Astrid jumps to her feet and I fly across the room, grabbing her and holding on as if she’s my lifeline. Because she is. “What happened? Where’s Erik?”

She’s obviously exhausted. Her skin is pale, and her eyes are red and puffy. “He and Jules are in administration, filling out paperwork. And I don’t really know what happened. Erik

called me right before I called you.” She looks at Gary and holds out her hand to him. He takes it and brings it to his lips, rubbing her knuckles gently. “All Erik said was that Bjorn had been stabbed, he was being rushed here, and he and Jules were on their way.”

Jocelin joins us midway through the details. He hugs Astrid and Gary and slips his arms around my waist. “I spoke with Tadhg and Alistair. Both said to take as long as we need, and to tell them if they can do anything.”

We all turn as Jules approaches. Jocelin hugs him, and I look for Erik. Jules waves back the way he came. “He’s still filling out forms.”

“Jules, what happened?” I drag my fingers through my hair and fight to keep my fists still.

He fidgets nervously, and Astrid pulls him into a hug. “I’m not sure about all the details, but there was something about a robbery at a convenience store and a guy with a knife. I guess the guy took another customer hostage. Or maybe it was the clerk. I don’t know. Bjorn somehow ended up getting stabbed.”

I drag my fingers through my hair. “Wasn’t he wearing PPE?” Jules’ eyes go wide, and he backs up a step. Fuck. I’m scaring him. “Sorry, I’m not mad at you.” I make myself still.

He clears his throat. “He had his protective vest, but somehow the guy got past it.” His eyes fill with tears, and he shakes his head. “That’s all I know.”

A wave of dizziness hits me, and I sway on my feet. Jocelin tightens his grip around my waist and guides me into a chair. Knife wounds. Why is it always knives? I grip my thighs and try to quiet the screaming in my brain.

About fifteen minutes later, Erik finds us. I shoot to my feet, and he hauls me into a tight hug. Thankfully, we're not doing that fake platitude thing because neither of us would believe it. "Hey. How are you?"

What he's really asking is whether I'm holding my shit together. It takes me a minute to speak without exploding into a million tiny pieces. "Alright." My voice is rough, like I've been screaming for hours. Or maybe that's just my imagination. "You?"

"Pretty fucked up, but I'm trying to keep it together for Astrid and Jules."

I nod, and with a final hug, we step back, sit down, and wait for an update. Astrid and Erik take turns pacing and sitting, jumping up whenever a doctor comes through. I don't have the extra energy for that. I'm staring at the doors that lead back to surgery, willing Bjorn to live. Jocelin brings me a coffee at one point, but I'm not sure I actually drink any of it before he takes the cold beverage from my hands.

It's several hours before a doctor finally approaches us, his face grim. Not a good sign. I push to my feet and force myself to listen to the words he says. "...survived the surgery. Now we wait and see. His wound was severe." He looks around the small group. "Are there any questions I can answer?"

Erik practically cuts him off. “When will we know if he’s going to... be okay?”

“We think we repaired all the damage, but we can’t be sure. He’s lost a lot of blood, and there could always be little tears. The weapon was a serrated blade. If he makes it through the next forty-eight hours, he should recover.”

No one says anything until Gary speaks up. “Thanks, doc. I think we’re all a bit shocked. Can we see him?”

“He’s in recovery and will be there for a little while. If all goes well, he’ll move to a private room in a few hours. At that point, we can allow limited visitation. Family only, and only a few at a time. Why don’t you all get something to eat, and when you get back, we might have more information for you.”

Gary thanks him, and the doctor strides back into the labyrinth of the hospital.

Jocelin squeezes my waist. “Do you want to go with me to the cafeteria? We could grab something quick and be back here in no time.”

I barely hear him, and it takes longer than it should to process the words. I blink and meet his eyes, almost surprised to see him, which I know isn’t right. “Yeah.”

He glances at the others. “Anyone else want to come with us?” Jules and Erik opt to stay in the waiting room, in case the doctor needs to speak to someone, but Astrid and Gary join us.

Astrid links her arm through mine and leans her head on my shoulder as we walk through the halls. “He’ll be okay. He’s a

fighter.” I don’t say anything because she doesn’t know that. Mom was a fighter, too. One of the strongest women I knew. Fuck. I can’t do this again. He can’t die. I’ve lost enough people.

Once we get to the cafeteria, Jocelin pushes me into a chair and says something. I blink at him, then nod blankly. It seems to be the correct answer because he and Gary head toward the food. Astrid takes my hand and rubs my knuckles. Her palms are soft and warm against my cold skin. I stare out the window, surprised to see daylight because it feels like we’ve been here for days. It’s a beautiful day. The sun is shining. Not a fitting day to die. I close my eyes and look away. Don’t fucking die on me, Bjorn.

Jocelin puts some food in front of me, and I eat without tasting anything. How long have we been here? What if there’s been a change? What if he’s... “Can we go back now?”

Astrid takes my hand. “Yes. Come on. We’ll let Erik and Jules have a chance to eat.” She hauls me to my feet, pulling me after her like when we were little. Without resistance, I follow her back to the waiting room.

Maybe it’s the food, or maybe enough time has passed, but as we reach the waiting room, my focus starts to expand. I feel Jocelin’s firm grip on my hand and hear Astrid and Gary’s quiet conversation. There’s also a deep ache in my chest. I turn to Jocelin and rest my head against his. His sigh of relief is loud, and his fingers tighten around mine. “Hey. I was hoping you’d show up. You had me worried.”

I roll into him, burying my face in his hair. “Sorry, sweetheart.” I let him go and drop into a seat. Jocelin takes the chair next to me, and I lean on his shoulder. “Thanks for being here.”

He kisses me, then rests his head against mine. “Where else would I be? Can I get you anything?”

“No. Thanks, though.” We lapse into silence.

It takes a few more hours, but eventually the doctor reappears. “We’ve moved him to a room. Family can briefly visit, but only immediate family and not for long. There’s another waiting area on that floor. You’re all welcome to use it. We’ll keep you in the loop as things progress.”

Astrid smiles and shakes his hand. “Thank you, Doctor.”

I trail along as we move floors and locate the family lounge. Astrid, Erik, and I leave almost immediately to find Bjorn’s room. She cautiously opens the door and steps inside, and I’m right behind her. My first glimpse of Bjorn makes me sway on my feet, but I lock my knees and will myself to keep my shit together. There are tubes everywhere, as well as an IV, but my gaze slips right past all of it to Bjorn’s face. “He looks smaller than usual.” It’s a ridiculous thing to say because he’s clearly not, but it seems that way.

Astrid takes my hand as we approach the bed, machines whirring and beeping. Reaching out with her free hand, she brushes the hair out of Bjorn’s face. “Well, you’ve given us quite a scare.” Her voice is gentle and quiet. Loads calmer than I am. “But you’ll be alright.” She pats my hand.

“Gunnar’s here. And Erik. Everyone else is just outside, waiting to see you. We aren’t allowed to come in all at one time. And we can only stay for a few minutes.”

She’s rambling for herself more than Bjorn, so I give her hand a squeeze and put my other one over Bjorn’s. “Hey.” My voice cracks. “Get better. Okay? And soon. I love you.” That’s all I can manage. I squeeze Bjorn’s hand and Astrid’s shoulder, then leave the room, hurrying to the waiting area and into Jocelin’s arms.

I bury my face in his neck and breathe in his scent. “He looks okay, like he’s just pale and sleeping.” Pale, like Mom was. “He has to be okay, Joce. He has to. I can’t do this again.”

Jocelin strokes my hair. “Shhhh. Come on. Let’s sit down.”

I tuck my hands into my elbows, trying to stop the tremors in my arms, and Jocelin cups my face. “Gunnar, look at me.” I try to block the overwhelming scent of blood, but my lungs tighten, and I can’t catch my breath. “Gunnar, look at me!” The command in his voice has my gaze snapping to his. I stare into warm brown eyes—Jocelin’s eyes—and blink, a bit dazed. He relaxes his grip, and his tone and volume drop. “Gunnar, you are here with me right now. Focus on me, *mon chéri*.”

“Joce.” I blink a few times and sit back, covering my face with my hands. I’m losing it. I need to get control of myself, but I feel like I’m going to blow apart.

“Gunnar, let me take you home. You need sleep. If anything happens, we can be back here in fifteen minutes. Astrid will call us if they need us.”

I glance at Astrid, who looks even more concerned than before, and I feel like shit because she has enough to worry about. “Sorry.” I stand and pace the small room.

She stops me on my next pass and pulls me into a hug. “You look like you need to get out of here. Go. If we need you, I’ll call.”

I nod into her neck. “I’m sorry.”

“Shhh. There’s nothing to apologize for. Go get some rest, sweetie. I love you.”

I squeeze her so tightly she probably can’t breathe. “I love you too, Bean. So much.” She lets me go, and I turn, walking right into Erik’s arms, and it’s all I can do not to break down. He’s so big, like Dad was, and his hug makes me feel small again. I press into him, hiding my face in his neck, and let the tears fall.

“Gunnar. What can I do? What do you need?”

That only makes me cry harder because I don’t know. I need Bjorn to get better. I need my family to stop dying. With effort, I take a few deep breaths, then back up, pulling out of the hug. “I’m okay.” I wipe at my face with the back of my hand and try for a smile. “Hospitals. You know?”

He nods but doesn’t look convinced. “You want us to come with you? Make sure you get home okay?”

“No. I’m going home with Joce. He lives close.” I squeeze his shoulder. “I’ll be fine. I just need some sleep.”

Jocelin slides his arm around me. “Let’s go home. I’ll make a fire, and we can sit on the sofa and watch TV or just go to bed if you want.”

Mumbling some sort of agreement, I put my arm over his shoulder, wave goodbye to Gary and Jules, and let Jocelin guide me to the elevators and out to the car. Numb, I climb in the passenger side and concentrate on buckling my seatbelt while Jocelin starts the car. He rests his hand on my thigh. “We can get up early and be back first thing in the morning.” I nod and squeeze his hand, trying to ease some of his worry. The truth is, I’m worried too. I’m barely holding it together, and I know it.

The drive home is quiet, and I close my eyes, letting my head fall back against the headrest as I try to breathe. When we finally reach the loft, I toss my coat over a chair and stare at nothing, trying to remember what I’m supposed to do next. Jocelin’s phone rings, and as he answers it, I head for the stairs. I’m in no mood to be awake anymore today. I just want to close my eyes and let this horrible day be over. “Gunnar, it’s for you.”

I stop midway up the stairs and turn around. He holds out his phone. “Who’s calling me on your phone?”

“It’s Tom. He didn’t want to call on yours in case the hospital tries to reach you.”

I nod and take the phone. “Tom.”

“Hey, Gunnar. Rough day.” I grunt my agreement. “How’s Bjorn?”

“He’s lying in a hospital bed fighting for his life.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a breath after seeing Jocelin’s horrified look. “Sorry, Tom. That was shitty. He’s alive, which is a good thing. But he’s not out of the woods.”

“Gunnar. Listen to me.” I sit on the step and lean against the wall, suddenly too tired to stand anymore. “Are you listening? I want you to focus. I want you to think about your positive image like we used to practice. Can you see it?”

“No. I can’t.” My voice wavers, and I squeeze my eyes shut and whisper into the phone. “And it’s scaring me.”

Tom’s voice is calm but firm and exactly what I need. “Gunnar. You’re exhausted. Concentrate on breathing, and work on focusing your mind on your positive image. Get some sleep. And if you need me, I’m a phone call away. I can be there in about 20 minutes, if that’s what it takes.” What he’s really saying is, ‘I’ll be your punching bag if you need it... if you can land a punch.’

I desperately want to curl up in a ball and sleep. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Keep Jocelin’s phone by the bed. If I have to reach you, I’ll call him. I’ll leave your phone free for calls from your family or the hospital. But call me in the morning when you wake up. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Gunnar, I mean it. Promise you’ll call me in the morning.”

I nod, though he can’t see it. “Yes. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Okay. Put Jocelin back on the phone.”

I hold out the phone to Jocelin, and he takes it, listening for a minute before replying. “Okay. Thank you, Tom. We’ll call you in the morning. Goodnight.” He hangs up and holds out his hand. “Come, *mon cœur*. I’m under strict orders to get you into bed and make sure you sleep.”

He doesn’t need to ask me twice. I shove to my feet and stumble up the stairs, every limb heavy. Jocelin coaxes me into the bathroom to brush my teeth, then helps me undress and get into bed. I can’t remember the last time I felt this drained. He climbs in next to me, and I roll toward him, tucking my face into his chest. “Hold me? Please?”

“Of course, *mamours*. Come here.” His comforting arms wrap around me, and I close my eyes. What if I lose him? What if something horrible happens, and I never tell him how I feel? I grip the back of his shirt. “Joce. I want to tell you something.”

He strokes my hair and holds me tighter. “Shhhh. Go to sleep. You can tell me in the morning.”

I don’t want to wait, but it’s a struggle to speak. “Please.”

“Gunnar. It’s alright.” Jocelin rubs my scalp and caresses my back. “Go to sleep, *mon chéri*.”

My fatigue is too strong, and Jocelin's soothing strokes calm my jangled nerves. Despite everything, I'm asleep in minutes.

Gunnar

It's not even five, and I'm wide awake, staring out the window at the darkness. Jocelin's arm is draped over my ribs, his warm breath tickling the back of my neck. It's odd being the little spoon, but having him wrapped around me is keeping me from flying apart. I truly don't know what shape I'd be in if he wasn't here being my rock.

I reach for my phone, curious what time it is, and the moment he feels me move, he tightens his arm around me. "Gunnar?"

"Just checking the time, babe. Go back to sleep."

He yawns and kisses the back of my neck. "Mmm. Only if you do."

If only I could. He must feel the tension in my body. "Mmm. That's what I thought. Want me to make tea? We can get dressed and go back to the hospital if you want."

So that's what we do, stopping at the cafe in the lobby for muffins to go with our hot beverages, and then we're back on

Bjorn's floor, pacing the little waiting room. At seven, I call Tom and check in. The conversation is short since there isn't any news, and he makes me promise to call him again later. Astrid and Gary show up around eight, and by eight thirty, Erik and Jules arrive. From that point on, things are eerily similar to yesterday, and I keep forgetting it's a full twenty-four hours later. I can't sit still, and I feel like I've walked at least twenty miles in laps around the floor. Jocelin forces me to go with him to the cafeteria for lunch, even though I'm not hungry. I manage to drink some soup, but the need to be close to Bjorn in case he wakes up is too strong.

Time creeps by, and as the day wears on with no change to Bjorn's condition, my control slips further and further out of reach. I try again to sit, dropping my head into my hands, willing Bjorn to wake up. A hand settles on my shoulder, and I itch to shake it off, even that slight touch too much input on my already frayed senses. "Can I get you anything, *mon cœur*?"

I thrust to my feet. "No! God! Stop asking me that!" Jocelin steps back, his eyes wide, and I reach for him, pulling him against me. "Shit, I'm so sorry, Joce. I'm sorry." I kiss the side of his head and rock back and forth. "I didn't mean to shout."

His arms wrap around me, and as he relaxes against my chest, I try to relax with him. "I know you didn't. It's alright." But it's not. It's not alright at all, but I can't seem to rein in my outbursts, and that's not good.

Astrid puts her hand on my arm. “Gunnar, go outside and get some air. You need to calm down.”

I step back from Jocelin and nod. “Yeah. Okay.” Every part of me is vibrating with tension.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Jocelin steps toward the elevators, but I shake my head.

“No. It’s okay. I’ll be back in a few minutes. I just need to clear my head.” I don’t wait for his reply, taking the stairs instead of the elevator, flying out the front doors and into the parking garage to pace in the dark next to my car. Rage bubbles up in my chest. How could Bjorn do this to us? He knew damn well how Mom died, and yet he decided to become a cop anyway. And then went into S.W.A.T. What the fuck was he thinking? And now, we’re back in the same situation again because of his selfish choice. Barely contained fury pours out of me. I can’t do this again. How can I possibly do this again? I let out a roar and slam my fist against the passenger side window of the Mustang. The glass doesn’t break, but the intense pain gives me enough focus to realize what I’ve done. I stare at the car that once belonged to my dad, then Bjorn, and as I stare at my already swelling knuckles, I start to shake. Slowly, I walk back into the hospital and find the men’s room, rinsing my hand under cold water and wrapping it in paper towels. I pull out my phone and text Jocelin.

Me: I want to go home. Please, can you drive me home?

Jocelin: On my way down. Are you okay?

Me: No

He meets me by the car and looks at my wrapped hand, then stares directly into my eyes. “Are you alright? Or should we go inside and see a doctor?”

“I just want to go home.” I sound like a petulant child, but I’m tired, and more than just my hand hurts.

“I realize that. But do you need stitches?”

He’s perfectly calm, and it’s very unlike him. “No. The knuckles are just bruised and a bit swollen.”

“Do you need a sedative? We could ask for...”

“Joce!” My shout echoes across the parking lot. “I just want to go home!” The color drains from his face, and I reach for him. “Babe.” Dread creeps up my spine. “God, Joce, I’m sorry. I’m...” I drag my undamaged fingers through my hair and pull hard.

“Gunnar, I’d like you to call Tom. Now, please.” His tone is absolutely robotic, and his eyes are distant, and dammit, I’ve fucked up. I’ve fucked up bad. I’m scaring him. With my good hand, I fumble for my phone and hit Tom’s number. Thankfully, he picks up on the first ring.

“Gunnar, talk to me.”

I start to pace, my voice quavering. “I fucked up. I’m losing it. I punched my car window, and I just yelled at Joce. He

didn't do anything, and I yelled at him. Twice, Tom. I'm snapping at everyone." I risk a glance at Jocelin, hoping to see affection, or at least forgiveness, in his beautiful eyes—not that I deserve it—but his gaze is cold and distant. "It's not good." The words are barely a whisper.

"I'll meet you at Jocelin's. I'm leaving now. Put him on the phone."

I hold the phone out to Jocelin, who takes it cautiously, and my heart clenches. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He's afraid of me. I've fucked up so badly.

"Tom." He's using that neutral voice again. "Yes." Another long pause. "Alright. I'll text you my address. See you there." He hangs up and sends the text before handing back my phone.

We get in the Mustang, and he takes a shaky breath before putting the key in the ignition and starting the car. After one more deep breath, he slowly pulls out of the parking lot and heads home.

"I'm so sorry, Joce." I keep my voice soft so I don't scare him any more than I already have.

He tries to smile and reaches over to grip my uninjured hand. I let out a little sob and clutch at him like a lifeline. "I know, *mon chéri*. It's fine." But it isn't, and we both know it.

When we pull up to Jocelin's building, Tom is outside the front doors, waiting for us. Jocelin rolls down the window.

“Tom, walk through the parking garage, and meet us at the elevator.”

He nods and heads that way, jogging to catch up with us as we exit the car. “Nice hand there, Osouf. Real pretty.” His tone is casual, but his body language says something else entirely. He’s primed and ready for the unexpected, and perversely, that calms me.

We ride up to Jocelin’s apartment in silence, and once we step into the loft, Jocelin goes for the first aid kit while Tom helps me look at my hand. “It’s gonna be ugly and sore for a while, but it doesn’t look like you broke anything. Mind telling me what happened?”

“I keep thinking about Mom and Bjorn and how stupid both of those situations were. I was so angry. I *am* angry. If I lose Bjorn too...” Sighing, I drag my fingers through my hair. “I was caught up in all of that, and the next thing I knew, I was in pain. Thankfully, the window didn’t shatter.”

Tom grunts. “You’d have to have made a one in a million punch or had a defective window for it to break. They design them to resist impact, dumbass.” I don’t argue either point.

Jocelin brings me a bag of frozen peas and directs me to the couch. I sit while Tom pulls him aside, and they have a brief conversation. Hopefully, Tom’s telling him I’d never hurt him. Because I wouldn’t. Not ever. Jocelin comes and sits next to me, taking my uninjured hand. He kisses me softly, and I whimper against his lips, trying to chase after him as he moves back. When his gaze meets mine, there’s warmth there. Tears

of relief prickle my eyes, and I don't bother to blink them away. Jocelin scrapes his fingers gently through my beard, and I lean into his touch. "I'm going upstairs to read, *mon cœur*. Come up when you're done."

I nod and grip his hand. "I'm so sorry, Joce."

"It's alright. You'll be fine. We're fine." He kisses me again and disappears up the stairs.

I take a deep breath, shaking with relief, knowing I dodged a bullet I fired, and turn to face Tom.

"Good. I was going to tell you to breathe. Now sit and get comfortable. It's been a while since we did this, and you obviously haven't been practicing, so we'll start from the beginning."

He sits across from me on the coffee table and holds my gaze. "Take another breath and close your eyes." I nod and do as he says. "Good. Now imagine yourself relaxing. You're in your happy place. Do you know where that is?"

I take a moment and visualize being on my motorcycle, the wind in my face, the sun shining on me. It's a wide open road, no other vehicles around. I have her opened up, and I'm speeding down the road. It's one of the few things Bjorn and I love to do together in summer. Will we get to do it again? My hands ball into fists, and I wince as my knuckles protest.

"Gunnar." Tom's voice cuts through my thoughts. Shit. "Try again. Take a breath. Visualize your muscles relaxing, and clear your mind."

Again and again, he walks me through the meditation exercises I used to do every day. It takes an embarrassingly long time for my brain to settle enough for me to regain some control. But eventually, the panic recedes, and just like last night, I'm drained.

Tom stands and helps me up. "It's like riding a bike. With a bit of practice, you'll remember the whole process, and it'll be easier." We walk toward the elevator. "Call me if you need me, but Gunnar..." He holds my gaze. "Get control of this. If visualization isn't working for you anymore, go talk to Cass again. There's no shame in that. You've done amazingly well, but this situation obviously was a trigger for you. It may require new coping skills." Tom puts his hands on my shoulders. "Get control of the rage, Gunnar. Don't hurt anyone." He gestures toward my injured hand. "Yourself included. Okay?"

I nod. "Yeah. I hear you. Thanks Tom. Tell Josie I'm sorry for dragging you out tonight."

He smiles softly. "She understands and sends her love. Call me tomorrow morning. Okay?"

"Okay."

Tom steps into the elevator, and after the doors close, I turn off all the lights and head upstairs. I stand in the doorway, watching Jocelin read, and once again, the words are on the tip of my tongue. *I love you*. I want to tell him, but after tonight, would he believe me? And if he did, I don't want the first time I tell him how I feel to be mixed up with an apology. Pushing

off the doorframe, I walk to his side of the bed and sit next to him. If I take his hand, would my touch be welcome? I'm too cowardly to risk the rejection, so I rest my hand on my thigh, fighting the urge to clench it. "I'm sorry. For everything."

He puts his book down and takes my uninjured hand in his. "I know, *mon chéri*. And I accept your apology. This is a very stressful time, and this isn't the first bad thing to happen to you."

He doesn't say it, though I hear the unspoken *buts*. 'But you're frightening me.' 'But it can't happen again.' "That's no excuse for what I did. For frightening you." I lean down and rest my head on his shoulder. "Joce, you're the very last person I want to hurt. Being with you, having you by my side, is everything."

He cups my cheek with his hand. "Where else would I be but with you?" Scooting over, he pats the bed. "Come, lie with me." I kick off my shoes and lie down next to him. Pulling me into his arms, he strokes my hair. "It will be fine. No matter what, we will be fine."

I want to ask him how he can be sure, but before I can form the words, sleep pulls me under.



I wake and know it's late. Or early, depending on how you look at it. Jocelin's still asleep, curled against my side. He

must have changed into sweats before going to bed, but I'm still wearing yesterday's clothes. I reach out to brush a lock of hair from his face and wince as I flex my fingers, recalling my injury and what caused it. God, he's the best thing in my life, and I'm going to fuck it up. No matter what he says, if I keep acting like this, I'll lose him. I need to get my head on straight. Bjorn has to pull through. Things need to be okay again. I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling for what feels like hours, and then my phone buzzes, pulling me out of my gloomy thoughts. Astrid's name appears on the screen, and cold dread grips my chest. With shaking hands, I answer the call. "Bean."

She snuffles and clears her throat. Fuck. "We're out of the woods."

I sit up, unsure I've heard her properly. "What?"

"Bjorn's still unconscious, but the doctor said, barring any odd infections or health complications they aren't aware of, they think Bjorn should make a full recovery." I cover my mouth to muffle my sob. "He'll be in the hospital for a while longer, obviously, and he'll need physical therapy, but he's going to be fine."

I take deep breaths and fight to keep my voice low so I don't wake Jocelin. "Thank God."

"I know. God, that was so scary!"

I nod as I press my finger and thumb against my eyes. "It was. Okay. I'm gonna go. We'll see you later at the hospital."

"Are you okay, Gunnar?"

I sniff and nod. “Yeah. Just... tired. I’m gonna try to get some sleep.”

“Okay. I love you very much, and I’ll see you later.”

“Love you too, Bean.” I hang up the phone and let the tears flow.

Jocelin stirs next to me, his palm smoothing over my back. “Gunnar, what is it?” Even sleepy, his voice conveys all of his concern.

I lie back down and pull him against me, kissing his hair. “Good news. The doctor said Bjorn is going to be fine.” He tries to push up on his elbow, but I tighten my arms around him. “No, babe. Go back to sleep. We’ll go over to the hospital later, once we get some more rest.”

He stops resisting and settles against me. “You’re sure?”

I nod, kissing him softly. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Okay.” He snuggles into my side, head on my shoulder, and in minutes, he’s softly snoring. Taking a deep breath, I exhale slowly, wiping away my tears. God, I’m a fucking mess. I don’t ever want to see that scared look on his face or hear the odd tone in his voice again. But I can do this. I can. I’ve done it before, and I’ll fucking do it again because *I will not lose him.*

Carefully, I extract myself from Jocelin’s warm tangle of limbs, quietly changing my clothes and using the bathroom before tiptoeing downstairs. I need to stop making bad decisions before I fuck everything up, and that means clearing

my head. I grab my keys from the bowl in the kitchen and my helmet from the closet, then push the call button for the elevator. When I get to the garage level, I head toward my bike. I won't be gone long. Just long enough to get my head straight again.

Jocelin

I wake to an empty bed and know something is wrong. Gunnar is almost never out of bed before me, and when he is, I can hear him in the shower or in the kitchen making tea. But the bathroom light is off, and I don't hear sounds from anywhere else in the apartment. I throw off the covers and get out of bed, poking my head in the bathroom in case he's left a note on the mirror or something. There's nothing. Hurrying downstairs, I call for him, even though I know he's not here. "Gunnar?" As expected, the living room and kitchen are empty, and tendrils of panic start to sprout in my gut. I rush back upstairs and grab my phone, hoping for a text or something, but there's nothing. With growing dread, I call his phone. It rings several times and goes to voicemail. I try again, and then again, but when he doesn't answer I give up and call Astrid.

"Hi, sweetie. Did Gunnar tell you the good news?" Relief washes through me as I realize he probably went to the hospital after Astrid called in the middle of the night.

"Is he there?"

There's a pause before she replies. "Gunnar? No." Clearly surprised that I'm asking, she now sounds worried. "Jocelin, is something wrong?"

I take a deep breath and pull my fingers through my tangled mess of morning hair. "Probably not. He's not here, and he's not answering his phone. With the mood he was in yesterday, I'm just panicking a bit. I'm sure he's fine. But yes, he told me the good news. Bjorn is going to be okay. Right?"

"Yes. We're all so relieved. He's not awake yet, but the doctor said he could wake up at any time."

From the bottom of my soul, I want to be happy for them. I *am* happy for them. I'm just more worried about Gunnar. Going back downstairs, this time at a normal pace, I put on the kettle and lean against the counter, looking around for any clue as to where Gunnar might be. "That's wonderful. I'm so happy for all of you." That's when I notice the motorcycle keys are gone from the bowl in the kitchen. Hope bursting in my chest, I hurry into the living room and look in the closet. His helmet is missing, and I sigh with relief. "Thank god."

"I know, right?"

It takes me a minute to realize she thinks I'm responding to the news about Bjorn. And yes, thank god for that, too. "I think Gunnar went for a ride. His helmet and keys are gone. Maybe he went to Tom's."

"Oh good. Then I wouldn't worry. When he's very stressed he goes for a solo ride. He says it helps clear his head. He'll turn up soon. Anyway, sweetie, Gary and I just got to the

hospital and we're going to grab a cup of coffee at the cafe and wait for Bjorn to wake up. We'll be in the same family lounge as before. Erik and Jules should be here in about an hour. So when Gunnar finally shows, just come meet us here."

"Okay. We will. Thanks, Astrid. And if you hear from him before I do, will you have him call me, please?"

"Absolutely. And don't worry. He always turns up."

I hang up and call Tom next. "Hello?" I'm surprised at the gruffness in his voice, and only then do I glance at the clock. Damn. If I woke him, that means Gunnar isn't there either.

"Hey, Tom. It's Jocelin. Sorry, I suppose I woke you. I hadn't noticed the time."

Tom is instantly awake, his voice full of concern. "Everything okay? How's Gunnar?"

"I was hoping he was with you, and *you* could tell *me* how he is." I run a hand through my hair again. "We got good news about Bjorn in the middle of the night. He told me to go back to sleep, so I did. But maybe he was too keyed up. When I woke up this morning, he wasn't here." I close my eyes and let my head fall back. "I should have stayed up."

Tom swears under his breath. "Is he at the hospital?"

"No. I just spoke with Astrid. He's not there. And his bike keys and helmet are missing."

Tom's hum rumbles through the phone. "Well, that's not as bad as it might sound. In the past, he's gone for day trips to clear his mind. He was struggling with focusing yesterday, and

a ride is one of the coping techniques that seemed to work in the past. I'm betting now that he knows Bjorn is going to be okay, he's gone for a ride to work things out. Don't panic. I'm sure you'll hear from him soon. But keep me posted. If he hasn't contacted you by lunchtime, call me back."

Just knowing Tom isn't worried eases most of my concern. "Okay. I will. Thanks for letting me know."

"You're welcome. And let me know if anything changes with Bjorn."

"Okay. I'll speak with you soon." We disconnect, and I make a cup of tea and sit at the kitchen table, staring at my phone, wishing it would ring. With a sigh I force myself to my feet. I should get dressed and stop moping. And if he hasn't called by the time I'm done, I'll try him again.

With a plan in place, I feel a little better. I take my time showering and dressing just to give Gunnar every opportunity to call, but when I can't put it off any longer, I try him again. There's still no answer, and I can't sit here and worry, so I take Gunnar's car keys and drive myself to the hospital to wait with Astrid. Surely he'll call one of us soon.

On my way out of the garage, I stop at the guard booth. "Good morning, Brian. Were you working this morning when Gunnar left?"

"Good morning, Mr. Allard. Yes."

"Call me Jocelin. Please. What time was that? Did you notice?"

Brian scratches his chin, brow furrowed. “I didn’t note the exact time, but it was somewhere around four. I watch a show on the gaming network every Wednesday night, and the stream ends around that time each week.”

I nod, comforted with at least some concrete information. “Thanks, Brian. I appreciate your help. Have a good day.”

“You too, Mr. Allard.”

I roll up the window and merge into the morning traffic. Even with the congested streets, less than fifteen minutes later, I’m steering the Mustang into the hospital parking garage. I look for Gunnar’s bike as I drive through the levels, but it’s not here. At least not that I can see. I try calling him again, but it goes straight to voicemail. Thoroughly annoyed, I shove my phone into my coat pocket and walk into the hospital.



We sit in the waiting room for hours, with Astrid and Erik coming in and out to keep us posted on the lack of change in Bjorn’s condition. Somewhere around noon, my stomach growls so loudly that Gary laughs and pats my shoulder. “Need some food there, Jocelin?”

“Yeah. I skipped breakfast. I’m thinking about running to the deli down the street. Do you want anything?”

The excitement on his face is almost comical. “That sounds really great. I’ve had enough of the food here to last me for the rest of my life. Mind if I check with the others to see if they want something?”

I wave him on. “Sure. No problem. Either text me the requests, or I can add it to my notes app. Whatever’s easier for everyone.”

Gary pokes his head into Bjorn’s room. There’s some low-key mumbling, and I take the opportunity to check my phone for the gazillionth time, even though I know what I’ll see. Or won’t see, as the case may be. As expected, there are no new messages or voicemails from Gunnar. Dammit, Gunnar. Where are you?

I practically jump out of my skin as Gary touches my shoulder. “Nothing yet?”

With a quick shake of my head, I slide my phone back into my pocket. “What’s the verdict on lunch?” He texts me everyone’s orders, and I head for the elevators, desperately trying to keep my mind from further catastrophizing. I’ve already imagined Gunnar in an accident, lying on the side of the road, bleeding, and unable to call for help. I’ve also thought of him stuck on the side of the road, broken down in the middle of nowhere, without cell service. And in one dazed waking-dream, I even considered he might have been captured for ransom. At that point, I mentally slapped myself and turned to social media for a distraction. This trek to the deli is just another way to keep my mind from dwelling on the fact

my boyfriend took off in the middle of the night without a word to anyone and isn't returning calls.

I push open the hospital doors and step out into the crisp afternoon air. It takes about fifteen minutes to walk to the deli, and as I wait for my order, I call Tom. He picks up on the first ring. "Jocelin. He show yet?"

Disappointment hits me just as hard this time. "Hi, Tom. No. And he's still not answering his phone. I'm starting to imagine all kinds of awful things have happened to him."

A deep growl rumbles through the speaker. "Okay, it's still not time to panic."

I feel stupid asking, but I can't help myself. "*Do* you think something happened to him? Wouldn't he have called by now, if he was fine?"

The huge sigh on the other end of the phone doesn't set my mind at ease. "Jocelin, I wish I could say yes. But I think he's trying to work through what's happened. Not only did Bjorn give him a real scare, dredging up old issues, but he knows he didn't handle things well, and that has him even more rattled. But no, I don't think we should panic yet. He's probably fine."

I exhale, frustrated, but I don't disagree. "You're right. I know you're right."

"Look, he's taken one or two overnight rides in the past when things have been bad. I hope he calls to let us know he's okay, but even if he doesn't, this isn't completely out of character."

Tom's right. I need to give Gunnar time. "Thanks, Tom."

"No problem. Hey, let me know what happens."

I rub my temple, feeling a headache coming on. "I will. Thanks again."

We hang up, and I try Gunnar—*again*—even though I know he's not going to answer. As expected, voicemail picks up. This time, I leave a message. "Hey, it's me. I've been trying to call you all morning. Would you please call me? I'm worried about you." I consider telling him that I love him, but this is definitely not the time to drop that bit of information, so I hang up and stuff my phone in my pocket.

When my number is called, I pay for the food and head back to the hospital. I hand Gary one of the bags of sandwiches and chips, and he pokes his head into Bjorn's room, passing it over. Astrid comes out to eat with us, and after a brief moment where we all concentrate on our lunches, conversation starts again. We avoid talking about Gunnar, but I know if he'd called or texted anyone here, they'd tell me.

We anxiously wait for both of the Osouf men to let us know they're okay, but neither decides today is the day for that. Eventually, I get tired of sitting in uncomfortable chairs, lost in my own miserable thoughts, and opt to go home instead. I make my goodbyes with the promise of seeing everyone tomorrow. When I pull into the parking space, I stare at the empty slot where the bike should be and sigh, unsure if I should be mad or sad. Probably both.

Exhausted, I ride the elevator up to the loft and toss my coat over a chair before pouring myself a very large glass of wine. With frazzled nerves, I turn on the sound system, and Spanish guitar drifts through the room. Dracona makes an appearance, announcing she's ready for dinner, and though it's a little early, I don't have the energy to tell her no. "Spoiled, beautiful girl." When I pick her up, she rubs her face against my chin. I scratch behind her ears, and she purrs contentedly. "Come on. Let's get you fed." We go into the kitchen, and I pour kibble in her bowl, stroke her back a few times while she eats, then go back to the living room. In an effort to distract myself, I grab the nearest book and drop onto the sofa. But instead, I end up staring at the same page for five minutes, all but chugging my wine. With a disgusted sigh for the entire annoying day, I give up and decide to go to bed.

I leave a light on in the living room in case Gunnar comes home late, then I head upstairs. By the time I'm done with my bedtime routine and crawl into bed, I barely have enough energy to pull the blankets over myself. Curling up, I stare at the cold, empty space on Gunnar's side. Exhaustion, loneliness, and worry win, and the tears flow silently. Please let him be alright. I really don't know what I'll do if anything happens to him.

I pull Gunnar's cold pillows around me, pressing them to my face and tucking them against my chest, breathing deeply to catch any lingering scent of him. It's a sorry substitute for the warm body I want wrapped around me, and it only makes me

miss him more. I bury my face in the pillows and quietly cry myself to sleep.



The next morning, I wake up just as tired as when I went to bed, with the added bonus of feeling utterly out of sorts. My eyes are red rimmed and puffy, and my head pounds with a raging headache. I glance at the empty space next to me, and an overwhelming ache settles in my chest, followed almost immediately by anger. Where the fuck are you, Gunnar?

I toss the covers aside and go into the bathroom, angrily brushing my teeth before I take a cool shower, hoping the temperature alleviates the worst of my puffy eyes and headache. It doesn't.

Dressed in comfortable jeans and a sweater, I go downstairs and make myself some toast and tea as I text Astrid.

Me: Morning. Hear from either brother?

Astrid: Good morning sweetie. Unfortunately, no. Sorry

Astrid: I was hoping you'd heard from Gunnar

Astrid: Bjorn hasn't woken up yet but hopefully soon

Astrid: *fingers_crossed emoji*

Me: *thumbsup emoji*

Me: I'm going to stay here in case Gunnar shows up

Me: I have a ton of work to catch up on

Me: I'll come to the hospital this afternoon

Me: Want me to bring lunch?

Astrid: Yes pls! TY!

Astrid: I'm sorry Gunnar's not back yet. *confused emoji*

Astrid: But I'm sure he's okay

Me: Thanks. I'll text you when I'm on my way

Thankfully, I have so much work to catch up on that I don't think about Gunnar *every* minute. Just every *other* minute. I really don't know how to feel about things. I keep bouncing back and forth between worried sick and utterly furious with him. In spite of it, I actually manage to get a lot of work done, and before I know it, it's time to get lunch and go to the hospital.

Me: On my way

Astrid: Kk. Any chance you can bring pizza?

Astrid: I'm in the mood for anchovies!

I make a sour face because that's disgusting.

Me: Getting you a small for yourself

Me: that's just *nauseated_face emoji*

Me: I'll bring a few normal pizzas for the rest of us

Me: *Stuck_out_tongue emoji* Should I get anything else?

Astrid: No. But thanks for bringing us edible food

I look up the number for a pizza place close to the hospital and phone in an order for a small anchovy pizza, a large cheese and mushroom, and a large cheese and sausage. That should cover everyone's preferences. They can pick off what they don't like.

Half an hour later, Astrid all but attacks me as I carry the pizzas into the waiting room. "Mmmmm! That smells divine!" She plucks the smallest box from the top of the stack and opens it, beaming at me. "You're the *best* best friend ever. Thank you!" She leans over and kisses my cheek.

I put the other pizzas on the small table and open a box at random, grabbing a piece of whatever is there, then take a bite. It doesn't matter what it is at this point. I don't have much of an appetite, mostly going through the motions of eating because I know I should.

Gary and I take a few slices each, send the rest of the pizza into Bjorn's room for Erik and Jules, and then wait. And wait. Late into the afternoon, Jules pokes his head into the waiting room, obvious relief on his face, grinning hugely. "Bjorn's awake."

Astrid jumps up and rushes for Bjorn's room. When she reappears a little while later, she's red-eyed, but smiling. "He's fine. He sounds like himself, although he's very tired and still pale." She sits next to Gary, leaning into him, and he wraps his arms around her, offering her comfort and support. She leans into him and I've never felt more alone or out of place. I'm happy Bjorn will be fine. Relieved for my friends. But I have little business being here for this very personal family moment, and I know it. I stand and clear my throat. "That's great news. Please tell him I said hello, and I'm glad he's doing better."

Astrid glances up at me, confusion in her eyes. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes. I still have a ton of work to do, and poor Dracona has been alone a lot." I don't look at Gary or Astrid. "I'll maybe stop by tomorrow, if I get caught up on the work stuff." The uncomfortable silence confirms we all know that won't happen. "Anyway, goodnight. I'll talk to you tomorrow, I'm sure."

Astrid jumps up and throws her arms around me, holding me close. "Thank you for everything. Thank you for being here for us. For Gunnar. You are always welcome. You know that, right? With or without Gunnar around. You're my best friend, and I love you."

I blink back tears and squeeze her tightly. "Thank you." It comes out as a whisper, but I know she hears because she

squeezes me harder. Stepping back, she takes my hands. “Be careful going home.”

With a nod, I wave to Gary and head for the elevators, making it out of the hospital parking garage and back to my building in record time, mostly because I speed the whole way. Once I’m home, I allow myself to feel the full weight of just how embarrassing and awkward the situation at the hospital had been. Gunnar put me in that position. His unwillingness to communicate is making everyone who loves him worry, and it’s utterly selfish. And juvenile.

Storming out of the elevator, I throw my keys on the dining table, my coat over a chair, then pour myself a very large glass of wine. I’m beyond wrung-out, mentally and physically. The stress of the past few weeks is taking its toll, and I’m not sure if I want to scream or cry.

Dropping onto the couch, I slouch into a corner and stare at nothing, lost in thought as I drink my wine. When the glass is empty, I set it on the coffee table and scoop up Dracona. “Time for bed, *ma reine*. Alone. Again.” The wine is working its way into my system, and I’ve sunk into melancholia. Excellent.

Once I’m ready for bed, I crawl under the covers, curling up on my side with Gunnar’s pillow against my face. The ache in my chest is almost unbearable, and I throw the pillow across the room with a growl. “Gunnar, why are you doing this to me?” Angry and hurt, I lay there, determined not to comfort myself with his scent, faded though it is. That lasts for another

full minute. Then I fling back the covers and stomp across the room to retrieve the pillow, pressing it to my wet face as I stalk back to bed. Please be okay. Please come home. I miss you so much. For the second night in a row, I cry myself to sleep.



This time when I wake up, it's barely light outside. Gunnar's side of the bed is empty and cold, and I turn away, pushing myself out of bed. I'm even more exhausted than when I went to sleep, but my mind won't turn off. It's a struggle to find the energy to stand, but I stumble my way to the bathroom, brushing my teeth and showering before I pull on sweatpants and a sweatshirt. I can't work up the motivation to wear anything more complicated. With more effort than should be necessary, I go downstairs to the kitchen and make myself some tea, then go into my office, hoping there's enough there to distract me.

For a few hours, I throw myself into my work, and whenever my mind drifts to Gunnar, I cut off the thought and dive into another project. I text Astrid to let her know I'm not going to make it to the hospital. She doesn't seem surprised, but I refuse to feel guilty about it. If Gunnar shows up, it's likely to be there, and I really don't want to see him. Not right now, anyway. I don't want to reward his awful behavior by looking

like I'm eagerly waiting for him. But what if he comes here? I don't want him here either. Not right now.

And suddenly, I'm *done*. I put my work aside and head to the kitchen to make myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich like the grown-ass adult I am. In between bites, I call the security desk in the lobby.

"Hello, this is Rob. How may I help you today, Mr. Allard?"

"Good afternoon, Rob. I need to make a few changes to my loft's security, please. Let's start with the key cards." I have him deactivate Gunnar's. If the jerk wants in, he'll need my permission, and he's certainly not getting that anytime soon. "If Gunnar Osouf requests access, please direct him to me, but don't allow him in unescorted."

The clacking of fingers on keys fills the silent pause. "Very good, Mr. Allard. The second card has been deactivated and a note put in the system regarding Mr. Osouf."

"Thanks, Rob."

I hang up, finish eating, and walk through the house, putting everything of Gunnar's—or anything that reminds me of him—into a box, stashing it in the bottom of the coat closet, where I won't have to look at it.

Upstairs, I change the sheets on the bed, tossing them immediately into the wash so I can't change my mind, then go back to my office and ignore the bitter ache in my chest. I feel both better and worse, and just want the roller-coaster ride to

be over. If Gunnar shows up, I'm sending him home. To *his* home. Because this isn't that for him anymore.

Gunnar

I pull into the parking garage at the hospital and drive through, looking for an open spot but also keeping an eye out for my car. I'm excited to see Bjorn and make sure he's alright, but god, I miss Jocelin. Over the last hour of my drive, I waffled between coming to the hospital first, or going to Jocelin's. Then I realized he'd probably be here, which made my decision for me.

Parking in one of the motorcycle-designated spots near the elevators, I take one more look around for my car. It's definitely not here, though there might not have been open spots on this level, depending on when Joce got here. I ride the elevator to Bjorn's floor and hurry out as soon as the doors open, heading straight for the waiting area. Astrid and Gary are here, but no one else is around. "Hey."

Astrid's head snaps up from her magazine. "God, Gunnar, you're alright!" She flings herself at me, and I barely catch her, struggling to breathe as she squeezes me tightly.

“I’m fine, Bean.” I laugh and squeeze her back. “This is quite the welcome. I’m very glad to see you, too.” She clings to me for a few more minutes, and I glance over her shoulder at Gary, with a questioning look. He frowns, shaking his head at me. And isn’t that confusing? “How’s Bjorn?”

“He’s fine. He woke up yesterday.” She stiffens in my arms, then rears back and looks into my eyes. “How are you?”

I let her go and scrub my hands over my face. “Tired. But better.”

“Good. I’m glad. Where did you go?”

She’s trying for casual, but she can’t hide the strain in her voice. At least, not from me. We know each other too well. “I went for a ride to clear my head, get things straight.” The frightened look on Jocelin’s face keeps flashing in my mind, making my stomach clench. “I was scaring Jocelin.” Taking a breath, I admit the truth. “I was scaring myself. It was better if I worked through things alone. Less chance to hurt anyone more than I already had.”

“Gunnar, I wish you’d called.” She bites her lower lip and frowns. “We were worried. You’ve never been gone for this long without calling.”

I look into her eyes and see the pain there. Fuck. I did that. And if Astrid’s upset, does that mean Jocelin is too? “I figured you’d all know what I was doing. It’s not like I haven’t gone off to clear my head with a ride before.” A tight knot forms in the pit of my stomach. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry anyone. I just needed to get myself under control.”

“You were gone for three days, Gunnar. And Bjorn was out of danger, but I figured you’d want to see him.”

“I did see him. Just before I took off, I stopped in and sat with him for a little while.” That seems to ease some of her tension. “And my phone died the first night out. I didn’t have my charger with me.”

She snorts derisively. “Okay, that’s a lame excuse, Gunnar.” She points at me. “You know it too, or you’d be looking me in the eye. You could have used a phone anywhere... a gas station, a restaurant, a police station. I know you weren’t in a good place, but we were worried about you.” She shakes her head and pulls me into a tight hug. “Really worried.”

“Astrid.” I can barely make my voice heard. She’s being kind, but I can tell I’ve fucked up. The depth of the fuck up settles on me like a crushing weight because Jocelin isn’t here, and I have a guess why. I need to ask the question, but I’m afraid. I do it anyway. “Where’s Jocelin?” Astrid sighs and squeezes me tighter, but she doesn’t say anything. “Why isn’t he here?” I know what the answer is, and it’s making me sick.

“He was here yesterday and the day before. But, once he knew Bjorn would be okay, and you still hadn’t called anyone...” She lets the words trail off and releases me, backing away. “You really hurt him, Gunnar. He doesn’t understand. I tried to explain it to him, but you didn’t contact him the entire time you were gone. He’s embarrassed and angry. He said he had a lot to do today, but I don’t think he

could face us again. I can only imagine what else he must be feeling. I'm not sure I could face us after that, either."

I drag my fingers through my hair and pace the room. "Shit. I fucked up." My voice is small and sounds every bit as scared as I am. "Can I borrow your phone?"

She shakes her head so quickly it'd be funny if I wasn't so tied in knots. "No way. You are not calling him and getting him to answer because he thinks it's me. I love you, but I won't do that to him." She looks at Gary. "And you aren't giving him your phone either." She points out to the nurse's station. "Use the hospital phone, or go charge yours with my power cord and call him on your own phone."

I don't argue because she's right. I sit on the sofa and use her power cord to plug in my phone, staring at it like that will make it charge more quickly. It just needs enough charge to make a call, even if I have to contort myself to talk while it stays plugged in. I slouch into the seat and glance at Gary. "Hey, Gary."

He nods in my direction. "Hey, Gunnar. You okay?"

I shrug. "I thought I was, but now I'm not so sure. Guess I fucked up again."

"That you definitely did."

I drop my gaze to my phone, and Gary puts a hand on my shoulder. "Apologize. Tell him you know you fucked up. Then apologize again. But don't give up." He sighs. "At some point, he'll probably agree to talk to you. And if you're very lucky,

and he gives you conditions to take you back? Agree. Say yes to whatever terms he makes. Every one. And stick to them. That's what I'd do, if I were in your position with Astrid."

I nod and clench my jaw, trying not to cry. "Thanks, Gary." All I wanted was to keep Jocelin safe and not scare him anymore. Instead, I hurt him so badly he can't even face my family. I prop my elbows on my knees, drop my head into my hands, and blink away the tears because I did this to myself. Christ. Maybe he's better off without me. The thought makes me sick because I'm definitely not better off without him.

My phone finally has enough charge to come back to life, and with trembling hands, I place the call. It rings twice and goes to voicemail. Shit. That means he rejected the call. Astrid's phone rings less than a minute later. My head snaps up, and I stare at her because that's too much of a coincidence.

"Hey." Just based on that greeting, I know I'm right. "Okay." Astrid glances over at me, then looks away. "No, I understand. That's perfectly reasonable." She nods and bites her lip. There's a long pause when she doesn't say anything, then she nods. "Yes. He seems to be." She looks at me again and gives me a half smile. "Alright. Will I see you tomorrow?" I furrow my brow, wondering why that's even a question. Tomorrow's a workday. Surely he'll see her at the office. "Okay, sweetie. Bye."

She barely has time to hang up before I'm on my feet and asking questions. "That was Jocelin, wasn't it?"

“Yes. It was. I’m sorry, Gunnar. He doesn’t want to talk to you right now. He needs some time to sort things out.” She pulls me down next to her on the couch, and I cover my face with my hands. “He asked if you were okay, though. I think that’s a good sign.”

When I look up, Erik is standing in the doorway, scowling at me. “Gunnar.”

“Erik. Hey. How’s Bjorn?”

“He’s healing. I’m sure Astrid told you he’s awake. He’s asking for you, and we keep telling him you’ll be right in. He’s been a bit out of it, so he hasn’t noticed that you weren’t here. But you should get in there before he figures shit out. He’s awake now.”

I follow him to Bjorn’s room, catching sight of Jules as I peek around the corner. When he sees me, he visibly sags with relief. “Gunnar. Good. You’re here.” He stands and hugs me, which shocks me. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I hug him back and glance over at Bjorn. He’s still pale, but looks better than a few days ago. I swallow and fight back tears of relief as well as misery. “No. Not really. I fucked up.”

Jules lets me go. “Yeah, ya did. But you’ll fix it.”

I clear my throat and stuff my hands in my pockets, staring down at the scuffed linoleum floor. “I’m not sure I can, this time.”

“Not sure you can, what?” Bjorn’s gravelly voice is barely a murmur.

My head snaps up to look at him. His gray eyes are tired and not fully focused, but they’re open and lucid as I walk toward the bed. “Hey. How are you feeling?” Dropping into the chair next to the bed, I grab his hand. “Shit, man. You gave us all a scare.”

“About as big a scare as you gave everyone else.” He looks at the three of us. “Come on. Did you really think I wouldn’t notice?” He squeezes my hand. “It’s good to see you.”

I just nod, fighting back tears. This is not how I imagined this whole thing happening.

“It’ll be okay.” I swallow, unable to meet his eyes. “Hey.” He squeezes my hand again. “Gunnar, look at me.” I slowly raise my eyes and meet his. “You know the number of times I fucked things up so badly that I was sure you guys would never forgive me?”

Erik frowns. “You mean like now?” He looks at Bjorn. “You’re getting too old for this shit, Bjorn. And we’re getting too old to deal with the stress your shit puts us through.”

He winces but slowly reaches out and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Give him time. He loves you. He’ll come around.”

I give up fighting the tears that have been threatening to spill since I got to the hospital. “I hope you’re right. ‘Cause right now, he doesn’t like me very much.” Bjorn stifles a yawn, and

I stand up. “You need rest right now, not my drama. I’ll figure it out.”

“I’m your brother, Gunnar. I’m here for you. And besides, fuck ups are what the Osouf brothers do best.” Jules snorts, but Erik and I don’t even protest because he’s not wrong.

Jules slips under Erik’s arm, hugging him, and I glance away because it’s too painful to watch right now. “Get some sleep. I’ll come back later.” Bjorn nods and gingerly tries to get comfortable, then shuts his eyes.

I step out into the hall, and Erik follows. “Gunnar, go home, get a shower, eat something. Jocelin was here with us for two days after you disappeared, and he’s upset. Let him wrap his mind around things.” He holds my gaze. “If it works out, it’ll probably require a very painful conversation with Jocelin first. I really hope you two fix things because that man is good for you. You’re less of a jerk around him. So when he tells you what you need to do to make it right, listen and actually *hear* what he’s telling you. It’s not easy or pleasant, but do it. It’s worth it.” Erik hauls me into a hug, and I allow him to hold me for a minute, then we let go.

He walks into Bjorn’s room, and I slowly head back to the waiting area, stopping in front of Astrid and Gary. “I’m gonna go home and get a shower. Maybe grab something to eat. Take a nap. I’ll be back later.”

Astrid stands and wraps her arms around me. “I love you, Gunnar. It’ll be okay.”

I nod, wave at Gary, and leave, praying she’s right.



I shake off my rain gear and hang it on the coat hook, trying not to get anyone else's things wet. My car is still at Jocelin's, so I had to ride the bike to work. In the rain. Guess I earned that. I sit at my desk and boot up my laptop, and hear a grunt of recognition from behind me. I sigh and turn around to face the music. "Hey, Tom."

"How are you?" Tom hangs up his coat and snorts at my rain gear, then walks to my desk and stands in front of me with his arms crossed, staring at me expectantly.

"I mostly have my head on straight. But Jocelin isn't talking to me." I clench my jaw and try not to let my emotions leak out through my eyes.

"Yeah, I know. I talked with him yesterday. He doesn't understand what happened."

"I realize that now. Honestly, it wasn't intentional. I thought everyone would know what I was doing and would tell Joce not to worry. I mean, I used to do it all the time when I had something big to work through. You all know that. And I can take care of myself."

Tom drops into a chair, pinning me with a look. "We get it. But for the record, I was starting to worry. You've never been

gone this long before. I was beginning to wonder if we needed to involve search and rescue.”

There’s no humor in his eyes and I realize what everyone was probably thinking. “I’d never hurt myself, Tom. I promise.”

He nods. “Good to know. I never would have considered it in the past, but you changed things up this time. Stayed away longer than usual. We had to consider the possibility.” Fuck. I’m such a dumbass. “When it was just you, it was alright to take off like that. But you have Jocelin now. And you can’t do that to him. Not without talking to him first.”

I look down at my hands. “I’m not so sure I do have him anymore.” I clench my jaw, refusing to cry. “He won’t talk to me.”

“Which is why I think it’s time to get professional help again. Don’t fuck around with this, Gunnar. Call Cass. Maybe if Jocelin knows you’re trying to deal with it, he’ll be more open to talking to you.”

I nod, dragging my hands through my hair.

“Good. Call her and make an appointment.” Tom’s voice softens. “So, how’s Bjorn? Jocelin said he was awake.”

“Yeah, he’s doing better. I talked to him yesterday. He looked like shit, but he sounded good.”

Tadhg and Quinn come into the office, and I brace myself for the blast.

‘Morning. Gunnar, it’s good to see you. Hopefully, this means Bjorn is recovering.’

Neither looks angry at all. In fact, they seem happy to see me. ‘Yes. He’s awake and doing well. Thanks for asking. And thanks for understanding about last week... giving me the time off.’

Tadhg waves his hand dismissively. ‘Of course. You were where you needed to be. With family. I’m sure it was stressful for everyone. Anyway, Quinn and I stopped for donuts, so help yourselves.’

Quinn waves the box in his hand and jerks his thumb over his shoulder. ‘I’m going to put them in the kitchen.’

I glance at Tom, who’s eyeing me meaningfully. ‘I’m going to go check out the donuts. No one tell Josie.’

Tadhg sips his coffee and looks at me expectantly, so I dive in before I can second guess myself. ‘Tadhg, I need to speak with you for a minute. If you have the time now?’

He raises an eyebrow. ‘Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this conversation?’

I stand and walk toward the door. ‘Your office might be best.’ I follow him down the hall with Quinn not far behind, looking at us curiously. We step into the office and I close the door behind me. ‘So, I’m not going to sugar-coat this. I fucked up.’ They wait expectantly, and if I wasn’t absolutely certain Jocelin hadn’t said anything, I’d think they are letting me stew in my own juices. ‘So, I was kind of messed up over what

happened to Bjorn, and once we knew he'd be okay, I still wasn't right.'

They watch me with unreadable expressions, and from these two, that doesn't bode well. They're usually pretty easygoing. 'When I need to clear my head, I jump on my bike and take off to work through it.' The more I say it, the more stupid it sounds. God, I'm a fool. I really screwed up so badly. 'So that's what I did this time, too. Only I didn't call or text anyone to tell them what I was doing. And now Jocelin won't talk to me.'

Quinn groans and rubs his face, but Tadhg is calm. Very calm. And staring at me. 'So, let me see if I understand. Your brother was stabbed, and it was life-threatening. Jocelin stayed by your side the whole time. Once you knew your brother would be okay, you took off like an emo teenager to find yourself or whatever, and you left behind the man who supported you through the whole ordeal, without telling him a thing. You also didn't call him the entire time you were gone. Am I missing anything?'

I swallow and shake my head, barely keeping up with his ever increasing signing speed. 'No, that pretty much summarizes it.'

Quinn waves to get Tadhg's attention, but Tadhg ignores him. 'Now Jocelin is so upset he won't even talk to you.' The anger in Tadhg's eyes is uncomfortable, but the scorn is unbearable. 'You are a fool. You are the biggest fool on the face of this earth. You've hurt the kindest, sweetest man, who

would have done anything you asked of him.’ Quinn tries again to get Tadhg’s attention, but Tadhg only holds up a hand, asking Quinn to wait while he keeps signing at me. ‘You’ve taken the gentlest soul, and you’ve squeezed his heart between your fingers and crushed it. No wonder he hasn’t returned any of our calls. He’s been covering for you.’

Tadhg smiles, but it’s cold and pitiless. ‘I warned you not to hurt him. I very specifically asked you never to do that.’ He shakes his head. ‘Go. Go back to your desk and work on something. If you need anything, talk to Quinn or Tom. You really don’t want to be around me right now.’ He stands and turns his back, dismissing me.

I glance at Quinn, who winces in sympathy. I leave their office and hurry back to my desk. Tom looks up and raises an eyebrow, but I shake my head, not wanting to talk about it. Dropping into my chair, I pull up the project I’m supposed to work on, but I can’t concentrate. My mind keeps wandering back to Jocelin. When I can’t take it anymore, I pull out my phone.

Me: Joce, I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t help. But I am.

Me: I miss you. Please call me

Jocelin

My week has gone about as horribly as I expected. Thankfully, the new contracts at work are fairly straightforward because my focus has been nonexistent. Gunnar continues to text, and he's left so many voicemails my mailbox is full. That's actually fine because now he can't leave any more. Not that I've listened to them. More than once, anyway. Well, except that one time I played them just because I missed him and needed to hear his voice. Not that I'm any closer to deciding what I want to do about him...or us. I keep bouncing between white-hot anger and morose pining. I'm ridiculous.

Today isn't progressing any better than the rest of the week, so I leave work early. It's not like I'm getting anything done, anyway. Pulling up the collar of my coat, I steamroll down the sidewalk, the fifteen-minute trek home doing little to burn off any of my tension. When I get to my building, I wave to the guard at the front desk but don't stop to chit-chat. I ride the elevator by myself, dump my coat and laptop on the table, and make a beeline for the kitchen. There's a bottle of wine in the

chiller with my name on it, and I hear it calling. In no time at all, I have the bottle open and pour a generous amount into my wineglass. Then pour more.

Dracona comes to greet me, rubbing against my calves, weaving in and out of my legs. She's adorable and loving, and her loud purring is doing wonders to calm me down. I bend and pet her with long strokes down her back to the tip of her tail, just like she wants. "Hello, *mon bébé*. So happy to see me. You care about me, don't you." Scooping her up, I grab my glass and walk out to the living room to sprawl on the couch. I take a large sip of wine, then give her the attention she deserves, scratching behind her ears and under her chin. "You would never run away and make me worry." Another large gulp of wine, and I kiss her soft, little head. "Would you, *chouchou*? You wouldn't be a complete *enculé* and ignore me like I was totally unimportant." After one more swig, I finally start to feel a slight buzz from the wine. "You wouldn't take off and not tell me where you were."

She meows at me, and jumps down from my lap, looking back before she darts into the kitchen. "Oh, are you hungry, *mon bébé*? I will get you your food." I down the rest of my wine in one go and push up from the couch. Back in the kitchen, I refill my glass and grab her kibble from the pantry. She jumps onto the counter next to me, but I don't have the heart to shoo her off. "Yes, I know you're not supposed to be up here. This is a crisis situation. The rules have momentarily changed." Sipping from my newly filled glass, I lean against the counter as she crunches on her food. "Do you know what I

think? I think we're better off if it's just you and me. Just us." I stroke her back as she eats. "We make a cute couple." Warmth spreads through my body, and I finally feel like my shoulders drop away from my ears. Yes, I'm tipsy, and I probably should also eat something. Otherwise, I'm headed for a nasty hangover tomorrow. But that requires calling for takeout, and I just don't have the energy. Fuck it. Who cares? I point at Dracona. "Exactly. Who cares? No one. Not Gunnar. He doesn't care. If he cared, he'd have called me on his little 'me-time' trip. His little finding himself excursion. He'd have made sure I didn't worry. But noooooooooo. He couldn't do *that*." I take another drink of wine. "*Trou de cul*."

Dracona meows angrily, and I quickly apologize. "I didn't mean you, dear. I mean Gunnar. He's the asshole." I chug the rest of my glass and set it on the countertop, pick up the half-empty bottle, and go back into the living room. A glass is just inefficient at this point. I'm definitely buzzed and heading squarely for drunk, and I'm only interested in speeding up the process because why the fuck not? I drop onto the sofa. "Here's to me." I raise the bottle and then take a swig. "Here's to telling Gunnar to fuck off." I drink again. "Here's to..." My phone rings, interrupting my flow. Damn, that's poor timing. I look at the name on the screen and turn to Dracona, mouth open. "Oh, look who it is." I wave the phone at her. "It's the *trou de cul* boyfriend. Should I answer it? Or should I ignore him again?" I take one more swig of wine. "Fuck it." I answer the call.

“Hello, Gunnar. I guess you figured out how to charge your phone. Lucky me. To what do I owe the gift of your call?”

There’s a long pause before Gunnar says anything. “Joce? Are you drunk?”

I snort. “No. No, I’m not. I’m fucking plastered.” I look at Dracona and giggle. “You’d think he’d be able to tell the difference.”

“Jocelin, is someone there?”

Even drunk, I hear the worry in his voice. Or is it jealousy? Good. “Yes.” I push off the sofa, managing to make it to my feet on the second try, pacing back and forth in front of the coffee table. “I’m having a lovely date and a bottle of wine with Dracona. She’s not drinking, but she’s excellent company. What do you want anyway, Gunnar? Why do you keep calling and texting me?”

There’s silence on the other end.

“See, you don’t even know why you’re doing it. But I do. Do you want me to tell you why? You’re doing it because you feel guilty for being such a fucking asshole and not calling me for days. Because you made me and the rest of your family worried. But guess what? They have to talk to you, Gunnar. Because they’re your family. I’m not. I don’t have to talk to you. I can do what I want. Like get shit-faced drunk.”

“Jocelin, let me explain...”

“Ooooh.” I laugh and look at Dracona. “He wants to explain now.” I inhale and exhale, which turns into a burp, and that

makes me giggle. “Let me explain something to you, Mister Gunnar I’m-a-fucking-mess Osouf. You fucking hurt me. *Me*. It’s *me*, Gunnar. And you shut me out. Just like that. Like I was *nothing* to you.” I’m gesturing wildly, and I almost knock over a lamp, so I sit down again and try not to spill any of the wine. That would be such a waste. “I would have done anything for you. And do you know why? *Je suis amoureux de toi!* I fucking love you, Gunnar! That’s why. And you treated me like shit. Like I was nothing. Because I am nothing to you. So you know what?” Something tickles my face, and I swipe at it, surprised to find tears streaming down my cheeks. “I don’t think I ever want to see you again.” A sob escapes me, but I keep talking, unable to stop myself now that I’ve started. “Because my heart hurts so badly right now. All I wanted was to love you and for you to love me, too. But you never said it. You never said it, and then you ran away. Just ran.” I’m suddenly drained, and I don’t want to talk or cry anymore. I wipe my face on my sleeve and sniff into the phone. “Goodbye, Gunnar. I’m hanging up. I’m tired. Please stop calling and texting me.” I hang up and let the phone slip from my hand, leaning back on the couch with my eyes closed. My bed is too far, and I’m too tired to go upstairs. I’ll rest here for a minute and go up later. Maybe.



I wake up on the couch, disoriented and cold. My mouth tastes like something crawled in and died, and my head is pounding. Sunlight streams in the windows, and I have no idea why I'm not in my bed. Pushing myself up, I wince as pain lances through my head. I ignore it, forcing myself to my feet and attempt to take a step forward. My foot hits something, and I glance down to see a wine bottle roll under the coffee table. Suddenly, all of last night comes flooding back. Groaning, I cover my face with my hands. I'm such a fool for drinking so much. A wave of nausea rolls over me just as my phone alarm goes off. Fucking hell. I squeeze my eyes closed and take several deep breaths, then pat my pockets for my phone, but I can't find it. After five or so minutes of playing will-I-throw-up-or-find-my-phone, I eventually locate it between the seat cushions. I stab at the screen, finally getting the alarm to shut off, and rest my head against the back of the couch, promising myself I will never drink that much again.

There is no damned way I'm going to work. It takes me far too long to remember the procedure since I've never actually called in sick before. Now that Alistair is my supervisor, I need to call him, which I do. He picks up right away. "Good morning, Jocelin. Everything okay?"

His voice is full of concern, making me feel like a jerk for worrying him. "Hi Alistair." My voice comes out like a croak, and I suppose I should be grateful because it lends credibility to my story. "I'm not feeling well this morning. I think I might have the flu."

Alistair hums into the phone. “You don’t sound well at all. And I’m not surprised. You’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. Your body is in a weakened state, leaving you open to illness.”

I have enough brainpower to marvel that Alistair is making my fake case for me. Or he knows I’m full of shit, and he’s giving me an easy out. Either way, I’m taking advantage of it. “I’m sure that’s it. But it’s best if I stay home today. I should be fine by tomorrow.”

“No problem. I hope you feel better soon, Jocelin. Get some sleep.”

“I will. Thanks, Alistair.” I crawl up the stairs and brush my teeth as quietly as possible, then drag myself into the shower, dropping my clothes on the floor, not even caring that the hamper is only two feet away. Setting the water to a tepid temperature, I stand under the spray until my headache eases, and I don’t feel like throwing up every other minute. Then I towel off and put on my comfiest sweats and T-shirt. Finally, I take some ibuprofen, and drink several large glasses of water before crawling into bed and pulling the covers over my head. I really need to decide what I’m going to do about the Gunnar situation because I don’t want to spend another week like this. I can’t. It might help if I could talk this out with someone, but it can’t be Astrid. As much as she’s my best friend, and I love her, Astrid is Gunnar’s family. That would put her in an awkward position. Which also excludes Erik for the same reason. Tadhg and Quinn are out because Gunnar works for them, and even if he deserves it, I don’t want to be the cause of

trouble between him and his bosses. Tom said I could call him anytime, but he's Gunnar's best friend, and that wouldn't be fair to either of them. Jules and Gary are out because they're practically part of Gunnar's family as well.

And right here is the reason why dating within a friend group, even tangentially, is a bad idea. That leaves Stef and Blake, and as much as I love them, Stef would be immediately defensive of me, and I need someone who can be impartial. Even with the intertwined relationships of our friend group, I know Blake can be that.

I reach for my phone.

Me: Lunch?

Blake: Absolutely! I'll even buy. Where?

Me: Don't care. You pick

Blake: Hang on...

There's a pause of a few minutes, and I close my eyes, fighting off sleep while I wait. The message app buzzes, jolting me out of my light doze.

Blake: Can make 11:30?

Blake: If yes, I can get us in at Cibum Optimum

Me: You are being too nice to me

Me: I feel like I've been a bad lawyer and friend lately

Blake: You're neither of those things

Blake: We're both busy people. I get it

Me: What if I need to cry on your shoulder for advice?

Blake: I have big shoulders, and I'll bring tissues

Blake: I'm honored you'd ask

Blake: You're not asking advice from Astrid

Blake: I think I know what this is about

Blake: I'm happy to be here for you

Me: That means a lot. Thank you. See you at 11:30

Blake: *thumbsup emoji*

I set my alarm for ten, roll over, and go back to sleep.



The restaurant is full of the delicious scents of spices and garlic. I approach the maître d', about to give my name when I spot Blake. The maître d' escorts me to the quiet corner table, and gestures for me to sit, then excuses himself as I drop into the chair opposite Blake. "Thank you for meeting me. I hope you weren't waiting long."

Blake smiles and shakes his head. "No. I just got here. Let's have a look at the menu and then you can tell me what advice

you need from me.”

After we review the lunch features and place our orders with the server, Blake pins me with a look. “Rough night?”

“Very. I had a bit of a pity party for myself after one of the most difficult weeks of my life.” I glance out the window to get my emotions under control.

Blake takes a sip of his sparkling water and gives me a minute. “This is about Gunnar, right?”

For a moment, I’m shocked he knows there’s an issue with Gunnar since Blake doesn’t really interact with him. But he could have found out from Astrid or Stef. I fiddle with my water glass, then dive right in. No sense beating around the bush. “I’m so angry with him. Yes, what happened to Bjorn was scary and stressful, and I know he has PTSD from when his mother was stabbed, but he cut me out. He didn’t allow me to help him deal with it.” As I talk through everything, the fury bubbles up again, and I know it’s justified. But then it fades. “But I miss him terribly. It’s been almost two weeks since I’ve seen him, and my heart hurts.” I sigh and slump in my seat. “I’ve been at war with myself all week about what to do.”

Blake nods and holds my gaze. “What options are you considering?”

“Tell him to lose my number and fuck off. Or forgive him and tell him to come over and hold me.”

Blake makes a humming noise, like he’s considering what I’ve said. “And which way are you leaning?”

I look everywhere but at Blake. “Well, I may have spoken to him last night on the phone and told him I love him.”

Blake coughs to cover a laugh. “You may have?”

I glare at him. “Okay, I did tell him.” Blake raises his eyebrows. “I actually yelled it at him, if you must know. Followed by telling him I don’t think I want to see him again.” I set my elbows on the table and bury my face in my hands. “What do I do?”

He reaches across the table, taking my arm. “Jocelin, only you can make that decision. But if it’s any consolation, Astrid says he’s miserable.”

I look up, hating the idea of Gunnar being miserable because of me. “That isn’t consoling. I don’t want him to be hurting. He’s been hurt enough in his life. He should be happy.” I realize I’m defending him and stop. “What would you do in my place? What if Stef had done this to you? What would you do?”

Blake frowns. “Stef and Gunnar are two extremely different people. I can’t imagine a scenario when Stef would do this to me.” He leans forward, resting his elbows on the table and clasping his hands together like I’ve seen him do a million times in negotiations. “My initial reaction as your friend was outrage for you. I thought Gunnar was being childish and hurtful. But I’ve had a conversation or two with Astrid.” He holds up a hand. “Nothing too personal, but she let me know about what happened with their mother and the coping

methods Gunnar had in college. And I think I have a better grasp on things.”

I lean in, hoping Blake has some kind of wisdom for me. His expression is serious, but I can see the sympathy in his eyes. “Gunnar handled this latest situation poorly, but I believe he didn’t intentionally hurt you.” He gives me a knowing look. “And you don’t believe he did it intentionally, either.” I feel my cheeks heat because he’s right. “Was he insensitive and self-centered? Absolutely. No doubt. But was he in a place to make sound decisions? No. He was trying not to lash out, and the only way he knew to do that was to remove himself from possible targets.”

Frustration builds in my chest because this isn’t anything I didn’t already come to on my own. “That’s not really helping me choose, though.”

He nods. “I know. Unfortunately, this isn’t cut and dry. The call is completely yours. You need to decide if you can forgive him for being an ass. I, of course, will support you, whichever way you go. And Astrid will too. She’s said as much. In fact, if what Stef said isn’t just Stef being dramatic, your entire friend group will support whatever decision you make.”

I blanch. “What exactly does that support entail if I decide not to forgive him? Is someone going to beat him up?” Then I think of something infinitely worse. “Shit, you don’t think Tadhg and Quinn would fire him, do you? That would be excessive. He was a jerk, but he didn’t intentionally set out to hurt me.”

Blake shakes his head. “I doubt it. That would be poor business. From what Tadhg says, Gunnar is a brilliant architect.” He grins. “Although if Tadhg ever found out you’d told Gunnar that, he’d probably never forgive either of us.” I take a breath and relax. “But...” Blake holds up a finger. “... based on your very visible concern regarding his job, I think you’ve answered your own question about what to do.”

I press my knuckles against my eyes and sigh. “Maybe I have.” The waiter brings our meals, and I will myself to remain civilized and not shovel every bite into my mouth. The last time I ate, or felt like eating, was lunch yesterday. Blake kindly ignores the way I inhale my food. He was definitely the right person to call. I knew he’d be impartial enough to come at the situation fairly. “Thank you. For lunch, for the restaurant pick, for listening. And really, just for always being an amazing friend.”

“You’re welcome. I value our friendship, and I’m very glad you’re feeling better. Astrid will be glad, too. She’s been very upset for you.”

That makes me feel even better. “I haven’t really talked to her about this. I was worried about putting her in the middle. She loves us both, and it would have hurt her even more.”

Blake nods. “She understands. But I think it will ease her mind to know you’ve made a decision.”

“Thank you again.”

“Anytime, Jocelin. You know that.”

Conversation turns to more nebulous topics, mostly because I steer it that way. Once Blake realizes what I'm doing, he keeps the discussion light and stress free. When lunch is over, he offers to drop me off at my loft since it's on the way to his office. The quick twenty-minute ride is quiet. I'm lost in my own thoughts, and Blake doesn't try to pull me into conversation, opting to check his emails instead. When the limo pulls up outside my building, I hug him. "Thank you. For everything."

"You're welcome, Jocelin. If you need anything at all, please call me?"

I nod and slide out of the car, walking into the building in a bit of a fog, my mind on Gunnar and how I want to proceed. When I step out of the elevator into my living room, my phone buzzes.

Gunnar: Joce. I'm so sorry. Really

Gunnar: I know you said to stop texting you, but...

My heart is hammering a million miles a second, and my stomach swoops. It takes me a very long minute of staring at the screen before I make up my mind to send a reply.

Me: I'm really confused right now. I need time to think

Me: Can you give me that?

Gunnar: Yes! Absolutely. Whatever you need

Gunnar: I miss you, Joce

I slip my phone into my pocket and pretend to ignore the way my heart flutters in my chest.

Gunnar

I slouch down in the patio chair and stare at the lake, thinking about what Jocelin said on the phone. My chest aches with the memory. He'd said the three words I'd been dying to hear. The words I've wanted to say to him for such a long time. But Joce had the balls to say them. And then he'd said he didn't want to see me again. I press my fingers to the bridge of my nose and squeeze my eyes shut.

“That bad, huh?” Astrid pulls up a chair.

“Worse.” I glance away, trying to get myself under control.

“Wanna talk about it?”

I shake my head. “Not really.” We sit silently for a few minutes before I cave like she knew I would. “He told me he loves me.”

“What?!” Astrid leans closer and takes my hand. “When?”

That simple touch feels so grounding that I almost sob with relief. I squeeze her hand tightly. “I called him Thursday night. He actually answered.” I look at her. “He was drunk off his

ass.” I glance away again, somehow finding the words easier that way. “He really told me off. Said some really mean things. None of it was a lie, though. Then he told me he loves me, but he doesn’t think he wants to see me again.” The pain had been so excruciating, I’d honestly thought I might die from it. Absently, I rub the spot on my chest. “I hurt him so badly, Bean. I never meant to hurt him.” I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my voice steady. “I love him.”

“Ohhh, Gunnar.” She squeezes my hand. “Did you tell him?”

I shake my head. “I wanted to. So many times, I wanted to. But it was never the right time.”

“Gunnar.” I can hear the exasperation in her voice, and I deserve it. “Anytime is the right time. You need to tell him.”

“How can I tell him now? He’ll think I’m only saying it to get him back.” I drag my fingers through my hair. “I wasn’t thinking straight when I took off. If I had been, I never would have left. I never would have needed to leave.”

“So what are you going to do?” She rubs my arm.

I shrug. “I texted him on Friday. Told him again that I was sorry. He actually texted back. Said he was confused and needed me to give him time.”

I risk a glance her way. Her expression is hopeful. “So that’s good. Right?”

“I don’t know.” My vision blurs with unshed tears. “What if he never wants to see me again? What if he never forgives me?” I try to look her in the eyes, but can’t see clearly through

my unshed tears. “What if I can never hold him again? What if...” Covering my face with my hands, I suck in shuddering breaths, unable to finish that thought.

“Do you want me to call him?”

“What?” I love and hate the idea.

“I can call him. He’ll answer the phone for me. He called in sick on Friday, so that can be my excuse if I need one. I can call to check on him.”

I’m not sure what to say. I really want to say yes, but I don’t know if Astrid calling him would make things better or worse. But I also can’t stand the idea of not trying. “Okay. Yeah. Call him.”

She takes out her phone and dials. She waits, and I assume the phone is ringing. “Hi, sweetie. How are you feeling?” She looks at me, eyes big, and smiles. “Yeah, gang’s all here. They let Bjorn out of the hospital on Friday, so Erik insisted on cooking for everyone. He’s turning into quite the chef. Everyone says hello, and we all miss you.” There’s a pause while Jocelin says something. “Jocelin, sweetie, is there anything I can do?” After another, longer pause, she grimaces. “Yeah, he mentioned that.” She listens for another minute, nodding. “That’s given him a bit of hope. I hope you intended to.” She sighs into the phone. “I know. Do you want to...?” Glancing at me, she winces. “Sure. Lunch sounds good. I’d like that. How about tomorrow or Tuesday? Okay. Sounds good. See you, sweetie.”

I watch Astrid's face for any sign of what Jocelin might have said. "Well, he misses you too. He did say he wants to talk to you at some point." Sighing, she rests her hand on mine. "Honestly, Gunnar, he sounds upset, but it was hopeful, if that makes any sense. And I don't think I'm reading into things. I really don't. He just needs some time to process. Get his mind around it."

I nod. "I guess. Cassandra said something similar. Something about as long as Jocelin is communicating, it's a good thing."

She leans in and kisses my cheek. "So how's it going with Cassandra? Can I ask about that?"

I inhale deeply before replying. "It's going well, I think. She's pretty no nonsense, so she calls me on my bullshit. But she has a way of approaching topics that doesn't immediately make me defensive."

"Is it helping?"

I shrug. "I think so. It's kind of hard to tell when you're in the middle of it. But it helped last time, so I'm hoping this time helps too."

There's a few minutes of comfortable silence before Astrid speaks again. "I think you should tell Jocelin you're talking to Cass again. Trying to work through things. Maybe it will help."

I've thought of that too. "If I ever talk to him again when he isn't drunk, I will. He deserves to know that, at least."

Jocelin

With a bit of creative truth stretching about my actual workload, I'm able to avoid lunch with Astrid for the first half of the week. But by the time Thursday rolls around, I'm feeling guilty. I know she wants to talk about Gunnar, and while I'm able to think about him and not turn into an emotional wreck, I'm still undecided about what I want to do. But I can't avoid her forever. She'll just ride down the elevator and corner me in my office.

Astrid: Lunch?

Me: Sure

Astrid: Really?!

That makes me feel especially guilty.

Me: *rolling_eyes emoji* yes really

Astrid: Okay. Pick you up at noon?

Me: Sounds good

Just before noon, there's a soft knock on my office door frame, and I look up to find my best friend hovering in the entry, with a pensive frown on her face. "Ready?"

No, but it's not like I have a choice. "Ready. Where are we going?"

Astrid chews on her lower lip and slips her arm through mine as I meet her at the door. "I was thinking we could go up to Pike Place Market and get gyros from Turkish Delight, then sit at the MarketFront Sundeck and catch up."

By 'catch up', she means 'talk about Gunnar', and we both know it. "Sounds good. I haven't been to Turkish Delight in a while."

We get a rideshare to Pike Place Market and queue up with the tourists and other locals waiting to order delicious, authentic Turkish cuisine. The underlying tension between us is awkward, and I can't take any more of it. Time to rip off the bandage. "How is he?"

Her long sigh tells me everything. "Alright, I guess. Better than when Bjorn got hurt but not as good as before that." From the corner of my eye, I can see her turn toward me, but I'm not ready to talk about this while meeting her gaze, so I scan the people in line in front of us as she continues. "Look, I know we've talked about Gunnar's PTSD before, but only in bits and pieces. I never shared the nitty-gritty details because that wasn't really anything you needed to know. But now..."

Her voice trails off, and I can see her biting her lip again. “But now I do.”

She nods. “You know that PTSD isn’t curable, right?” I nod, finally looking at her. She clenches her jaw and takes a deep breath through her nose. “So, imagine you’re seventeen, out with your mom, doing a little holiday shopping, and while you’re off getting the car, some asshole holds her at knifepoint and tries to steal her purse. Then imagine she attempts to fight him off and gets slashed with the knife, nicking an artery, and by the time you pull around with the car, she’s already on the sidewalk, dying right in front of you. You’d just left her a few minutes before, and she was fine, and now she’s gone. And if you’d only stayed a few more minutes or opted to walk with her to the car instead of picking her up, or if you’d been there to fight him off, maybe she’d still be alive.” My stomach drops, and my heart squeezes for the young boy Gunnar was. “Gunnar beat himself up for years over the *what-ifs*. He knew it wasn’t his fault, but it didn’t stop him from blaming himself anyway.” I want to say something, but what is there to say? So I stay quiet but give her my attention. “It took him a while, but he worked so hard to deal with the trauma, and for the past few years, he’s been really good. There’ve been a few down periods where he’s struggled but nothing really big. And he knows he’s going to struggle on and off with the PTSD for the rest of his life. It’s part of who he is.”

“Like Jules and his anxiety.”

She bobs her head back and forth. “Yes and no, but for this discussion, it’s a decent comparison.” I don’t mention that this

really isn't a discussion, since she's doing most of the talking. "Anyway, enough with the analogies. My point is that Gunnar went through all of that and worked really hard to get himself to a good place mentally. That should have been it. But then Bjorn got stabbed." She holds up a finger. "During a robbery." She holds up a second finger. "And almost died." She holds up a third. "Any one of those things would be a trigger for him, but he got hit with all three. And he spiraled." *Merde*. "Cass, his therapist, calls it decompensation. What was working for him before Bjorn got stabbed didn't work for him after it happened. Only he couldn't see that, and he kept trying."

Her explanation is interrupted as we reach the counter. Thankfully, I know the brief menu by heart because I haven't given any thought to what I want for lunch. Not that I'm particularly hungry right now. I order the doner kebab sandwich, and Astrid gets the chicken kebab wrap. We pay for our food and move to the side to wait, so I pick up the conversation where we left off, trying to keep my voice low. "So, you're saying he was stuck in his head."

"Yes. And what used to work wasn't working anymore and he got frustrated and scared. That's why he kept lashing out." She turns to face me. "It's why he got on his bike and left. He was trying to fix himself, and it took longer than usual."

"Because it was a bigger than usual event."

"Yes. Exactly."

I get what she's saying, and I accept that Gunnar wasn't being malicious or doing hurtful things on purpose, but the

truth is, he hurt me anyway. “But he still left and didn’t reach out to any of us. He didn’t trust us to help him. How are you okay with that?”

She shakes her head. “You’re looking at it rationally. PTSD isn’t rational. Gunnar thought he was doing the right thing by removing himself from the triggering situation so he could get himself together. What seems like an obvious answer to us was far from obvious to him at that moment. And he kept making bad decision after bad decision until he finally calmed down enough to think things through, and then he came home.”

“Going off by himself isn’t an answer, though, and I’m not sure I could be okay with that as a coping strategy.” It seems like that’s what she’s suggesting, and part of me feels like a complete ass for not being okay with it, but the other part feels like that’s an unreasonable request to make of anyone.

Astrid smiles sympathetically. “That’s fair. It’s why you need to think things through. Being with Gunnar means accepting that there are going to be points in time where he isn’t coping well and starts to make faulty decisions. Hopefully, those instances will be few and far between. It’s been years since he had an episode, and this one was exceptional. A family member getting stabbed doesn’t normally happen to people. We’ve just been really unlucky in that regard. Being with Gunnar means being aware of his triggers and the signs that he’s not coping well. It means learning how to encourage him to get professional help when he needs it. And it probably means going with him to therapy to learn about his issues and how to be a partner to someone who lives with PTSD. He’s

already going again, by the way. He sees Cass once a week, and he says it's helping.”

“That's good. I'm glad.” And I am. The idea of Gunnar suffering through that trauma by himself hurts my heart.

“Look, if you're not up for the ups and downs and the therapy, it's understandable. It's a lot. But it's been years since his PTSD has been this bad, and he's actually very considerate and sweet when he isn't dealing with triggering events. But that level of support is what he needs from a partner, and not acknowledging that is asking for disaster.”

Our order is called, and we collect our food. As we walk across the street to the MarketFront Sundeck and find an empty table, I consider everything Astrid has said. Can I be that kind of partner for Gunnar? I tried to be supportive, but he shut me out. No, I guess he didn't. He went back to coping mechanisms that he knew. And I suppose they ultimately did work since he came back and seems to be doing better, according to Astrid. “It's a lot to consider, but I do get what you're saying. And I promise to give it serious thought.”

“I appreciate that. And I'm here if you have any questions.” She grips my hand and looks me in the eyes. “If you decide you can't be what he needs, I would understand and wouldn't hold it against you. It's not what you thought you were getting into.” I don't remind her that, initially, I didn't think I was getting into anything other than a quick fake boyfriend situation. Gunnar turned out to be everything I'd been looking

for. Until he wasn't. And isn't that a totally unfair expectation to hold him to?

There's a lot to consider, and I have some major soul searching to do.



Over the past few days, Gunnar has texted me twice, and I've briefly responded to both, trying to keep the messages neutral. But again, I'm not sure how long I can keep that up. It's been a week since Astrid and I went to lunch, and it seems like I've done nothing but think about everything she said. Ultimately, it comes down to forgiveness and acceptance, and I need to make a decision.

I sling my laptop bag over my shoulder, shut off my office light, and since it's raining, I pull out my phone to call a rideshare. There's another text from Gunnar waiting for me.

Gunnar: I miss you so much

Sighing at the screen, I'm suddenly too tired to do anything else but be truthful.

Me: I miss you too. A lot

He doesn't text anything else, and neither do I.

Thursday is slightly more bearable than the rest of the week has been. I'm still thinking about Gunnar as much as ever, but I'm less angry and more concerned with how he's holding up. I'm also finding it harder to justify putting off speaking with him.

By Friday I make up my mind and open the last text from him.

Gunnar: Joce, please. Just talk to me. Please?

I hold my breath and type a response.

Me: What would you say?

It takes less than a minute for the reply.

Gunnar: Let me tell you face to face

Gunnar: You can yell at me all you want

Gunnar: I need to see you. Please?

This is it. The crossroads of giving us another try or telling him we're through. I take a breath and type out my response.

Me: 8 tonight. My place. Don't be late

I spend the rest of the day trying not to obsess about him, or how the conversation will go. I completely fail at both and am all but useless at work. It probably would have been best if I'd left early, but there aren't any distractions at home, and that would have been worse. I force myself to finish the contract I'm working on and then walk back to my loft, hoping the brisk air will clear my head and calm my nerves. In a last-ditch effort to delay the inevitable, I stop and grab something to eat, and by the time I enter the lobby, Gunnar is waiting. He looks tired and pale, and utterly gorgeous. The ache in my chest threatens to overwhelm me. I want to walk right up to him and throw my arms around him, press my nose into his neck and breathe him in, feel his strong arms holding me close. I don't do any of that, though. "Hi." It's all I trust myself to say.

"Hi." He watches me warily, like I'm going to lash out at him, and I feel slightly guilty about it. I press the call button, and we wait in uncomfortable silence for what feels like an eternity before the elevator chimes and the doors open. I step in first and wait for Gunnar to follow, then slide my keycard into the slot and press the button for my floor. The ride up is just as silent, and equally painful, and when the doors finally open, I breathe a sigh of relief. I drop my laptop bag on the

table and wave at the living room. “Have a seat. I’m going to change.” Without waiting for a reply, I hurry up the stairs. This conversation requires comfortable clothes. It’s going to be draining, and god only knows how long it will take.

I strip and toss my suit on the bed, pulling on sweats and a T-shirt, and when I come back downstairs I purposely go into the kitchen and give Dracona her dinner, and turn on the kettle. I really want a drink, but ultimately, alcohol will only make things more emotional and messy.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I walk back into the living room. “Do you want something to drink?” Gunnar shakes his head but doesn’t say anything. I sigh, sit on the opposite side of the couch, and look directly at him. “Okay, I’m listening.”

Gunnar

Jocelin sits at the other end of the couch, and though I'm disappointed he's keeping his distance, at least we're on the same piece of furniture. Truthfully, I hadn't expected anything more. I'd *hoped*, but the chance that Jocelin would see me and everything would be alright had been too low to acknowledge. So, scary as it is, I take a deep breath and lay everything bare for him. He deserves at least that much from me. "Joce, I fucked up. Not that you don't know that already. But I promise you, that wasn't my intent. Bjorn getting stabbed brought up a lot of memories of my mom's murder. I kept flashing back, reliving it." My heart pounds in my chest just thinking about it. "I was stuck in my head and it kept getting harder and harder to find my way out. I scared you so badly when I lost my shit and punched my car window, shouting at you when you were only trying to help." Closing my eyes, I take a breath and chew the inside of my cheek, using the sting to fight back tears. "The look on your face... Joce, I never want to see that pain in your eyes again. Especially because of me." Opening my eyes, I gaze into his. "I knew if I didn't get myself under

control, I was going to do or say something I couldn't take back. I thought if I stayed, I'd fuck things up completely. Instead, I fucked them up by leaving. The bottom line is it hurt you. *I hurt you.*" I clench my jaw, trying to keep my emotions under control. "That's the last thing I meant to do, and I can't tell you how truly sorry I am." I wait for any reaction, but Jocelin just watches me, saying nothing. Fair enough. I deserve that. "I know I scared you." He stares at me, anger flaring in his beautiful brown eyes, and my hope fades. I've hurt him too much. He's not going to forgive me. And really, why should he? But I have to try. "How can I fix this?" My eyes swim with tears, but I keep my voice level. "Please, tell me how to fix this. The thought of not being with you, of never having you in my life, never—" My voice cracks, and I dig my fingers into my thighs, using the pain to keep myself focused. "I'm a dumbass. And what I did hurt you. I was already hurting you." I'm not sure what else to say. "I'm just so sorry."

Several emotions flit across Jocelin's face before he shakes his head. "Don't."

"Joc, I..."

He holds up a hand. "Please. I don't want to hear you apologize again, Gunnar. I really don't." My stomach sinks. I've done too much damage. "Because I'm the one who should apologize."

My head snaps up. "What? Why?"

“Because I was an insensitive prick. I was so caught up in how hurt I was that I lost track of how much you were hurting. And how much you needed me to be there for you, and I wasn’t. I let you down.”

I shake my head. “No, you didn’t.”

“I absolutely did. I know you had past trauma. And yes, you got help, and by the time we got to know each other you were doing really well. But then you went through a horrible triggering event and lost your way. And what did I do? I got upset and let my feelings silence my better judgment. Did you take off and not tell anyone? Yes. And for the record, please don’t do that again. Absolutely take off if you need to, but please tell me first, so I don’t worry. Or better yet, let me help.”

My chest feels full, and my stomach swoops ridiculously because he’s talking about a future. Our future.

“Because that’s what love is, Gunnar. It’s letting the people who love you the most help you when you’re hurting the worst. It’s trusting them to help you shoulder the burden or take it from you when you can’t manage anymore. If you can’t rely on the people who love you when times are the bleakest, then what’s the point?”

He said love, not *loved*, and I’m clinging to that like a life raft. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have shut you out. I should have talked to you and let you help me figure things out. Because when you love someone, you should let them in, not push them away.”

The moment the words leave my mouth, Jocelin's eyes lock on mine, and for the first time tonight, I feel true hope. "I'm sorry. What?"

"I love you." I stand up and walk to his end of the couch, taking his hands and pulling him to his feet. "You said you're the person who loves me the most. Well, I love you. And every word you said is true. I shut you out. I shut everyone out." Taking a deep breath, I keep going. "If it makes any difference, I'm getting help. I'm seeing my therapist again, and we're working through everything. All of it." I swallow thickly, and when Jocelin doesn't pull his hands away, I hold on tighter. "It's slow going, and I've only been to two sessions, but it's helping. I'm a dumbass for waiting so long to call Cass." I snort. "She said as much." I hold his beautiful gaze and resist the urge to lean in and kiss him. "I'm so very sorry I hurt you, Joce. It's a lot to ask, but let me prove I won't do it again. Let me try to make it up to you. You're everything to me, and the thought of never waking up next to you again, of never seeing you smile at me the way you used to—" My voice breaks again, and the tears spill down my cheeks unchecked. I try again, but my voice comes out in a whisper. "I miss you so much."

He bites his lip and searches my eyes, and I hope to god he sees what he needs in them. "Are you really getting help?"

I nod. "Yeah. I'm seeing Cass every Thursday evening. It's a standing appointment for now." I swallow the fear sitting just inside my throat and take one more chance. "Maybe—maybe you could come with me at some point. Talk to her with me."

Silence hangs between us, and fear grips my heart because there's a real possibility he could say no. He squeezes my hands. "I missed you too." A small sob slips past my lips as Jocelin wraps his arms around my waist and leans into me. I hold him as tight as I can, burying my face in his neck. "And I do love you, more than you will ever know. But if you ever fucking do this to me again, I promise you, Gunnar, I will kill you."

It's not meant to be funny, at least, I don't think so, but I'm so fucking relieved I can't help laughing. "I swear I won't. Never again." I inhale the familiar citrus smell of his cologne, mixed with the natural scent of his skin, and the tension I've been holding pours from my body in waves.

"Don't make promises you shouldn't. I've talked to Astrid and started doing a little research on my own about PTSD. I don't claim to understand everything, and I need to learn how to help you instead of blame you, but I want to get there. I want to be able to support you when you have another episode."

"Good, because I can't promise I'm not gonna fuck up again. It may be in some other way, or it might be the same boneheaded move. After all, I'm an Osouf brother. Seems like every few years, at least one of us does something monumentally stupid. But we do try never to repeat ourselves."

Jocelin chuckles and kisses the side of my head. "Gunnar Osouf, what am I going to do with you?"

I close my eyes as Jocelin's lips brush against my ear, then over my temple. "Absolutely anything you want." Lifting my head, I kiss his cheek. Then he turns, and our lips meet, and every butterfly in my stomach bursts into flight. "I missed you." I pepper his lips and cheeks with soft, feathery kisses. "I love you."

His smile is radiant. "Shut up and kiss me like you mean it."

I don't need to be told twice. I press my mouth to his, my tongue darting out to flick against his soft lips as I grasp frantically at him. Jocelin pulls back first, his kiss-swollen lips tempting me in again. As I try to chase after another kiss, he moves backward, leading me by the hand toward the stairs.

My heart hammers so loudly in my chest that I can hear it in my ears. "Jocel. Are you sure?" He doesn't say anything, but his smile widens, and he speeds up the pace. When we reach his bed, he turns to face me, shaking hands quickly unbuttoning my shirt. Thank god I'm not the only one with nerves. "Jocel."

"Shhhh." With each opened button, Jocelin places a gentle kiss against my skin, slowly working his way down my body until he's sitting on the bed, focused on opening the front of my jeans. He looks up at me with a saucy grin and pushes my pants and boxer briefs to the floor as I shake my shirt off my shoulders. He glides his hands up my thighs, wrapping a fist around the base of my cock, and fuck, that feels incredible. I moan, sliding my fingers through his hair as he sucks me into his mouth, teasing me with little swirls of his tongue, gently

tugging the head of my cock with his lips. It's so fucking hot. *He's* so hot.

“Joce.” I stroke his cheek, holding his gaze as he looks up at me. “I love you.”

He releases me with a pop, his half-lidded eyes smoldering with lust. “Show me.” Leaning back across the mattress, he pulls me with him, and I go willingly, covering his body with mine. I nuzzle along his jaw, enjoying the scrape of the short beard he's kept, and push his T-shirt up his torso. When he grabs the hem and pulls it off, I take full advantage of the unhindered access, caressing his body, nibbling at his neck, slowly grinding my cock against his hip. “I've missed you, *mon amour*. I've missed you here in our bed.”

A possessive growl rumbles in my throat. *Our* bed. *My* Jocelin. “God, I've missed you too. So much.” I kneel between his legs and slip my fingers under the waistband of his boxer briefs, tugging them and his sweatpants down in one quick move. His cock slaps against his torso with a satisfying smack. Slowly, I stroke my fingertips along his slender length, all the way to the damp tip.

He shudders under my touch and thrusts against my hand. “*Mon chéri*, please don't tease. Not now. I need you too much. I need to feel you inside me.” The words are like a stroke to my cock, and I groan. With a nod, I reach into the nightstand and dig out the bottle of lube, squeezing a generous amount into my palm because there's no way I can deny him anything. I coat both hands, stroking myself as I slowly slip two fingers

into his tight body. His sexy mouth goes slack, and he gasps, his hips pushing against my hand. “Oh, *mon dieu*, yes. Like that.” I gently work him open, my heart soaring at all the little sounds of pleasure he’s making. “Please, *mon chéri*. I’ve missed you too much. Don’t make me wait.”

“Anything for you, love.” I gently slip my fingers from him and grab his hips, pulling him closer as I slowly ease into his warm body. He squeezes around me, pulling me deeper, and I groan.

“Fuuuuuck. Joce.” His eyes drift closed, and his mouth goes slack in a silent gasp of pleasure, and I can’t take my eyes off him. The absolute bliss on his face is riveting. “You are so beautiful.”

“I’ve missed you, *mon chéri*.” He pulls me down, kissing me with a passion and hunger that match my own. “I’ve missed this.”

As I roll into him with long, deep strokes, his nimble fingers caress my body anywhere he can reach. His touch is like fire, burning invisible fingerprints on my skin, marking me as his, and I want more. I pick up the pace until my hips beat a quick staccato against him, each thrust punctuated by his filthy moans that increase in pitch and volume. We’re desperate to touch, eagerly kissing, hands grasping in almost feral need. “God, Gunnar, that feels so good.” Jocelin thrusts his hips against me, vibrating with tension. He looks almost pained, but the sounds he’s making are pure lust, and they’re going straight to my aching cock.

“You like that, baby?” I press more firmly, and Jocelin’s breath catches in his throat.

“Fu... ck...” I grab his shoulders, pulling him toward me, thrusting into his body with powerful strokes. His cock is rock hard and straining against his belly, leaking enough precum to form a little puddle beneath him on the mattress.

With a groan, he takes himself in hand, matching the almost brutal pace I’m setting, and I know neither of us will last much longer. The sheer concentration on his face, the soft mewling, and the way his body shakes, I know he’s already close. I thrust harder, needing him to come because I’m that close too. “Shit, Joce. You look so fucking gorgeous. I missed you so fucking much, baby.” Jocelin’s entire body seizes and shakes as his hips thrust violently against me, thick ropes of come painting his chest. Like hitting a brick wall, my orgasm slams into me, and I shout his name, my body spasming as I bury myself deep inside him.

I collapse on top of him, ignoring the mess in my post-orgasmic haze. Gathering him close, I wrap myself around him, burying my face in his neck. The combined smell of sweat, come, and citrus fills my senses, and I sigh, drained but ridiculously happy and at peace. Jocelin’s legs are wrapped tightly around my hips, and he doesn’t seem keen to let go anytime soon. I run a hand down his thigh and squeeze his knee. “Can I hold you?” He hums his approval and relaxes his grip around my waist. Carefully, I pull out and roll onto my side, drawing him close until we’re nose to nose. “I love you, Joce. I’m sorry I hurt you.”

He strokes my face, and I lean into his touch. “Shhh. I believe you. And you’re here now, where you belong.” He kisses me slowly, filling my heart with so much happiness it might burst out of my chest. “Tell me again, *mon chéri*.”

I smile against his lips. “I love you. With all my heart, I love you, Jocelin.” I nibble at the corner of his mouth, place a gentle kiss on the tip of his nose, trail kisses along his jaw, and with each soft brush of my lips, I whisper it over and over. “I love you.”

He chuckles and hugs me tightly. “I love you too, *mon cœur*.”

I settle on the pillow next to him, our faces only inches apart. “I have something for you.”

Jocelin’s eyes widen. “Really?” His smile turns wicked. “Is it a bribe?”

I kiss him just below his ear, his warm breath ghosting across my shoulder. “Well, I wasn’t above a bribe, if it came to that. Do you want it now?”

He nods excitedly. “Yes! Of course!”

That makes me laugh. “What was I thinking?” Groaning dramatically, I lean over the side of the bed, snagging my pants and digging in the pocket to pull out the small velvet pouch I’d hoped I’d be able to give him. I snuggle next to him again and place the bag gently in his open hand, watching him expectantly. Jocelin looks at me and slowly opens the drawstring, dumping the contents into his palm. “I thought it

might be easier for you to keep an eye on me if you moved in.”

Jocelin’s gaze flies from the brass key in his hand to my face. “Are you serious?”

I cup his cheeks with my palms and look directly into his eyes. “Yes. Please, Joce. Will you live with me? I mean, that key is to my house, but if you’d rather live here, we can do that. Or we could get someplace new.”

“What about Dracona?”

“I assumed you were a package deal. I mean, you can’t leave her behind. That would be cruel. She loves you, too.”

Jocelin surges up, kissing me hard, and I laugh into the kiss, holding him tightly. Unexpectedly, he shoves back, giving me a stern look. “Don’t think this gets you off the hook. You have so much making up to do. It’s going to take you months and months before you’re back in my full good graces.” But he can’t keep the excitement out of his voice.

I sigh so incredibly happy after so many miserable weeks. “Oh, how I’ve missed you, love.” I rub our noses together. “So very much. I love you.”

“I love you, Gunnar. And yes, we will move in with you.”

I suck in a ragged breath, tears pricking my eyes. He’s given me a second chance that I don’t deserve, but I’m going to make the most of it. I stroke his cheek, look into his sparkling eyes, and smile. “Do you want to call Astrid? Or should I?”

Epilogue - Gunnar

Two years later...

Watching the falling snow, I frown, worry making my heart ache. We're having one of our rare snowstorms, and it's coming down harder than ever. But Jocelin isn't home yet. I peer down the street, through the swirling flakes, as if that might make his car appear, and when it doesn't, I pull out my phone and check the time. He left over two hours ago to pick up a last-minute gift. I tried to warn him the snow was coming, but he insisted, saying he'd be back in plenty of time.

About an hour ago, the snow started falling faster, the thick flakes obscuring the view out the window. Now the roads are completely covered, and my phone's been blowing up with winter storm warnings and inaccurate alerts about the exact

time the precipitation will begin. I'd probably enjoy it if Jocelin was home.

I slip my phone into my pocket and go into the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Not that I really want tea, but I need something to distract my brain from visions of Jocelin, his car stuck in a ditch, with no cell signal. Or him freezing to death because no one stopped to help him. It doesn't matter that neither of those scenarios is even remotely likely to happen. It's just where my mind goes in situations like this. I consider texting him to make sure he's alright, but what if he looks at his phone while driving and ends up in the ditch, and the whole nightmare scene plays out for real?

My phone buzzes, and I clutch my chest to calm my racing heart. I fumble it out of my pocket, hoping it's Jocelin. It's not, and I sigh disappointedly as I answer the call. "Hey, Bean."

"Happy Christmas Eve!"

She's far too cheery for my current mood. Guess Gary is home and not stuck in a ditch on the side of the road. "Yeah. Happy Christmas Eve."

"What's wrong? Did you and Jocelin have a fight?"

I pause midway through pouring hot water into my mug. "No! What? Why would you think that?"

"You sound upset. Depressed even. So what's up?"

I take a breath. "Joce went out this afternoon to pick up a last-minute gift, and he's still not home. It's been over two hours, and the roads are shit. What if he's stuck in a ditch?"

What if he freezes to death?” Besides Jocelin, Astrid is the only person I can voice these ridiculous thoughts to. I *am* being ridiculous, and I know it, but that doesn’t mean I can stop myself from worrying.

“Oh, sweetie. Jocelin is fine, I’m sure. You know the roads are bad, so he’s probably taking his time. Did you try to call him?”

“No! If I call, he might get in a wreck trying to answer the phone.” I pull at my hair and look out the window for the millionth time.

“Do you want me to stay on the phone with you until he comes home? I’m sure it’ll be any minute now.”

I can tell she’s serious, and now I feel silly. “No. I’m fine. I just need to have a cup of tea and calm down. Anyway, you called me. Did you need something?”

“Bad news. We’re probably not going to make it over tonight, with the roads the way they are. Unless by some miracle this stops soon. But the forecast is calling for more.” I wonder if she knows that’s not making things better. “They should have it clear by tomorrow, though, so if we can’t make it tonight, we’ll see you tomorrow at Bjorn’s. Alright? We’ll have the brunch all set up around ten-ish. But come on over when you guys wake up and feel like being social. Okay?”

I sigh. “Yeah. No sense *everyone* getting into wrecks today. I’ll text Bjorn and Erik and let them know.”

“Aww. Sweetie, Jocelin’s fine. I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, alright. See you tomorrow, Bean. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up and look out the front window again. There’s still no Jocelin, so I open the text app on my phone and fire off a message to Bjorn.

Me: Hey, roads are really bad

Me: No need to risk lives or cars

Me: See you tomorrow at your place

About two minutes later, a reply comes through.

Bjorn: Probably safest

Bjorn: You’ll have your hands full anyway

Me: What? Why?

Bjorn: *winky_face emoji*

Me: Wait! Was Jocelin there? Have you heard from him?

Bjorn: Left about 20 min ago. Should be there soon

Bjorn: See you all tomorrow

All? What does that mean? I shut the text thread because I know Bjorn, and I’m not getting any more out of him. I switch to my message thread with Erik.

Me: Hey, roads are really bad

Me: No need to risk lives or cars

Me: See you tomorrow at Bjorn's place

Erik: Was just about to text you that

Erik: Jules and I are staying put

Erik: We'll be at Bjorn's bright and early

Me: Sounds good

Erik: You'll be busy tonight, anyway

Me: What does that mean?!

Erik: Gotta go. Jules needs me *winky_face emoji*

Me: Erik! What does that mean?!

Erik: *point_right emoji ok_hand emoji*

Me: Eww. Not what I meant! *Nauseated_face emoji*

Me: *middle_finger emoji*

Erik: *rofl emoji*

I slip the phone into my pocket, relieved to know Jocelin probably isn't in some ditch somewhere. Well, as of twenty minutes ago. I'm just about to break down and text him when I see headlights coming down the street through the snow. I hurry away from the window so he won't catch me lurking. He teases me enough about that.

My phone buzzes, and I check the screen.

Jocelin: Open the front door please?

Whatever he bought must be huge if he needs help with it. I open the door but Jocelin isn't there or in the car. But I can hear him.

“Okay, boy! Let's go!” There's a short yip, and a small locomotive hurls itself through the door, knocking me backward. I'm suddenly flat on my back, with a very wiggly Norwegian Elkhound puppy standing on my chest, trying desperately to lick my face. I laugh and attempt to fend him off but fail spectacularly. The chill from outside makes my slobbery cheeks cold. Jocelin shuts the door and looks down at us. “Um... Merry Christmas?”

I clutch the puppy to my chest and struggle to sit up, grinning from ear to ear. “Joce!” I laugh and give up trying to fight the puppy kisses, letting the little guy have free access to my face and neck. “Joce, you got us a puppy!” Jesus, I want to cry. We've been talking about getting another pet ever since we moved in together two years ago. Jocelin insists he's a cat person, and although he doesn't hate dogs, he didn't particularly want one as a pet. “You did get us a puppy, right? He's ours? We're not just borrowing him or watching him for someone? Wait. Is it a boy?” I lift him up and check.

“Yes, love. *He's* ours.” Jocelin squats down next to us and scratches the pup behind his ears, sending him into little fits of warbling pleasure. I stare, fascinated, and when Jocelin stops, and the little guy whines pitifully, I gladly oblige with more

scratching. The puppy leans heavily against my chest and continues to make rumbly sounds of happiness.

My vision is blurry with tears, and I have a huge grin on my face. “I thought you didn’t want a puppy.”

Jocelin sits next to us and sighs. “Well, I know how sad you were when I told you I was more of a cat person. At the time, I was still a bit worried things might not work out between us. We hadn’t even been living together a month at that point, and living with someone is very different from just dating them. But here we are, still together, and I’ve really been thinking a lot about it over the last few months, deciding if I want that kind of responsibility. And I could see how much it would mean to you.” Jocelin blushes and looks at his hands. “And I can’t help thinking it’s good practice.”

I stare at him, going very still, and even the puppy seems to sense something big just happened because he leans into me, licking my hand. I hold him a bit tighter, and when my voice comes out, it’s rough. “Practice?” My heart is thundering in my chest.

“Well, yeah. I mean, someday we’ll get married. Right? We’ve talked about it. A bit. And although neither of us is quite ready for that yet, I know we both want it. And you love kids, and I love kids, and so it would be the natural progression. Right? And so, to see if we were responsible enough to be parents, to practice, I thought a puppy would be a good start.” Jocelin makes the entire speech while staring at

his hands, but when he finishes, he finally looks up at me. “What do you think?”

I gawp at him, my mouth hanging open, until the puppy tries to French kiss me. Ducking my face, I can’t help but laugh, so many emotions building in my chest. “Jocelin, I love you more than you’ll ever know.” I grab him by the back of the neck and kiss him soundly, relief, surprise, and excitement blending together, and all of it threatening to explode out of me. The puppy wiggles against me, and I reluctantly let Jocelin go. “Yes, Joce. Yes to all of that. Yes, I love dogs, and kids, and you, and I think a puppy is a wonderful place to start.”

There’s a tugging at the front of my sweatshirt, and I look down to find the puppy nipping at the drawstring. “Oh no, little guy, no chewing on that. That’s not for puppies.” I grin happily. “We’re gonna have to get him lots of stuff.” I turn to the wiggling ball of energy. “You’re gonna need a leash, and a collar, and food and water bowls, and chew toys, and lots of other stuff.” When I glance up, Jocelin is smiling softly at me. “What?”

“For all the scowling you do to strangers, and all the grumbling you do about people, you’re the sweetest man I’ve ever met. And this was the best idea I’ve ever had. Look how happy you are right now.” I smile and move closer as he leans in and kisses me again. “But that’s what took me so long, *mon chéri*. I stopped to get the basics. Shampoo, leash, collar, food that Bjorn recommended, a few treats, and toys. But I knew you’d want to take him shopping, so I didn’t get too much. It’s

all in the car. But there's one more thing he needs, and I couldn't get that by myself."

I drag my eyes away from the sweet puppy face. "What's that?"

"Well, he needs a name tag with our contact information on it, but I don't know what his name is."

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I hold up the puppy, looking deeply into his eyes. "What's your name, little guy? Huh? We have to give you something cool."

"Um, I do have an idea, if you want to hear it." Jocelin looks adorably sheepish. "You might think it's corny. But I've been thinking about it since I put the down payment on him with Bjorn's breeder." He fidgets and scratches the pup's flank. "How about Harley? Like your bike? I thought it was kind of a good pick."

"Harley! That's a badass name! I love it!" I set Harley down on the floor and lean in to kiss Jocelin properly. "All the cool puppies at the dog park are gonna be so jealous. They'll want to hang out with him and be his little puppy friends."

Jocelin laughs and watches Harley run around the living room, sniffing happily. "He's going to pee on everything, isn't he?"

"Every last thing we have. And what he doesn't pee on, he'll try to chew to bits. So we have to puppy proof everything." I smile at Jocelin, my heart ready to burst. "He's adorable, Joce.

Thank you. It does slightly complicate the gift that I got you, but we'll figure something out."

Jocelin looks intrigued. "Well, I've given you your gift, so you should give me mine. That way we can uncomplicate things."

I laugh at his hopeful look and groan playfully. "Oh! You know I can't resist that beautiful face! Fine. You watch Harley for a second, and I'll go get your gift." I hurry to the bedroom, pulling a small envelope from the top drawer of my dresser. As I skip down the steps, I can hear the clicking of Harley's little puppy claws on the kitchen floor.

"We've moved rooms. He's checking out the place." And Dracona is cautiously checking out her new brother, tail swishing as she perches on the kitchen island. I don't have the heart to shoo her down.

I lean against the doorframe and observe Jocelin and Dracona watching Harley, and a warm contentment settles in my chest. I can see Jocelin's enjoying him, probably more than he thought he would, and I've seen him play with Pita. I slip an arm around his waist. "He's adorable. Thank you again." I kiss his cheek. "And here you go, sweetheart. I hope you like it."

Jocelin looks at the envelope and raises an eyebrow. I hold my breath as he carefully opens it, pulling out a packet of papers. I'm fairly certain he'll like the gift, and it only takes a second before his hand flies to his mouth and his eyes widen. Then I have an armful of Jocelin, kissing me all over my face.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love it! My god, Gunnar, two weeks in the Mediterranean? Just you and me? Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy. *Mon cœur*, it’s my dream trip!”

I exhale, finally able to relax. “I know. That’s why we’re going there and not somewhere else.” Laughing, I shake my head and look at Harley. “But that’s why Harley is a challenge. Although I’m sure Bjorn would watch him for us. Harley can practice his doggie and human social skills while we’re gone.” I squeeze Jocelin tightly. “I can’t believe you got us a dog. I’m so excited!”

“I can’t believe you got us a trip to the Mediterranean! *I’m* so excited!” He smiles and leans into me. “Hey, is everyone still coming over tonight? We should probably get Harley settled before they do.”

“No, I canceled. The roads are too bad, so it’s just the four of us. Which probably works out well. Dracona can get used to Harley, and Harley can get used to everything.”

“I suppose you’ll want him to sleep with us instead of in his crate.” I don’t miss how he’s not really put out by that idea.

“Well, he *is* our first son. We don’t want him to feel unloved.” I grin and pull Jocelin fully into my arms. “Have I told you how much I love you? Because I do.”

“I love you too, you big goof. With all my heart. Merry Christmas, *mon chéri*.”

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”



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To my readers:

Thank you so much for taking a chance on my books, and coming along on this journey with me. I appreciate each and every one of you!

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Save Me: Love in the Pacific Northwest Book 1

Embrace Me: Love in the Pacific Northwest Book 2

Choose Me: Love in the Pacific Northwest Book 3

Free Me: Love in the Pacific Northwest Book 4

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Beck is a non-binary writer of sweet, sexy, LGBTQ+ happily ever afters. Why? Because everyone deserves all the happy! They live in the Northeastern United States with their two adorable dogs. Weekdays are spent working their day job, but nights and weekends are devoted to writing stories involving hot characters, favorite tropes, and happy endings. Any additional time includes reading, laughing with friends, drinking red wine, and playing D&D. If there's cake involved at any point, it's a win!

Be the first to know about new releases and have access to short stories and deleted scenes. Follow Beck on social media:

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Have you read Duncan and Bill's story, **Charm Me** yet? It's available if you subscribe to my newsletter.

Charm Me

Duncan doesn't "do" love. Not since his ex stomped on his heart and walked away. Now it's only hookups with no repeats. Until he meets Bill, a sexy bear of a pastry chef, determined to break through Duncan's walls one sweet treat at a time.

Charm Me is a low-angst, contemporary MM romance about a gorgeous grump determined to avoid romantic entanglements, a sweet cinnamon roll with a heart as big as his muscles, delicious desserts, southern charm, and plenty of spice. It contains no cheating and has a guaranteed HEA.

It is part of the Love in the Pacific Northwest series but can be read as a standalone.

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