

Tinked
BEASTS

A REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

STEPHANIE BROTHER

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A Reverse Harem Romance


STEPHANIE BROTHER

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SNEAK PEEK

“A wager,” Kai says. “I can give you better sex in ten minutes than you ever had with him.”

Damn him. A wager. He knows me too well. “What do you get if you win?”

“You come to family dinner tonight.”

“I was going to do that anyway.”

“And you give me a few hours, another time, to show you what *great* sex is like.”

I stare at him. “Hours?”

He shrugs, but there’s no mistaking the look on his face. “Once won’t be enough.”

LEXY

“Lexy?”

No one outside of my family has called me that in several years. I turn to see a tall, beautiful woman smiling at me. It takes me a moment to recognize the girl I once knew.

“Ava! Oh my gosh, how are you?”

“I can’t believe it’s you,” she says as we hug. “How long have you been back in Vegas?”

“I just got here a couple of days ago.” I gesture at the reception hall of the Golden Star Hotel, where the staff are scurrying about on last-minute tasks. “For my father’s wedding.”

“I thought it was you I saw at the ceremony! I’m here for the bride; Belinda’s an old family friend.”

Before I can respond, one of the staff interrupts me with a question about the wedding cake. I answer him and turn back to Ava with a smile, to find her staring at me. “Are you the wedding planner?” she asks.

I laugh. “Yeah, can you believe it?” We move aside as a team of decorators hurries past with mounds of flowers. My father has spared no expense for his second wedding, in stark contrast to when he married my mother, which I’m told was a no-frills event at the county clerk’s office.

My inner twelve-year-old is only a little bitter.

“It’s hard to picture you doing weddings.” Ava gives me big eyes. “I mean, we talked a lot right before you left, while—”

she glances around and lowers her voice— “your parents’ marriage was imploding.”

“That is absolutely the right word. Here, have a seat.” I point to the nearest round table. “I have a few minutes before all the guests show up.”

“You swore you’d never get married. You were the ultimate cynic about relationships.” She glances around again and leans in to whisper, “And you *hated* your father back then.”

“I was really, really mad at him.” I shrug. “I was also a child. I understand a lot more now about what makes relationships work, and what makes them fail. My parents weren’t good together, but neither of them is a bad person.”

“Look at you, all mature and stuff.” Ava’s smile turns sly. “So, have you seen your boyfriends yet?”

I laugh again, even as my heart squeezes. “My friends who were boys? No, I haven’t.”

“You know all the other girls were jealous of you.”

“Really?” I shake my head. “It wasn’t like that.”

“They were the coolest boys around, and you had them all to yourself.”

“We all lived on the same street. We grew up together.” A pang of longing hits me so hard that for a moment, I can’t breathe. “They were my friends.”

My best friends. My soulmates.

And then I left them.

Guests start to trickle in, and I summon a smile for Ava. “That’s my cue; time to get busy. I’ll catch you later, okay?”

As I stand, a tall, blond, immaculately-dressed, perfectly-groomed man approaches. He looks around the reception hall and nods. “Not bad, given the space.”

I suppress a tiny spike of irritation. My boyfriend’s family owns a chain of upscale hotels, so of course Scott is critical of everyone else’s properties. “Yes, I did do a fantastic job, thank you.”

He smiles then. “No need to fish for compliments, Alexandra. You are our most sought-after wedding planner, after all. We’re well aware of your abilities.”

My inner twelve-year-old pipes up. *Does he have to treat you like a commodity? You’re his girlfriend, not a pricey piece of software.*

I tell her to pipe down. Grownup me has a much more nuanced view of the world and the people in it. Scott isn’t perfect, but he loves me, and I’m almost certain that before too long, I’ll be planning my own wedding.

I survey the room. The staff have carried out my instructions to the letter, and the space really does look lovely with all its white and gold, and touches of autumn elegance. I allow myself a moment of satisfaction as the guests begin to fill up the tables surrounding the dance floor. My dad and Belinda wanted everyone to mingle, so there’s no assigned seating.

A lot could still go wrong between now and when the happy couple leave for their weeklong trip to Bermuda: cold food, inebriated guests, the DJ not showing up ... and where is the DJ? “Grab a seat,” I tell Scott. “I need to see to a few things.”

He sniffs. “I don’t know anyone here. Where would you suggest I sit?”

I long ago decided that Scott’s seemingly stuck-up attitude masks his insecurity. Ava’s still sitting at the same table, so I gesture her over. “Ava, meet my boyfriend, Scott Peyton. Scott, meet Ava ... is it still Martinez? Yeah? Okay. Ava and I went to school together.”

Ava takes her cue like a pro. “So, Scott, tell me about yourself. What do you do?” She leads him away, and I know she’ll keep him occupied while I do my job.

The DJ arrives just then, and I go to see if he needs help. We finish setting up just in time for the bride and groom to make their entrance. I watch as my dad and Belinda come in holding hands, smiling.

I’ve spent quite a bit of time with my father in the last couple of days, the most I’ve seen of him since my parents divorced.

Their breakup was spectacularly acrimonious, and I did resent my dad's philandering ways; Ava wasn't wrong about that. I didn't want to visit him, and he didn't make an effort to visit me, either. We were estranged for a lot of years.

We finally started talking again when I was in college, and gradually, my feelings changed and I started remembering the good things about him. We got to be friendly enough that I was happy to say yes when he asked me to plan his wedding—especially since I knew he was asking as a peace offering, an apology, a way of reaching out.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let's hear it for Mike and Belinda!” the DJ announces. The guests applaud, and I slip to the back of the room to keep an eye on everything.

It all goes smoothly: the food, the toasts, the first dance. Now everyone's out on the dance floor, cutting loose. All that's left is cutting the cake in a little while, and then the big send-off.

Two more hours, give or take, and I'll be able to pat myself on the back for another successful wedding. And shortly after that, I'll be leaving this town, with all of its sad and complicated memories, and getting back to the life I've made for myself.

A deep voice says, “Lexy.”

Another person from my past. As I turn, I have a flicker of premonition, but it's not enough—not nearly enough—to prepare me.

I'm facing a broad chest. I look up.

And my whole world tilts out of kilter.

LEXY

From a distance, I'm not sure I would have recognized him, this massive man who stands before me. He's so tall, and built like a gladiator, with biceps and thighs that strain his clothing. A tattoo snakes up one side of his neck.

But up close, there's no mistaking his face, especially his eyes, as deep and dark and hot as the strongest coffee. "Kai," I whisper.

He takes my hand and leads me out into the hallway. The contact sends a shock through me. This is real; this is happening.

His presence disturbs me on every possible level. As soon as he stops us, I take my hand back. "What are you doing here?"

"Heard a rumor you were in town." His eyes roam my face, as if memorizing every detail. "Had to come see for myself."

"Well, as you can see, the rumors were true."

His gaze flicks down my body and back up. "You look different."

I let out a shaky laugh. "So do you." The gangly teenager has grown up into a smoking-hot man.

With every second that passes, this new Kai is merging with all my old memories of him. The weight of emotion, combined with his overwhelming physical presence, makes the need to touch him a craving I can scarcely control. I curl my hands into loose fists, fighting the urge.

His voice somehow gets even deeper. “You disappeared. You never called, or wrote, or sent an email. Not once.”

Guilt makes me defensive. “Neither did you.”

“You left a hole in our lives, Lexy.”

Fifteen years of pain threaten to rip open my chest. “What about my life? How the hell do you think I was feeling? At least you still had each other.”

Kai and I always argued; it was our standard mode of communication. He smiles now, his eyes warming. “Fuck, I’ve missed you.”

That smile was one of the best parts of my first twelve years of life. It could make the darkest day brighter, give me strength when I was down, soothe my temper when I was mad. If Kai was smiling at me, nothing could be truly wrong in my world.

My heart reaches for him like a plant stretching toward the sun. I’m resisting the pull to launch myself into his arms when Scott appears.

“Alexandra.” He looks between me and Kai and frowns. “Who is this?”

Kai scowls at him, the way a general might react to a pesky civilian who barges in on an important briefing. “Who the fuck are you?”

Scott straightens his spine. “Prescott Peyton. Alexandra’s with me.”

The scowl becomes a sneer. Kai looks back at me. “You. With him.” His voice drips with contemptuous disbelief.

“Don’t start,” I warn him.

But it’s too late. Scott manages to look down his nose at Kai, despite being several inches shorter. “I can’t imagine what she might see in you.”

Kai’s wearing jeans, a leather jacket, and boots. He’s got that tattoo. He looks like a biker, and for all I know he is one.

Trust Scott to judge a man’s character, and his entire life, based on his appearance. You could say Kai’s just done the

same thing, but I know better.

When we were kids, Kai used to draw little cartoons of people we knew. He had an absolute genius for distilling a person's essence into a few lines of ink on paper, especially when it came to lampooning anyone who deserved it.

The rule-bound, self-important assistant principal at our school became a rooster, strutting around, glasses askew, unaware that half his feathers were missing and he looked like a bedraggled mess. A gossipy mean girl was rendered as a snake with a popular hairdo and outfit—both ridiculous and dangerous.

I'm suddenly intensely curious to know how Kai would depict Scott.

All this flashes through my mind in the moment after Scott's pronouncement. Kai, for his part, doesn't bother getting mad or defending himself. He just looks my boyfriend up and down and drawls, "Wish I had my sketchpad."

It's so close to what I was thinking that it startles an uneasy laugh out of me. "You still draw?"

He gives me a funny look then, but all he says is, "Yeah."

"Alexandra," Scott says impatiently. "You're needed inside."

He's not wrong. I tell Kai, "I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

He nods. "Okay." Somehow, he invests the word with all sorts of meaning: not just assent, but a promise that we will definitely be catching up, whether Scott likes it or not.

I go back into the reception hall, but my mind is no longer on the wedding. I can't wait for all this to be over, so Kai and I can get back to our reunion. I have so many questions for him.

Where is Gage these days? Are the two of them still best friends? And Thorn, what is he up to?

Maybe we can all get together for a drink before I leave Vegas again. And this time, we could stay in touch. I could have my friends back again, even if things will never be like they were when it was the four of us against the world.

Scott hasn't gone back to his table; he's still standing beside me. I'm suddenly irritated by his presence, and wish he'd leave me alone with my thoughts. The realization rocks me.

You. With him.

When my mom left Las Vegas and took me with her, the foundations of my life crumbled. I struggled to build a new one, as if each painful piece of my new identity had to be carved from stone using nothing but a plastic spoon. For years, I've been proud of what I accomplished.

But did I lose myself somewhere along the way?

I think I know what twelve-year-old me would say to current me, if we could meet. She'd punch me in the face for forgiving my father, and then she'd make fun of my boyfriend. Lexy would not have been impressed by Scott.

Ava catches my eye. She's watching us, her lips twitching. Did she recognize Kai? Probably. She probably sees him all the time.

The flash of jealousy shocks me.

I was not prepared for this wedding to make me question all my life choices. But it's not the wedding that's doing it; it's Kai. I was fine until I saw him.

"Lexy."

A different voice, and this time I don't need a premonition. I know who it is before I turn. "Gage."

LEXY

He's different, but the same. Taller, just as massive as Kai, and beautifully proportioned. Beautiful, period. He might be the most exquisite specimen of manhood I've ever seen.

"It's good to see you," he says in a voice that's quieter than you'd expect from someone his size. My throat closes over with unshed tears.

Scott is still standing right there, about to open his mouth and demand to know who this latest interloper is. I don't care. I go into Gage's arms, lay my head against his chest, close my eyes, and breathe him in.

A hint of something spicy, and his own familiar scent. Until this moment, I didn't know I remembered it.

"Alexandra." Scott's harsh whisper shatters the moment. I release Gage and step back.

"Scott Peyton, Gage Leota."

Gage is in jeans and a black t-shirt, like Kai, but without the leather jacket. He has tattoos on both arms. I have a wild impulse to strip off his shirt and see where else he's inked.

Scott takes my arm. "Alexandra, I need to speak to you. Privately."

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes. "Excuse me," I say to Gage, and let Scott lead me a few feet away.

His voice is stern. "I can't have you consorting with people like this."

“Consorting? Are you serious?” I knew he was concerned—okay, overly concerned—with appearances, but this is ridiculous. “People like what, exactly?”

“We have an image to uphold.”

I take a beat to wrangle my temper under control. “First of all, we’re in Las Vegas, where these people live, and you are a guest. Second, you’re being incredibly rude. And last but definitely not least, you don’t tell me what to do.”

He’s still holding my arm; he drops his hand like I’ve turned rancid. “If one visit to this city is all it takes for you to behave this way, then it seems the woman I thought I knew was only a thin veneer.”

It’s not a good look to wreck your own client’s wedding, so I manage not to punch his lights out. Have I really been that much of a doormat, letting this man dictate my priorities? I suspect the answer is yes, and it shames me.

“It seems the veneer is all you care about,” I tell him coldly.

His eyes turn equally icy. “I’ll see myself back to our room.” He walks out without another word.

Gage comes up beside me. “Are you all right?”

I blow out a breath and look at him. “Yeah. I think I’m mostly mad at myself. How did I end up with that man?”

I’m not expecting an answer; I’m just talking, thinking out loud. It’s as if our fifteen years of separation never happened, and we’re picking up in the middle of a conversation.

“It doesn’t matter,” Gage says. “He’s gone, and you’re here.” He tilts his head toward the dance floor, where a slow song has just started. “Dance with me?”

The emotional ground shifts under my feet. If Kai and I always fought, Gage and I never did. But we’re not kids anymore, and a slow dance with this gorgeous man would open the door to all sorts of danger.

I want to live dangerously.

I've spent my time with Scott being careful and safe and proper—always proper. I never let myself see the cage he'd put me in.

No, that's not right. That I'd put myself in. I made my own choices.

It's time to change things.

I follow Gage onto the dance floor and go into his arms again. He pulls me close and my nipples go hard against his chest, my pussy clenching with instant lust. Scott never evoked this kind of primitive response.

Closing my eyes, I do my best to eject Scott from my mind and stay in the moment as Gage and I sway to the music. Being pressed against him head to toe is doing strange things to my insides. Not just physical reactions, though my whole body is thrumming with need.

It's the other changes that are getting to me.

It feels, rather alarmingly, as though Scott was right about one thing: like the person I've tried to be for the last fifteen years was never real, and her facade is breaking, cracking apart, falling off of me in big chunks.

If I open my eyes, I imagine I'll see the pieces littering the floor around us.

"It's been a long time," Gage says.

I do open my eyes then, but I look up, into his face. "The longest."

"I understand why you left; you didn't have a choice. But it never felt right, you being gone."

Now it's my heart growing fault lines. Gage's words have always held power, because he chooses them carefully and makes them count. "I never wanted to be gone. But once I was, it felt like I couldn't come back."

The hand that's resting against my lower back tightens, as if in reflexive protest. "Why?"

There's no accusation in his voice, but there is demand of a sort. He needs to know. "It hurt too much. I had to cauterize the wound to survive."

The look on his face wrecks me. He shakes his head. "I hate that you went through that. We were too young to do anything about it. If we'd been a few years older, we could have gotten our own place, and you could have stayed with us."

"That would have been amazing." I huff out a laugh. "And probably a train wreck at least some of the time."

He smiles. "Yes. But it would have been worth it."

"Yeah. And in some alternate universe, we did that." I let out a soft sigh. "In this one, not so much."

His expression changes. "How long are you here?"

LEXY

I know what the answer should be: I'm just here for the wedding. My flight back home is booked for tomorrow. I didn't leave any time for this reunion to happen, because I was too afraid of what I'd find.

I was afraid the boys would have grown up and moved on without me, built lives that held no memories of the girl who once lived down the street, and had no room for her return. That they would have gotten over me the way I never could get over them, no matter how I tried.

Now I'm kicking myself. I should have given myself at least a few days. I should have trusted my old friends that much.

Gage is still waiting. "That's a tricky one to answer," I hedge.

"You mean Scott won't want you spending time with us?"

"No, he won't." And even though I'm done taking my cues from my boyfriend, I do try to avoid conflict. I sigh. "I hate fighting."

"You never minded it with us."

I laugh. "With Kai, you mean."

"He did have a genius for setting you off." Gage's eyes twinkle.

I grin. "And vice versa, to be fair."

The song ends, but I'm not ready for this moment to end. Neither is Gage, it seems. We stand on the dance floor,

watching each other. “So what have you two been up to, anyway?” I ask.

His eyebrows go up. “You don’t know?”

I frown. “No. Should I know?”

From the corner of my eye, I see the DJ signaling me. It’s time for the cake. This wedding keeps interrupting my reunion.

I squeeze Gage’s arm. “I’m sorry; I need to go deal with a few things.”

He nods. “I’ll be here.”

Fifteen minutes later, the cake has been cut. My dad and Belinda are making the rounds, chatting with all their guests. I look to the back of the room and see Kai and Gage standing together; there’s a third man with them.

It has to be Thorn. He’s built like a slightly smaller version of Kai, which is even more mind-bending in his case. Thorn is three years younger than his big brother, a year younger than me. He was the kid who tagged along on all our adventures, a puny eleven-year-old when I left. There is absolutely nothing puny about him now.

My father comes up next to me. He looks where I’m looking and after a moment says, “I never liked those boys.”

Anger, hot and bright, slashes through me. That was the other reason I used to hate my father, the other thing I couldn’t forgive him for; it hurt even more, if I’m honest, than him cheating on my mother. “*Those boys* were my best friends.”

“They were a bad influence on you.”

“They kept me sane. God only knows what I might have gotten caught up in if I hadn’t had them.”

Dad shakes his head. “At least you have better taste in men now. Where is Scott, by the way?”

I laugh, and it’s not a friendly sound. “He left. Let me know when you and Belinda want to wrap things up.”

He looks at me like he wants to say something else, but fortunately thinks better of it. “Another few minutes.”

I nod and make my way to the back. Since I'm expecting Thorn, it's easy to recognize him, but the changes in him are still impressive. I stop at his side and smile. "You grew up."

He turns, and I'm startled by the flash of heat in his eyes. "So did you."

Ava's words come back to me—*Have you seen your boyfriends?*—and for a split second, I wish myself into one of those alternate realities, a fantasy realm where it's true.

In this world, the gods don't like me that much. I let the fantasy go. "I'm nearly done here. Do you all have time to grab a drink?"

"It's Saturday," Kai says. "Family dinner. You should come with us."

"Scott would be welcome too, of course," Gage says diplomatically.

Kai grins, a fierce baring of teeth. "Yeah. Bring him along."

Every weekend, when we were kids, we ate dinner at Kai and Thorn's house. His parents always welcomed Gage and me like we were family, too.

Fifteen years of family dinners that I've missed. Longing pierces me again. "I'd love that."

Scott will hate it.

Too bad.

I look for my father. He's watching us, and I can imagine what he'd say if he were close enough. I don't care. This reunion is happening, and anyone who doesn't like it can get lost.

I raise my eyebrows in question; Dad nods. I signal the DJ, who announces, "All right, everyone, this is our last dance before the bride and groom leave."

"My turn," Kai says, and before I can ask him what he means, he's taking my hand and leading me out onto the dance floor.

I'm flustered, just like I was when he first showed up. Was he watching me with Gage? Is he, what, jealous?

I can't process that, so I go with my other reaction: Gage asked, Kai didn't. I scowl up at him. "Bossy much?"

His eyes glitter. "Hard not to be, with you."

"What does that mean?"

The hand splayed across my lower back pulls me even closer. "You make me want things, Lexy. All kinds of things."

Evidence of that presses against my belly, and the size of it makes my legs weak. Wrong as it is, my body has an instant need for Kai to pin me against a wall and show me just what he can do with it.

His expression turns intent; my reaction must be written all over my face. "You and me. Right now."

I sputter. "We can't just go off and—"

"Why not?"

LEXY

The audacity of the question short-circuits my brain for a moment. Before I can come up with a reasonable-sounding response, Scott reappears. He tries to tug me away from Kai, his face contorted in a way I've never seen before.

"Come, Alexandra. We're leaving."

I stare at him. "What do you mean, leaving?"

"I changed our flight home. We're getting out of this disgusting city. Tonight."

"Take your hands off her," Kai growls.

Scott makes a sound that's almost like a growl himself. "You stay out of this," he orders Kai.

"Listen, asshole—"

People are looking. I try desperately to avert the train wreck I can see bearing down on us. "Both of you, stop it."

Scott grabs at my arm again. I pull away at the same time that Kai plants one big hand on Scott's chest and shoves. Not that hard, but it's enough to send my boyfriend stumbling back a few feet.

Scott recovers and comes at Kai with crazed eyes, taking a huge swing at him. Kai easily avoids it, and then his fist connects with Scott's face and sends him sprawling to the floor.

The music stops. A couple of men help Scott to his feet. He shakes them off and glares at me. "Are you coming with me or

not?”

I'm embarrassed, and angry at both of them. But more than that, I can't leave now. I need to continue this reunion, even if it's only for the closure I never got back then. “Scott ...”

“Either you leave with me, right now, or we're through.”

Everyone is watching. I'm not sure there's any way I could explain to Scott what my childhood friends mean to me, and I certainly can't do it here and now. “You're not being reasonable. Can we please talk about this?”

He folds his arms. “There's nothing to discuss. Now, Alexandra.”

Ugh. I'm about to break up with my boyfriend in front of a whole crowd of people. “I can't.”

The look he sends me should make me shrivel up inside, but my inner twelve-year-old is cheering. Seeing my old friends has given her so much more power. She doesn't care what Scott thinks.

But he's not done with me yet. “Very well. I'm checking out. You'd better go up and pack your things so you can move them to a different room.”

He turns to leave, then sends a parting shot over his shoulder. “You'll need a new job when you get back. Don't expect a reference.”

I watch him go, dismayed, but not for the reasons he'd want. I'm more concerned with the damage Scott could do to my professional reputation than the loss of our relationship.

Which tells me everything I need to know about the future I thought we had.

Kai's hand lands on my shoulder. I whirl on him, and he holds up both hands. “Lexy, the guy was a loser. You're better off without him.”

I shake my head. “I can't deal with you right now.” I cross to where Gage and Thorn still stand. Their eyes are sympathetic, which soothes my feelings a bit. “I need to go up to my room and pack.”

“I’ll go with you,” Kai says. Because of course he’s followed me, silently despite his size.

I glare at him. “No, you will not. I’ve had enough of your help for a while.”

“Come on, Lexy. Let me make amends.”

I snort. “Whatever. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Gage and Thorn nod, agreeable, while Kai accompanies me to the elevators. We wait in silence, but it’s not a quiet stillness. The air between us is electric.

I’m afraid that we’ll encounter Scott in the hallway or still in our room, but he’s not there, to my relief. He’d probably already packed his own things before he came down. But not mine.

I pick up my suitcase, but before I can put it on the bed, Kai takes it from me and sets it on the floor. My hands go to my hips. “Kai.”

“Kiss me, Lexy.”

“No! I’m mad at you.”

He grins, and it’s the winsome, mischievous smile he always shared with me before we did something reckless. “I like angry sex.”

My pussy tingles. “We are not having sex. The others are waiting.”

Both of us know I just admitted we will be having sex, and I’m only negotiating about when.

Kai says easily, “It won’t take me long to get you off. We can take our time and do it properly later.”

I scoff, even as my pussy tightens. “Bossy *and* arrogant.”

“Just confident.” His eyes narrow. “Stop stalling; you were never a coward.”

He knows me so well; but I know him, too. “I’m not a kid anymore, Kai. You can’t goad me into doing whatever you want. I’m upset, and I’m distracted. This is not a good time.”

His voice softens, but he was never one to change his mind easily. “Personally, I think it’s a great time. How long were you with him?”

My arms fold across my chest. “We met after I graduated college.” I thought he was such a prize, an educated, urbane, wealthy man.

“Years, then. I don’t know all the details of your relationship, and I don’t want to know, but I saw enough of him today to be certain he couldn’t be a good lover. He’s too selfish.”

Our sex life wasn’t terrible, but it wasn’t great, either. I assume that most people’s sex lives are just okay. Other things matter more.

“A wager,” Kai says. “I can give you better sex in ten minutes than you ever had with him.”

Damn him. A wager. He knows me too well. “What do you get if you win?”

“You come to family dinner tonight.”

“I was going to do that anyway.”

“And you give me a few hours, another time, to show you what *great* sex is like.”

I stare at him. “Hours?”

He shrugs, but there’s no mistaking the look on his face. “Once won’t be enough.”

God, this man. How did I survive fifteen years without him? “And what if you lose?” I already know he won’t, but I have to ask for the wager to exist.

“Then you can pack your bags and run back to Scott.” There’s a glint in his eye that says that won’t be happening, no matter the outcome of this little arrangement.

I shake my head. “You know this is ridiculous.”

He shrugs, and I have to laugh. Kai and I were as combustible as gasoline and fire, but for all our fighting, we were never at odds down deep where it mattered.

I look around the room, and Kai says, “You’re right, you are distracted. We can table our experiment until later. But how about a down payment? Sixty seconds. One kiss.”

Maybe I should say no, but my skin still aches to touch him. “Okay. I can do that.”

He comes to me, lowering his head. I wrap my arms around his neck and rise up to meet him, and he fits his mouth to mine.

Kai doesn’t take, doesn’t demand. He gives—gives himself to me, using his mouth to promise so many things that words can’t express. More than pleasure, more than lust.

Need roars through me like a firestorm. The kiss goes on and on, and when we finally break off, I only take a moment to breathe before I drag his head back to mine, impatient, greedy.

He picks me up, hands under my ass, and puts my back against the wall, still kissing me. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he shifts his hold to one hand—fuck, he’s so strong—and slides the other under the skirt of my dress, up my thigh, and into my panties.

I’m slippery wet. Kai growls into my mouth; I moan into his. I hear his zipper working, he pulls my underwear aside, and then the blunt head of his cock nudges at my entrance.

I wasn’t wrong about what I felt while we were dancing. He’s so big. He presses into me a bit at a time, stretching me, and it’s the most glorious thing I’ve ever felt.

When he’s buried balls-deep inside me, he rests his forehead against mine for a moment, and I take his face in my hands, trying to show without words how much I cherish this, and him, because this isn’t some cheap tryst, no matter what it looks like. It’s beautiful.

I kiss him, tenderly, and say, “Fuck me, Kai.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He shifts both hands to my ass, gripping me firmly, and starts to move. Slowly, at first, his thick shaft dragging against my inner walls, then faster.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan.

He speeds up until he's pounding into me, his cock bumping some spot deep inside, and my orgasm barrels down on me so fast I have almost no warning before it hits. I cry out as I convulse around him, my whole body shuddering with the force of my release. Kai doesn't stop, doesn't even slow down, and my climax multiplies, intensifies until I'm screaming, so loudly that he puts his hand over my mouth, and fuck, that's hot.

I don't even try to be quiet; I just scream into his hand as he pummels me, until he drives home a final time and pours himself out inside me.

We stay there, panting, a few moments; and then, somehow, he walks us backward to the bed, eases down to sit on it, and lies back with me on top of him, still inside me. I'm fine with that. We're a sticky mess, but I could stay in this afterglow haze indefinitely.

Except that I still need to pack, and go back downstairs, and—oh, fuck—my father has probably left on his honeymoon without me saying goodbye.

And Gage and Thorn will know the second they look at us what happened up here.

What have I done?

KAI

Lexy has wrecked me.

Not just physically, though that is definitely true. I probably—no bragging—just gave her the best sex of her life. But even though it was quick, it was also the best sex of mine.

Because it was her.

I was so mad at her for leaving, even though I knew it wasn't her fault and she couldn't have stayed. I took it personally, and ever since she left, some part of me has never not been angry with her. And that anger bled over into every relationship I tried to have.

None of them were right, because none of them were her.

I stroke her hair, her back, and eventually my hand makes its way down to her ass, rubbing gently. "Need to spank this," I mumble absentmindedly.

She props herself up on her elbows and scowls down at me. "No spanking."

I bring my hand up to cradle her face, because part of me can't believe she's really here, and I'm not just having an amazing dream that will turn into a nightmare when I wake up and find her gone. "Don't knock it 'til you've tried it."

Her cheeks go pink, and I don't need to ask why she's embarrassed. That uptight prick she came here with isn't good enough to lick the soles of her shoes. No way he ever played the kinds of games with Lexy that I know she would love.

I don't ask if I've won the bet, either. No need to rub it in. The less time she spends thinking about her ex, the better.

"I need to get back downstairs," she says softly.

"Yeah. Hang on." I ease her onto her back and go into the bathroom, coming back with a warm washcloth. She gets tears in her eyes while I clean her up, and I pretend not to notice.

She's never been treated right, not like she deserves. That's going to change. I'll take care of her.

If she'll let me.

She'll break my heart beyond repairing if she doesn't let me, so I need to not fuck this up.

GAGE

“It’s obvious what’s going on up there,” Thorn says, leaning against the wall, his body angled to watch the elevators.

“Knowing your brother, yes.”

He lets out a heavy breath. “Guess that’s all wrapped up, then.”

Thorn doesn’t have any problem getting women, but he grew up in Kai’s shadow. When we were kids, he was the little brother; Kai and I were the leaders.

But all three of us, in ways that are only clear to me now, revolved around Lexy. She was the sun in our personal solar system.

“Don’t count yourself out.”

His head comes up, his eyes intent on mine, his brow furrowed.

“Lexy was always ours. She was never only his.”

He frowns, thoughtful. “Yeah, but do you really see him sharing?”

“It’s not his call to make.”

He stares at me a moment longer. And then he smiles.

LEXY

Sure enough, my dad and Belinda are gone when I get back to the reception hall. The DJ's gone, too, and the guests, including Ava. There's just the staff, cleaning up.

And Gage and Thorn, waiting patiently so we can go to family dinner.

I check with the staff to make sure the rest of the cake was sent home with the designated friend of the couple, who will store it safely in their freezer. It was, and they have everything else well in hand, so there's really nothing for me to do here.

I grabbed a shower and changed my clothes before we came back down. My excuse, if Gage or Thorn says anything, is that I needed to freshen up before we went to dinner. Not that they'll be fooled.

They both looked right at me when Kai and I came back in. No embarrassment, no apology. No anger, either; just frank assessment.

Part of me feels guilty, even though I know that doesn't make any sense. But I feel as though I owe Gage the truth. I'll find a moment to talk to him before I leave town.

Wait. Leave town and go where, exactly? There's nothing to go back to. My mom's still there; but my job, my boyfriend, even my home are gone, because I lived with Scott.

My stomach feels like a small freighter has capsized there, but my organizational superpowers are already at work. I can ask my friend Hillary to go over to Scott's place and pack up my

things before he does something petty, like give them all to the charity shop. Because part of me can imagine him doing just that.

Our finances are separate, thank goodness, so that's one worry I'm spared. I have enough saved up that I can take a few days here, enjoy my reunion, and then decide what's next.

Resolved, I turn toward the exit doors to see a woman standing in front of me. "Oh! Hello." I vaguely recognize her as one of the guests. "Is everything all right?"

The woman smiles. She's probably around my dad's age, fit and elegant, with an easy poise that I envy. "It was a beautiful wedding, despite the last-minute disruption."

I flush. "I apologize for that."

She waves away the rest of what I was going to say. "It wasn't your fault. That young man was completely out of line; I wasn't entirely sorry when Kai knocked him down."

I blink. "You know Kai?"

"His brother works for me." She holds out a hand. "Clare Hoffman. I own Belle Epoque Resort."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Alexandra Arden." Thorn works for a fancy resort? Doing what? I'll have to ask him.

"A pleasure. Have you done many weddings?" she asks.

"Quite a few, yes, though not here. I came to Vegas just for this; my father was the groom. My weddings don't normally have that kind of excitement," I add, part of me still feeling the need to apologize.

"I'm sure they don't. The reason I ask is that my resort is a popular spot for weddings and other events, and I wondered if you might be looking for a job. But if you live out of state ..."

She lets her voice trail off, giving me time to think. I never imagined myself living in this town again, but her offer, and its fortuitous timing, seem like fate playing its hand. It will at least be a temporary solution while I make new plans.

“Actually, a change of scenery sounds like a good idea,” I tell her. Not having to worry about running into Scott will be worth the hassle of moving. “I’m not sure how long I’ll be able to stay, though.”

“We can keep it short term for now.”

“That works, then.”

Clare smiles broadly. “Excellent. We have an unused guest room; it’s a bit too close to the kitchen. You’re welcome to stay there as long as you need to.”

“That’s very generous. Thank you.”

“Not at all. Your skills are just what I need to take the resort to the next level. Between you and Thorn, Belle Epoque is going to be in demand.”

I’m dying of curiosity now, but I smile and try not to let on. “I’m excited. I could use a few days to get settled before I start, though.”

“Of course. The room is available as soon as you need it. I’ll let the front desk know to expect you.” She extracts a gold-embossed business card from her tiny satin purse and hands it over. “Give me a call when you’re ready to start. I look forward to working with you.”

“Likewise. Thanks again.”

Clare exchanges a few words with Thorn on her way out; I follow her path to where the men are waiting for me. “What was that about?” Thorn asks.

“She offered me a job.”

Three pairs of eyes pin me in place. “You’re staying in Vegas?” Gage asks.

“For a little while.”

Their expressions set an entire kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttering in my belly.

“That calls for a celebration,” Kai says. He pulls out his phone, dials, and has a brief conversation in Spanish.

I was semi-fluent when I was younger; I'm pretty rusty now, but I remember enough to get the gist. He's telling his mother that I'm coming to dinner, and asking her to make my favorite dessert: pineapple upside-down cake.

It was my favorite back then, anyway. I haven't eaten it in years, but it gives me all sorts of feelings that he remembers.

"Ready to go?" he asks me.

"Yep, let's do it."

As one, the men each pick up a piece of my luggage, so all I'm left with is my purse. A girl could get used to this.

Outside, in the parking lot, the sun is already low in the sky, and the air has a bite. Las Vegas in early November is still warm during the day, but the temperature drops off quickly at night. I wish I'd gotten a sweater or jacket out of my luggage, but I don't want to act like a wimp by stopping to dig one out.

Kai leads the way to a glossy black sports car. "You bring the luggage," Gage tells him. "Lexy can ride with me."

The two men exchange a long look, but Kai doesn't speak, just pops the trunk. I feel a bit put out by their maneuvering, but I don't object, because this will give me the chance to talk to Gage privately.

Maybe that's why he arranged it.

Gage drives a different make of sports car; his is silver and just as sleekly impressive. Thorn, for his part, straddles a motorcycle. I didn't notice any tattoos on him, but he's wearing long sleeves.

I smile at Gage, who's holding his passenger door open, and climb in, settling onto the soft leather seat. He shuts me in and circles around to his side while Kai and Thorn drive away.

My butterflies start up again as Gage pulls onto the road. I can't let my encounter with Kai ruin my friendship with the other two men. They all matter to me.

I rub my arms against the chill. Gage doesn't say anything, but he fiddles with the controls on his dashboard, and suddenly a

soft plume of warmth hits my feet. A moment later, my upper body feels it too.

“Thank you,” I say, touched by his thoughtfulness, and then take a steadying breath. “Gage ...”

“I know you slept with Kai.” His voice is even, matter-of-fact. “It doesn’t change how I feel.”

I blink, several times. “It doesn’t?”

“No.”

There are so many things I could say to that, chief among them *And how exactly do you feel?* The question is right there, but I refuse to voice it. It’s unworthy of me, of us.

I don’t know what else to say, though, and I don’t want to let the silence turn awkward. After casting around for something suitable to say for a few moments, I settle on, “Do Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez still live in the same house?”

“They do. Kai and Thorn offered to buy them a new one, but they’re happy where they are.”

“And your family?”

We didn’t spend as much time at Gage’s house growing up, primarily because he has a large extended family, and we had more room and privacy playing outside, or hanging at the Sanchez residence. But I remember the Leotas being a warm and happy clan.

“They all moved to California,” he says. “But I visit them as often as I can.”

Outside my window, the flashy lights of Sin City beg for attention, but my focus is fully inside the car, as the questions in my head compete for priority. “What does Thorn do at the resort?” I ask. “And what about you and Kai? You seemed to think I should know.”

He glances at me. “I’m guessing you don’t spend a lot of time on social media.”

“I do, as much as most people, I think, but I mostly follow other wedding planners, organizational gurus, some health and

beauty people, stuff like that. I haven't seen anything about you guys."

"Well, to take your questions in order, Thorn is the head chef at the resort."

"Oh! He was always cooking for us. That's so exciting." I'm practically bouncing in my seat. "He's young, to be head chef."

"He started his own channel several years ago, posting photos and videos of dishes he'd created. He's got a lot of followers. People go to the resort just to eat his food."

"Ahh, I see." Clare is a very canny businesswoman; I approve. I wonder if she has any ideas about how I can best promote the resort in my soon-to-be position.

Gage clears his throat. "And Kai and I have our own tattoo shop."

LEXY

My brain screeches to a halt. “You’re tattoo artists?” That explains some things. “No wonder you’re both inked. Beautiful work, by the way.”

Gage grins. “Thanks. We design our own, but generally I ink his, and he does mine.”

“That’s awesome. The two of you used to write all those comic books together; I kind of thought you’d end up doing something artistic.”

He nods. “We like being our own bosses, and we like the human element. Having our art out in the world, on all those different bodies, and being able to give people something that’s personal to them—that’s very satisfying.”

“That makes sense. But why did you think I would know?”

He glances at me again as he takes a corner, heading for our old neighborhood. “We did a couple of seasons on a reality tv show. It was enough of a hit that we were able to open a bigger shop and hire some more people.”

This day has brought enough surprises for a lifetime. “You and Kai are reality tv stars? And Thorn’s a social media star. You guys are all celebrities.”

I’m happy for them, and so proud, but part of me is uneasy, too. I’m a nobody. Sure, I had a good reputation in my little corner of the world, but not beyond it.

I always counted on doing a good job, and the word of mouth that comes from that, to build my clientele. I’ve never aspired

to be a world-famous event planner, but I suddenly feel inadequate.

Still, I try to ignore the little voice in my head that says I don't belong in my old friends' world. I just found them again; I'm not giving them up that easily.

The late-afternoon sun casts a soft glow as Gage cruises slowly down our old street, and a mixture of emotions swirls inside me as I prepare to see the house where I grew up.

We slow to a near stop as we inch by the house, which looks much smaller than it seems in my memories. There are two cars out front, and a toddler's plastic slide in the side yard that's new. I hope the family that lives there now is much happier than mine was.

Next, I'm looking for the vacant lot, choked with weeds, where we all used to play. Instead, there's a beautiful park that features a children's playground.

"Stop the car." Gage pulls to the curb, and I jump out, staring at the apparition. "This is amazing. I can't believe the city spent the money to build a park here."

When Gage doesn't respond, I turn to him and see the truth in his eyes. "You did it?"

He nods. "All three of us."

Before I can fully take that in, I spot a mural on a building across the street. Even all these years later, the style is familiar. "You did that, too."

I walk down the street a few steps so I can see it better. It's children, playing. Three boys ... and a girl.

I gasp. "It's us. You drew us."

Then the tears come, and Gage holds me close while I soak his t-shirt.

When I can speak, it's to say, "I'm such an idiot."

"You're not an idiot," he chides me gently. "Why would you say that?"

"I thought you'd forget me."

His arms tighten around me. “Lexy.”

“I was so afraid to come back here and find out I meant nothing to you.”

“That could never happen. Never.” His voice is fierce.

I reach up and touch his face. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry you were so alone.” He looks down at me. “You don’t have to be, ever again.”

That brings a fresh spate of tears, but this time I fight them back. “We need to get to the house,” I say, wiping my face.

He hands me into the car again, and as we roll down the street, I see other changes. More trees, restored houses, flower boxes in windows. The whole neighborhood feels younger, fresher, more alive.

Gage stops in front of the Sanchez residence. Not surprisingly, it looks beautiful. It’s been recently painted, the landscaping is lovely, and the sagging front porch has been replaced with a new one that runs the width of the house. I’ll bet there are other changes I can’t see, like updated electrical and plumbing.

A small, round woman bustles out the front door and hurries our way. I climb from the car to be folded in a warm embrace. “Señora Sanchez. It’s so good to see you.”

“Lexy. I’m so glad you’re here. When Hector called and told me you were coming, I was so happy.”

I smile as I let her lead me into the house, Gage trailing behind us. The boys chose new names for themselves back then, but I guess it’s not surprising that their parents still use their given names. I seem to remember Mrs. Sanchez telling me once that Hector was her father’s name before it was also given to Kai. Thorn was named Tomás, after their other grandfather.

Inside, the house is much as I remember it, though the worn carpet has been replaced with wood flooring and area rugs, and there’s a new recliner in the living room, facing a big-screen television. We follow Mrs. Sanchez to the kitchen and dining area at the back, where Kai and Thorn are talking with their father.

Mr. Sanchez rises from his seat at the table. “Alejandra.” I’ve always loved him calling me by the Spanish version of my name. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you, Señor Sanchez.” I give him a big hug and look around the kitchen. A new stove, new cabinets, and expensive new tile flooring. Probably new appliances and dishes, too, if Mrs. Sanchez wanted them.

“Sit,” she tells me. “Dinner is ready.”

The table is not new; it’s the same rough beauty that Mr. Sanchez built with his own hands years ago. Seating for six, perfect for the makeshift family I surrounded myself with growing up.

I take a seat between Kai and Gage; Mrs. Sanchez sets a final dish on the table and sits down, and I bite my lip to keep from tearing up again.

Mr. Sanchez catches my eye. If he makes a speech I am absolutely going to cry, so I smile and say, “It’s so good to be here.”

He takes my cue gracefully and lifts his glass of water. “To Lexy.”

“Hear, hear,” Thorn says.

I lift my own water. “To family.” We all clink glasses, and then get down to the serious business of eating. There’s some polite conversation about my father’s wedding bringing me back to Vegas, but mostly we concentrate on the food.

Señora Sanchez must have known I was in town and been planning to invite me before Kai’s oh-so-casual comment about family dinner, because she’s had time to make all my old favorites—pozole, enchiladas, carne asada, and so many accompaniments. It’s not just a meal, it’s a feast, the kind that’s normally prepared for large groups on special occasions. Emotion swamps me again that I’m being not only welcomed, but celebrated.

“Even more delicious than I remember,” I announce. And it’s true; I’m not just saying it to be polite.

Mrs. Sanchez beams at me.

“She keeps getting better,” Gage agrees. “I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but Señora Sanchez apparently has no upper limit on her culinary magic.”

“That won’t get you out of helping with the dishes,” she teases him, and we all laugh.

When we were kids, Mr. Sanchez always did the “tell me one thing you learned at school this week” question. Gage was very dutiful about always having an answer ready; he would tell me, at some point during the week, and I would write it down in the little notebook where I’d recorded my own response. I was always the organized one, even then.

Thorn usually had an answer, too. He didn’t love school, but he didn’t mind it.

Kai was the one who struggled.

He hated school; it was too confining for his restless nature. I always thought he would have liked it more if he could have had his classes at the same time as he was dismantling a car engine, or if all the books could have been set to music, or if he’d been able to listen and draw what he heard.

Despite Kai’s distaste for formal education, his father wouldn’t let him get away with sarcasm at dinner (“I learned that Bobby Wilcox cries like a baby if you hit him. No, not me! It was Pedro!”). He had to give a genuine answer. So we kids would have a little huddle, every week before dinner, to help him figure out what his response could be.

It’s those memories, combined with a sudden mischievous impulse, that have me asking, “So, what did everyone learn this week?”

LEXY

Mr. Sanchez smiles, quietly pleased. Thorn grins. “I learned that cinnamon and thyme taste amazing together.”

“Really. Who would have guessed that?”

“They make a great marinade, along with a few other ingredients. I’ll make it for dinner some night.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I smile at him, knowing that I’ll be here at least a little while to share meals and other moments. The certainty wraps around me like a soft, warm blanket.

Gage says, “I learned that I prefer bamboo sheets to linen or cotton.”

Thinking about Gage in a bed, regardless of the type of sheets, makes my face go warm. I curse my tendency to blush and say brightly, “Okay then! Would you like to share with the class your research into the different fabrics?”

Thorn snickers. Kai is too quiet for comfort.

Gage smiles, shrugs, and says, “They’re all good fabrics, but I find that bamboo gives me the best combination of comfort, softness, and durability.”

This makes me think about activities that are hard on sheets, which has me blushing again. Dammit! I turn to Kai, willing him to play along. “Anything?”

He eyes me, and I know he wants to say something about what he and I learned together this afternoon in my hotel room. But he’s not going to say that in front of his parents, or they and I will all kill him.

Finally, he says, “I learned that people can surprise you, even when you think you know them.”

I don’t ask for details. “Okay, that concludes our quiz for tonight. Thanks for playing along, everyone.”

“Wait a minute,” Thorn says. “You didn’t go.”

“Oh, right. Umm ...”

I could say the same thing as Kai did. Scott certainly surprised me today, although I think part of me knew all along that he was like that, and just pretended otherwise. But I don’t want to talk about him.

“I learned ... that true friendship doesn’t end, no matter how long you’ve been apart.”

“To friendship,” Gage says, and we all toast again.

Of course, Kai is now a friend with benefits. Huge, fulfilling benefits. But I don’t dare think about that right now, because his parents have excellent radar.

He rescues me by telling us about a ditzy former client and the saga of them getting their tattoo. He keeps us all in stitches, and Gage shares stories about some of his clients, too. Mr. Sanchez, who runs a garage, gets in on the act by describing a man who kept trying to tell him how to fix his car, but had no idea what he was talking about.

“Surely changing the brake pads affects the carburetor,” I tease him.

“Exactly,” he says drily. “But you must have some stories to tell yourself, being an event planner.”

I laugh. “Oh, yes. I’ve seen everything, especially the weddings—from the young and starry-eyed, to people who have been married multiple times before.”

“And which were your favorites?” Mrs. Sanchez wants to know.

The question turns me unexpectedly serious. “You know, it’s funny. I got into event planning because I’m naturally organized—”

“We remember,” Gage says, prompting more laughter.

I elbow him gently. “When my work shifted more into wedding planning, I was still pretty skeptical about relationships. I kept my feelings separate, of course, and just focused on the actual tasks involved. But the more weddings I did, the less hardened I got. It’s not easy to stay cynical when you witness the power of love in so many lives.”

There’s a brief pause, when I’m momentarily worried that I’ve gotten too mushy, and then Mr. Sanchez raises his glass. “To love.” We all clink glasses again, but I notice that the other men don’t say anything. Of course, none of them have been married, so far as I know, let alone happily partnered with the same woman for decades.

Mrs. Sanchez brings out the pineapple cake, still warm from the oven. I thank her, and we all have a piece, and then everyone but her helps clean up the kitchen.

If we were kids, it’d be just about bedtime by now, with maybe a little tv watching beforehand. But grownup me is still pretty tired. It’s been a long day, and an exhausting one on multiple fronts.

“I’d better go,” I tell the group. “Thank you for having me.”

“*Mija*,” Mr. Sanchez says firmly, “you are family. You do not need an invitation to be welcome here.”

He’s made me cry after all. I hug him, and his wife, who kisses my cheek, and then I hug Thorn and Gage, who are careful and respectful with the parents watching, but still manage to give me a good squeeze.

Kai escorts me outside to his car. He’s got my luggage, after all, and Gage drove me here, so it makes sense. All my golden, sunshine-y feelings from the dinner start ebbing away, leaving a tangle of emotions in their wake.

The drive is quiet; my thoughts are anything but. I had sex with Kai. Amazing sex. And, completely apart from our wager, I want to do it again.

But Gage, unless I completely misunderstood him, has feelings for me as well. And while Thorn has been more laid

back, I got some definite vibes from him at the reception, too.

Which blows my mind.

Since we all grew up together, we were still treating each other like siblings past the age when we might have been flirting, or kissing, if we'd met when we were older. Sure, by the time I was twelve, I was starting to have some confused, complicated feelings about my friends-who-were-boys, but I left before there was ever a chance to explore those feelings and see if they led anywhere.

And now all three of them are maybe possibly interested in me that way? I don't know what to do about that. The only thing I'm certain of is that I don't want to risk my friendship with them—any of them, and all of them.

“What's on your mind?” Kai says into the silence.

“Sorry, I don't mean to be rude.”

“You're not being rude. You're just thinking really loudly.”

I laugh. “I am, aren't I? Today has been ... a lot. My life has been turned upside down in more ways than one since I woke up this morning.”

“True that. Hey, you don't have any pets, do you?”

“What? No.”

“I was just thinking about the logistics of trying to move an animal here.”

“Oh, right. Fortunately, I don't have to worry about that.” I make a face. “Scott doesn't like animals.”

“What the fuck.”

I laugh again. “I know. That should have been a red flag right there.”

“I know I'm biased—but, Lex, I'm glad you're away from him.”

I don't respond, because I still need to process it all; but I can't help thinking about how I felt just now having dinner with Kai and Thorn's parents, who've always welcomed me like family,

contrasted with the cold, formal dinners Scott and I sometimes shared with his parents, where I always felt like an outsider.

“Do you want to come to my place?” Kai asks.

I hesitate. “I’d love to see it, but I’m pretty beat. I think I need to just crash for the night. Clare Hoffman said she had a room available for me.”

“Okay.”

His easy acquiescence makes me a tiny bit suspicious, but then I remember the way he kissed me this afternoon, the way he took care of me, and my heart melts all over again.

When we arrive at Belle Epoque resort, Kai lets me have my carry-on bag, but takes the other two. I give my name to the woman working at the front desk, and she instantly registers recognition. “It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Arden.”

“Call me Alex.” Lexy belongs to the past, and Alexandra lived in Scott’s world. I don’t mind if the men still call me Lexy, but Alex feels like the right name for this new chapter of my life.

“Nice to meet you. Follow me, and I’ll show you to your room.”

We follow her through a series of hallways, winding toward the back of the building. The unused guest room is indeed very near the kitchen, but it has its own bathroom and a mini fridge, so I don’t mind at all. It’s not as though I’ll be spending a lot of time in it during the day, and I can’t imagine the kitchen is that busy throughout the night, if it’s open at all. From what I could see, the resort is small by Vegas standards, a niche operation rather than the usual mega-building.

“You can call out to the front desk if you need anything,” the woman tells me. “I’ll let you get settled.” She closes the door behind her, leaving me and Kai alone.

KAI

“Do you want me to go?” I ask.

Lexy’s expression changes. She’s been in a state ever since we left my parents’ house, and I can make a pretty good guess about what’s on her mind. Everything that happened today, but especially what happened with me.

She blows out a breath. “I’m not sure what’s going on with all of you, exactly.”

“With Thorn, Gage, and me? We all want to fuck you.”

She stares at me. “You talked about it?”

“Don’t need to. I know them.” My literal brother and my brother of the heart, men I’ve known all their lives, or nearly so. It’s not difficult for me to predict how they’ll think and react in most any situation.

I saw how they were with Lexy this afternoon. And so did she.

If she didn’t have those kinds of feelings for them, she wouldn’t be all worked up about it. So I know what I need to say, even though I want to claim her for myself. But I have no right to do that.

“I’m not going to get in your way, Lexy. It’s your call. One of us, all of us, none of us, whatever.”

Her face softens. “Kai ...”

I shake my head. “Would I love having you to myself? Yeah. So would Gage. So would Thorn. Any man would be lucky to

have you, and we know better than most how special you are. But we're not going to fight over you."

Any other man on the planet, I'd fight. But not them.

Relief is plain on her face. "Are you sure? I wouldn't ever want to come between you. I just ... I need time to know how this is all going to work itself out."

"Take all the time you need." I hope that means she'll be taking us all for lots of test drives, because I'm not sure I can survive being around her if she decides to be celibate while she works things out. I'd much rather be sharing her than for all of us to be living in a Lexy-deprived desert. We've been there for far too long.

"Thank you." She smiles. "In that case, would you mind staying?"

My cock jerks. "Happy to stay, but this doesn't fulfill the wager."

Lexy laughs. "And why not?"

"Because you're tired. I want you fully rested for that."

That gets me an outright giggle, and fuck, everything about her just makes me so damn happy. Every last inch of me. Several hard inches in particular.

"Got it. Just tired sex tonight." She gives me a sassy grin, and I remind myself that tonight is also not the time to explore fun and games with spanking. Which is a pity.

I shrug off my jacket and toss it aside. "Where do you want me?"

Her expression turns impish. "Naked and on the bed, please."

"As you wish." I don't have the patience for a strip tease tonight, so I just shuck everything off and lie down on the bedspread. Lexy stands, hands on hips, staring at me.

I prop myself up on my elbows and quirk an eyebrow. "Problem?"

"Just admiring the view." Her eyes roam my body, drinking me in. "Fuck, you're gorgeous." My cock jerks, and she

smiles. “Hold onto the headboard for me.”

Her wish is my command. This being a fancy resort, there’s an actual headboard, made of antique-looking brass, and I reach up and take hold of two of the bars.

“Perfect. Keep those hands there.” Lexy hurries out of her own clothing, but the sight is still enough to make my cock even harder, especially when she crawls onto the end of the bed and right up between my legs.

I’m expecting her to ride me, cowgirl style, but she sits on my thighs instead, and reaches out to trace my tattoos. “So much ink.” Her fingertips follow the feathers that curl across my chest. “And your arms have more ink than bare skin.”

Her touch is sweet torture, but I’m silent as I take in the glory of her naked body while she’s inspecting mine.

“All of the art is gorgeous, but not as impressive as the canvas,” she says, before finally scooting back until her head is over my belly. She smiles down at the beast lying against it, pulsing in invitation. “Mmm,” she says, and literally licks her lips.

She’s killing me. And this is supposed to be all about her, not me. “Lexy ...”

“No moving your hands.” She lowers her head and licks right up my shaft, from root to tip.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say in a strangled voice.

“I want to.” She wraps a hand around me as best she can and laps up the precum welling from my slit. I hiss out a harsh breath, but don’t speak. I’m not sure I can anymore.

And then she opens her mouth and swallows me down.

I grip the bars of the headboard so hard I’m afraid I’ll break them. She’s worshipping my cock like it’s her personal deity, taking me deeper with each bob of her head, her tongue working sweet, torturous magic. One hand works the base of my dick, and the other is cupping my balls, rolling them, squeezing gently, her thumb stroking my seam.

“Lexy, *fuck*.” I won’t last long at this rate. She’s sending me straight to heaven, all the faster because it’s her. I’d be having an out-of-body experience at how surreal this is, if I weren’t determined to feel every sensation.

“Lexy.” Dammit, I need to stop her before I come in her mouth, but I can’t move my hands. “Lexy, stop. I’m almost there.”

Instead, she deepthroats me. “Fuck,” I yell, and then I’m coming because I have absolutely no fucking choice in the matter, and she swallows me down relentlessly, every last drop, until I’m completely drained.

Only then does she release me, crawl the rest of the way up my body, and settle atop me, her face nuzzling into my neck. “That was fun,” she murmurs.

“Jesus Christ, woman.” I finally let go of the headboard, which has somehow withstood my assault, and get my arms around her. “I was not expecting that. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” She sounds like she means it, too.

There’s a throw artistically draped across one corner of the bed. I manage to hook it with my foot and bring it close enough to grab, spreading it over us. The room is cool, and I don’t have enough strength yet to get us under the covers.

We’re quiet for a few minutes, until I wonder if she’s fallen asleep, but she stirs and kisses the side of my neck. My cock twitches, and Lexy giggles.

That must be the sweetest fucking sound in the whole universe. I could spend the rest of my life finding ways to make her laugh. “Mr. Rochester amuses you?”

That does it. She almost can’t lift her head and look down at me, she’s laughing so hard. “You do not call your cock Mr. Rochester.”

I grin. “No, not really. I just wanted to make you laugh.”

Her face changes; she kisses me, softly. I can taste myself on her, and I start to get hard again.

She ends the kiss and wiggles her eyebrows at me. “Does Mr. Rochester want to make amends some more?”

“He’s gonna need just a minute. But in the meantime ...” I reverse our positions and slide down her body until my head is between her thighs, then look up at her. “You might want to hold on.”

LEXY

I didn't know it was possible to have that many orgasms in one night.

When I wake the next morning, I'm amazed at how good I feel, despite how little sleep I got. Kai was incredible. I forgot I was tired, or maybe it's simply that fantastic sex is energizing.

He showed me, in spades, exactly what he meant about my ex by being the exact opposite—a skilled, generous lover who delighted in giving me endless pleasure.

I stir, and the hand cupped around one breast squeezes gently. “Good morning.”

“It is, isn't it?” We're on our sides, spooning, and I wiggle around to face him. “Thank you for last night.”

He smiles. “It was my pleasure. Mr. Rochester is happy to help out anytime.”

When I giggle, he gets a look on his face that gives me a funny feeling in my chest. “I gotta get ready for work,” he says. “Want to share the shower?”

“Mmm, yes, and then I could eat a horse. Several, actually.”

“I thought you did that last night.”

I snort, slap his chest, and roll away to sit up on the edge of the bed. I haven't unpacked yet, so I need to do that first thing, and then organize my day.

Well, almost first thing. I stand, stretch, and saunter toward the bathroom. When I'm close to it, I say over my shoulder, "Last one in the shower loses."

I go up on my toes, ready to sprint, but an instant later I let out a laughing shriek as I'm lifted off my feet and swung around. Kai settles me at his waist, legs wrapped around him, and steps carefully backward into the shower, where he smirks at me. "What do I win?"

"My toes were in the shower before any part of you."

He barks out a laugh, turns on the spray, and kisses me.

Good thing we didn't order breakfast before we showered; it would have been cold by the time we were ready to eat. As it is, I'm even more famished once we're finally dressed.

Kai calls room service, which is when I remember his brother is head chef. "Is Thorn here already?"

"Nah. He's in charge of deciding what's on the menu, but Clare's not going to make him work twenty-hour days. She wants him to stick around. There's a separate crew who handles breakfast, and he comes in for lunch and dinner."

The easy familiarity with which he says Clare's name makes me wonder if the two of them are more than casually acquainted. An ugly stab of jealousy hits me, and I turn away, dismayed.

What is wrong with me? I like Clare, completely apart from her being my new boss, and I have no claim on Kai. I need to get it together.

"What's the matter?" he asks.

I force a smile. "Nothing. Just preoccupied. If you'll excuse me for a few minutes, I need to make some calls."

Grabbing my phone and a sweater, I slip out onto the patio. The chilly morning air won't let me stay out here long, even

with the extra layer, so I waste no time calling my friend Hillary back home.

“Lexy! You’re not back already, are you?”

“No, I’m not. Hil, I need a favor.”

Something in my tone of voice alerts her. “What’s wrong?”

“Scott and I broke up.”

“Oh ... I’m sorry.”

She doesn’t sound particularly sorry. I hesitate a moment, then say, “You never liked him, did you?”

There’s a slight pause on her end, too, before she says, “I never thought he was good enough for you. And I suspected that he didn’t really make you happy.”

I sigh. “I blinded myself to the truth about him, but here in Vegas he really let his jerk flag fly. He’s already gone back to Atlanta, and I’d like to get my things out of his place. Since you already have a key ...”

“Of course,” she says immediately. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

My relief tells me that I was really worried about what Scott might do. “Thanks. I owe you.”

“Don’t be silly. When will you be back?”

“Not right away. I’m catching up with old friends, and I have a temporary job offer.” I tell her about Belle Epoque, but not the men. I’m not ready to tell anyone about them yet.

Hillary promises to pack everything up—including the plants—while Scott is at work. She’ll take good care of my greenery, and make sure the rest of my things are safe.

We say goodbye, and I hurry back into the warmth of the room to find breakfast waiting. Five minutes later, I say, through a mouthful of egg, “This food is amazing, and so creative.”

“The boy comes up with good recipes, even when he’s not cooking them.” Kai smiles, every inch the proud big brother. “But the lunches and dinners are even better.”

I look around for the bill. “How much did this cost, anyway? Did you pay? You didn’t have to do that, though it’s good that you were here to tip whoever brought it.”

“No charge. The woman who brought it said your meals are included as an employee benefit. But yeah, I tipped her.”

“Free meals? Nice. I’m going to gain twenty pounds if I eat Thorn’s food all day.”

“Worth it,” Kai says with a grin, and takes another bite.

I brush aside the fleeting thought that I never would have made a casual comment about gaining weight in the presence of my ex. I’m fully aware how much more comfortable I am in my own skin now, after less than a day apart from him. He’s the past, and I’m focused on the now. I’ll start sorting out the future sometime soon.

Kai hasn’t said anything about his tattoo shop, or the tv show he was on, but replaying our conversations, I realize he probably assumes I already know. “Gage brought me up to date on everything,” I tell him. “About the two of you going into business, and your show.”

“Oh. Yeah. I thought you knew.” He shrugs. “Though, why would you? It’s not like you looked us up.”

“Kai.”

“Sorry.” He looks away. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m not entirely rational where you’re concerned.”

We’re sitting cross-legged on the bed, the food between us, and I reach out and touch his hand. This kind of conversation is so much easier with Gage, but I owe it to Kai to try. “It wasn’t that I didn’t care. I was just ... trying to survive.”

“Yeah. I get that.” There are emotions I can’t name storming in his eyes, but he smiles. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too.”

“And ... I gotta go. Big job to prep for.” He climbs off the bed and grabs his jacket. “I’ll call you later.”

“Bye,” I say, and stare at the door he’s closed behind him. No goodbye kiss, no nothing. I can’t escape the feeling that I’ve hurt him.

Well, I’m not entirely rational where he’s concerned, either, so I can cut him some slack. This friends-with-benefits thing has some minefields, but we’ll figure it out. We have to.

I refuse to lose him again.

As if on cue, my phone rings. We all traded numbers last night at dinner, so I can see that it’s Gage calling. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Just the sound of his voice, so smooth and deep, makes me feel better. “Have you had breakfast?”

“I have, actually. Turns out I get free food at the resort.” I don’t mention Kai.

“Nice.” If he wonders whether I was alone last night, he doesn’t ask. “Well, then, how about a tour of our business?”

“Oh, I’d love that.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up in ... half an hour?”

“I’ll be ready.”

LEXY

After everything Kai and I have done together since yesterday, I don't expect to be having those kinds of feelings about anyone else. If anyone asked, I would have said I was thoroughly sated and completely satisfied.

Then Gage pulls into the parking lot at the resort and unfolds himself from the driver's seat, and my heart skips a beat. Total cliché, but my body doesn't care. He's just as beautiful as he was yesterday.

As I look at him, there's a knowing, a quiet certainty: he will always make me feel this way. I will always want Gage. Even if we were parted for decades—or forever—a part of me would still yearn for him.

Which leaves me feeling confused and guilty. Who gets her brains screwed out, in the best possible way, and then gets horny for the screwer's best friend?

Me, that's who.

Gage studies me over the hood of his car, no doubt taking in my expression, my posture, and a million other tiny cues. Then he comes toward me, his long legs eating up the distance, moving with a grace that reminds me of our dance yesterday.

When he's standing in front of me, he looks down, his expression enigmatic. I tense, waiting for him to tell me he's changed his mind, that he can't handle me with Kai after all. I'm not prepared for what he does say.

“You never have to apologize.”

I close my eyes. My head tilts forward until it touches his chest. After a moment, I say, “Our hug got interrupted yesterday.”

His arms come around me, mine around him, and we stand together like we did at the reception; only this time, we don’t let go. For long moments, it’s just us, together. And all the turmoil inside me goes quiet.

How does he do it? How can this man heal me with just his touch? I don’t know, but it hits me—that’s why I need them both, have always needed them both: Kai’s fire, and Gage’s grounded strength.

And I vow once more that I will not lose them, not either of them. Not ever again. I am whole in ways I haven’t been in years, just by being near them, in ways that go much deeper than anything sexual.

But sex is definitely the elephant in the room. Or should that be the snake? My body is intensely curious about what secrets Gage’s clothing conceals.

Which is why I release him and take a step back. I’m not ready to go there, no matter what my body wants. Smiling up at him, I say, “Tour time?”

The answering smile that ghosts around his mouth makes me think he knows everything that was just going through my head—and other parts of me. His only response, though, is to open the passenger-side door of his car.

Such a gentleman. But with Gage, though his manners somehow feel courtly, even old-fashioned, they never feel forced or condescending. For him, courtesy is as natural as arguing is to Kai.

We don’t talk much on the drive, but it’s an easy silence. In minutes, we’re near the Strip. Gage finds a slot in a parking garage, and after a short walk to a trendy plaza right in front of one of the most popular resort hotels on Las Vegas Boulevard, we come to a stop in front of a glass-fronted shop. A sign above the door reads **Beasts Ink** in bold red letters, and several

“Best of Vegas” stickers beside the entrance catch my eye as we go inside.

My brow furrows at the Beasts name, but I don’t have time to question it, because my attention is immediately drawn to the shop’s interior.

I’m not sure what I expected. I’ve never gotten a tattoo, never been in a tattoo parlor, but my impression of what they’re like is dimly-lit back rooms and an overall seedy atmosphere. Which I guess may be true for some of them.

This one, though, feels more like an upscale salon turned ultra masculine. It’s clean and brightly lit, but with a lot of black metal, wood surfaces, and a dark brick wall running the length of the space. Instead of photos on the walls of models with various hairstyles, there are beautiful close-up shots of tattoos. Some are in glorious full color, others rendered in fine detail in grayscale, and the styles range from delicate to dramatic to whimsical.

There are half a dozen work stations lined up in the space, carefully arranged to allow for an easy flow of foot traffic and minimal disruptions. Kai’s at one of them, working on a gorgeous curvy woman with flaming red hair. The now-familiar jealousy whips through me, and I shove it ruthlessly down. Intent on his work, Kai doesn’t look up when we enter.

“This is very impressive,” I say to Gage, keeping my voice low.

His smile is gentle, but genuine. “Thank you. We’ve worked hard to get here.”

“I can see that. So you have four other artists working for you?”

“Three, at the moment. We’ll hire another one if we find the right fit.”

Another man comes through the door. He’s as big as Kai and Gage, and has an impressive set of tats himself, full sleeves on both arms. “Morning,” he says to Gage, and instead of going to one of the tattoo stations, he settles on a standing stool near the door.

I look from him back to Gage. “You have a bouncer?”

An unmistakable look of embarrassment crosses his face. “Sometimes fans of the show get a little ... enthusiastic.”

As if summoned by his words, a group of young women pushes through the entrance, their eyes lighting up when they spot Gage. The bouncer moves nimbly to intercept them. “Good morning, ladies. Do you have appointments?”

Four faces fall in unison. “We just wanted to talk to the guys,” one of them says. “Get some autographs, maybe a selfie, you know.”

“Sure,” he says easily. “In order to let all the artists here focus on their work, we have set times for fans to hang out. Today, it’s from two-fifteen to two-thirty. You’re welcome to come back then.”

The woman who spoke looks sullen, then crafty. “Can we make an appointment?”

“Ember?” The bouncer gestures over a woman who appears to be in her early twenties, who’d been sitting behind a counter in the center of the shop. “Ember handles appointments for all the artists.”

Ember smiles at the women. “We don’t do group appointments, but you’re each welcome to make an individual appointment, and you can bring one other person with you for moral support.”

“How much is an appointment?” the spokeswoman wants to know.

Ember quotes a price for consultations and a range of hourly rates for tattoo work that make the fans’ eyes go wide. They look at each other, then shrug, pretending to be undaunted by the figures. “Whatever.”

The women’s gazes move past the bouncer and Ember to Gage, and they smile and wave; but when they look at me, their expressions turn hostile. “We’ll be back later,” their leader says.

They flounce out and I turn to Gage, dismayed. “You have to deal with that all the time?”

He shrugs, still uncomfortable. “Not all the time, but often enough.”

“Enough that you pay a full-time bouncer,” I murmur, mostly to myself.

“Brax is getting his degree in mechanical engineering. This job lets him make some money while he studies.” Sure enough, I can see now that Brax has a textbook open on a tablet, the device looking almost dainty in his big hand.

The receptionist comes over to us. “This is Ember,” Gage says. “Ember, this is Lexy, an old friend of ours.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say, shaking her hand. “Call me Alex. Are you a student too?”

“In business administration,” she says with a smile. “I don’t have any artistic ability, I’m afraid, but I like being around artistic types.”

I laugh. “Same here. I can barely draw stick figures.”

“Right? I’m always so amazed by the things artists create.”

“We all have our strengths,” Kai says behind us.

LEXY

He's snuck up on me again. How does such a huge man do that? His dark eyes go from me to Gage and back again, and I see the fire smoldering in them. It's not jealousy, I don't think, or not exactly. More a reminder that he intends us to get naked again before long.

He keeps his distance, though, not giving me a kiss or even a hug. I suppose that if he made a big point of being possessive or affectionate here at his workplace, it would bother me. It's better for him to be professional in this setting.

Which means it's my problem, not his, that his entirely appropriate distance disturbs me, even with Gage standing right next to me. Yep, definitely not rational where Kai's concerned.

There's a teasing light in those eyes now, his lips curving slowly, as if he can read my mind. Suddenly annoyed with both him and myself, I tell him, "Nice place," in a deliberately casual tone of voice. "Fancy."

Kai grins, not concerned by what might seem faint praise to others. "We like it." Then the smile fades, and there's a brief but charged silence before he cants his head toward his client. "Gotta get back. Catch you later."

He's gone two steps before he stops and says over his shoulder, "We can talk about *Jane Eyre* some more."

My face gets hot. It's a good thing Gage already knows we slept together. Still, I keep my eyes on Kai as he makes his way back to his client, and don't look at the man beside me.

By the time Kai's back at work, my face no longer feels like it could grill a shish kabob. "Looks like a big job," I observe to Gage, hoping I sound casual. Kai said as much this morning, but no point revealing that.

"It'll take multiple days to get it all done," Gage agrees. If he noticed my flaming face, he's too much of a gentleman to mention it.

"When's your first client today?" I ask.

"Not until this afternoon. We're open well into the evening, and the hours add up, so Ember gives us half-days off here and there. One of the benefits of having more artists on staff."

"Makes sense." I glance around the space again, but unless I'm going to get inked myself, there's no point staying here. "What do you do with your time off?"

"It varies. Is there anything you need? I could take you shopping."

I'm so surprised by his offer that I almost don't think I hear him right. Scott never wanted to go shopping with me, not even for groceries for the both of us.

With free meals at Belle Epoque, I don't need food. I will need more clothing for my unexpected extended stay here in Vegas and my new job, but I'm not in the mood for it right now. Plus, if Gage is still as generous in spirit as he was when we were kids, he might try to pay, and I don't want to take advantage of his kindness.

"I think I'm good at the moment, but thanks." I smile at him and start to move toward the door, but Gage touches my arm.

"This way," he says, tilting his head toward a door in the back. Curious, I follow him, glancing at Kai one last time. He's still absorbed in his job.

The door leads to a storage area, and there's another door that leads to a service hallway. "Sneaky," I say with approval.

The hallway winds through the building, with doors for other businesses spaced along it. Eventually, it lets out onto an alley

right across from the parking structure, and we make it back to Gage's car without encountering any more fans.

"So, no shopping?" he asks once we're inside the vehicle. "Are you going to be looking for an apartment?"

I blow out a breath. "I don't know. I need to figure out what my long-term plans are. At first, I thought I'd just stay in Vegas for a few days, catch up with you all ... but now that I'm working for Clare, I need to rethink that."

"Want to hang at my place for a bit? We can relax, talk things through."

"That sounds good." I'm avidly curious about the lives my friends have built for themselves. Part of me wishes I'd accepted Kai's invitation to stay at his place last night.

Gage starts the car and winds through the garage to street level. His driving is as smooth as the rest of him, elegant, with no wasted movement. Is that what he's like in bed?

My face gets hot, and I'm glad he's focused on the road and not me. I'm so much more at ease with Gage in some ways, and so much more vulnerable in others.

Sex with Kai was straightforward: desire, action, pleasure. Things won't be so simple with Gage ... if we reach that point.

The car noses into another parking garage, eventually gliding into a numbered spot near an elevator. Gage leads me, not to the elevator, but to double doors that he opens with an access card. They lead to a short hallway and another set of doors; this time, he uses the card again, and also a code that he punches into a keypad set into the wall.

We emerge into another hallway, this one a bit wider than normal in an apartment building. The carpeting is high end, the walls decorated with tasteful contemporary art. An alcove holds a small sculpture on a pedestal.

Gage leads me around a few corners before he stops at one of the doors, accessing it with what I'm pretty sure is a different key card. I'm impressed by the extent of the security, but it also makes me a bit worried. Enthusiastic fans are one thing, but have any of them crossed the line and turned into stalkers?

I don't ask, because we've entered the apartment, and I'm too busy taking it all in. High ceilings, tall windows letting in the light, clean lines, art on the walls. A few select pieces, each making a statement.

It's the perfect environment for Gage: cool and sophisticated, but not cold. Most of the apartment is done in neutrals, except for the art and some of the other decor: a pot of flowers on a windowsill, a colorful plate in the kitchen. Someone who didn't know him could look at this space and draw the wrong conclusions, but the hints of his inner fire are there for anyone with eyes to see.

I content myself with the visible areas of his home, not detouring to see his bedroom. Safer that way. The nervous energy I felt earlier is once again doing pirouettes up and down my spine.

"It's amazing," I tell him, coming to a halt in the kitchen. "I love it."

"Thank you." He comes to me, and for a moment I think he's going to kiss me, but instead he reaches over my head for a pair of cut-glass tumblers. A tiny part of me is relieved; a larger part is disappointed.

He pours us each a glass of juice from his high-tech fridge. I take a sip. "This is delicious. What is it?"

"It's my own blend."

It's tart, but not too tart, and it has me going back for another taste. "Whatever you've got in here, I approve."

"Thanks. I like having something that still tastes ... entertaining, shall we say, when I don't feel like alcohol."

"Smart man. But then, you always were."

He doesn't answer, just looks at me, and his expression opens up another fault line under my feet. We could skip the drink and the talk and go straight to bed, if I wanted it. And I do want it ... but I'm not ready.

So I gesture toward a sofa with my glass of juice, and Gage lets me lead the way there. He won't push me, not like Kai. As

we sit, my mind wanders off, into the past.

“Something’s got you deep in thought,” Gage says, inviting me to respond, not demanding answers.

“I was just trying to remember what you did to get your way when we were kids.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Get my way?”

“Yeah. Kai’s always been the pushy type, and that’s not your style. But you were never a pushover, either. You didn’t just let him call the shots.”

A half-smile teases around his lips. “And what does your memory tell you?”

I sip more of the addictive juice. “You should bottle this and sell it at your shop. You’d make bank.”

Amusement dances in his eyes, but he doesn’t answer.

“Stubbornness,” I say. “If Kai’s the irresistible force, you’re the immovable object.”

“I did sometimes have to stand my ground with him,” Gage agrees.

“Like when he wanted us to break into the pet store and free all the animals. Because seeing them in cages made me sad, and he hated it when I was sad.”

“Funny you should mention that. The store is still open, but it doesn’t sell animals from backyard breeders anymore. It offers rescue animals from the local shelter for adoption.”

The grin that splits my face is so huge my cheeks hurt. “That’s awesome.” And then, remembering the neighborhood park, and how I’m coming to realize my old friends seem to be capable of just about anything, I ask, “Did you guys have something to do with that?”

GAGE

“We might have persuaded the store that it would be better for their public image. Not to mention the animals,” I admit.

The delight on Lexy’s face ignites a warm glow that spreads across my chest.

It’s odd that there’s so much she doesn’t know, because even though she was gone, it’s somehow always felt like she’s been with us. She’s been living in my heart, and a part of me always knew she’d be back in our lives.

“Speaking of furry creatures,” she says after taking another drink, “that reminds me of a question I had. Why is your tattoo shop called Beasts Ink?”

“Ahh, okay. Remember the monsters we used to draw?”

Her brows lift. “Oh, right. The gory ones?”

“Yeah. We didn’t show them to you very often because we knew you didn’t like them, but we had a whole army of them. When we were brainstorming names for the shop, we both thought back to the drawings and it seemed like a good fit.”

She smiles, and I can see that she’s remembering.

“To commemorate the shop’s opening, we got new tattoos, and had our beasts inked on our skin. It was a way to say we were all in.”

“Something from the past taking you into the future. I like that.”

As she ponders it, I find myself wondering whether she's seen Kai's beast tattoo. Then her eyes scan my body, little flames glimmering beneath her lashes, and I forget all about Kai.

She licks her lips, and just as I knew she'd be back in our lives, I know we'll be together. I know she'll discover the tattoo on my upper thigh, along with the one over my heart, and all the others. But I'm not going to rush things. I can be very patient.

She has a lot going on right now. Massive life changes. I don't need to push.

"It makes perfect sense that you became tattoo artists, and I'm definitely not surprised that you're successful, but how did you end up on tv?" she asks.

I shrug and shake my head. "It just happened. When our clientele grew and we started to get a reputation in town, we moved into a bigger place, closer to the Strip. Not where we are now, but a place with more foot traffic than where we started out.

"One day, a woman came into the shop, scouting for new reality tv ideas. There were shows about local pawn shops, custom car builders, motorcycle shops, casinos... she was just looking around for something else to fill air time."

"You're being modest. I can understand why she'd think the two of you would draw in viewers."

I shrug again. "It was fun at first, but it got old quick. The show was fine when it filmed us working on clients, but it pushed a little too far into our personal lives for my taste."

"So you ended it?" Lexy asks.

"We didn't have to. The network changed hands and they never renewed the contract. There was talk of it continuing at some point, but it hasn't happened."

She's watching me closely, and I anticipate more questions, but instead, she says, "Definitely looks like it was good for business."

As I nod, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I reach for it, excusing myself. I wouldn't normally pay attention to it when I'm with Lexy, but it might be my mom, and sure enough, it is.

"Excuse me for a moment." I step into the kitchen and tap to call her, because Mom isn't really a fan of texting. After a brief just-the-facts conversation, it becomes apparent that I need to cut my time with Lexy short.

Returning to the living room, I make my apologies. "That was my mother. One of my cousins is in town, and her car has broken down. I need to go help her."

"Oh, I hope it's nothing serious." She's understanding, as I knew she would be. "I can get an Uber back to my place."

"I can take you. It's on the way." It's a white lie, but I can drop her off and still get to my cousin in plenty of time.

"I'll have to get a rental," she says. "I can't have you chauffeuring me all over town every day."

I file that bit of information away as I rinse our glasses and set them in the sink. "Why not?"

She returns the smile I give her, and as we retrace our steps back to the parking garage, she folds her hand into mine. "I really love your place," she says.

"Then you'll have to come back very soon."

The two of us squeeze each other's hand at the same time, and I'm reminded of long-ago adventures and a few occasions, the four of us out exploring after dark, when Lexy got spooked and reached for my hand.

I want to be her security, her safe place, and so much more.

LEXY

I haven't had much time alone since I've been back in Las Vegas, and though I could definitely use the solitude to make much-needed plans, my head is instead full of thoughts of Kai, Gage, and even Thorn.

I can't decide if I'm relieved or disappointed that my time with Gage was cut short this morning. There's a pull there that's becoming impossible to resist. I have so many questions for him, and things I want to catch up on; meanwhile, anytime I'm with him, my body is urging me to tackle him and have my way with him.

When I realize that list-making isn't soothing my racing mind, I change into the workout clothes I'd brought along on the trip, and wander out of my room to find out if the hotel has a gym. I'm not a big fan of exercise, but Scott always encouraged it, and I did discover, while trying to look good for him, that sweating also provides mental health benefits.

The thought of perspiration summons images of other ways I'd rather get hot and sweaty, but for now an exercise bike will do.

It turns out Belle Epoque has a small but nicely appointed gym, and I end up seeking relief on a treadmill equipped with an interactive video screen that provides a good temporary distraction. But though I push myself to near exhaustion, it turns out that I can't outrun the past or the present.

Later, after I'm back in my room and freshly showered, I search out the Beasts Ink reality show and watch the first few episodes. It's clear the producers did their best to manufacture drama, but Gage and Kai are shown to be the creative, hardworking, sexy beasts they are. It's obvious why they have groupies. Even if I didn't know them, I'd be drooling.

I'm still watching when Kai calls, pushing right past any small talk. "Want to get together tonight?"

I'm tempted. The area between my legs is sorely tempted, but something tells me to say no. "I'm really tired," I say. "All of the stuff from the wedding is catching up to me." Which is true, but more than that, my emotions are so tangled up about Gage that I'm not ready to be with Kai again yet.

His long silence comes across as disappointment, and I almost change my mind. I expect him to push, but he eventually just says, "Okay. Get some rest."

"See you soon," I tell him.

As soon as I click off the call, my stomach rumbles, reminding me that I forgot to eat lunch. So much for being organized. I'm definitely not feeling like myself lately.

Ordering room service again seems too indulgent, so I head to the resort's restaurant. It's a weeknight, and it's still early, so it turns out to be no problem for them to accommodate me.

The delicious scent of food registers first, followed by the sight of the dining room's ornate decor. Swirling gold lines draw my eye to the walls, where fresh flower arrangements blend seamlessly into painted floral panels.

Chairs and booths are upholstered in a vivid cobalt blue; tables and trim are deep mahogany. The space is lush and decadent but also somehow modern. I suddenly can't wait to see the resort's event space, and I'm envisioning the beautiful weddings I'll be helping to plan, but my stomach insists that eating takes priority over work.

I'm shown to a small table near the back of the room, which turns out to be perfectly positioned for me to see Thorn when he comes out of the kitchen just as I'm perusing the menu.

With the contrast of his dark features against his starched white chef's jacket, he looks even more attractive than he did yesterday, and I spend some time admiring him before I wave to get his attention.

The way his face lights up when he sees me does something funny to my stomach, and it's full of fluttery feelings as he makes his way directly to my table.

"Lexy, how are you?" It's still a shock that this deep voice and this strong, solid body belong to the scrawny boy I used to play with.

"I'm good. Excited to try some of your food. How are you?"

"Even better now." The way he looks at me makes his meaning clear. I never would have imagined Thorn would grow up to be such a smooth talker.

I'd never have thought he'd be able to make me blush.

"What does the chef recommend?" I ask.

His lips quirk as he considers. "Have you grown into liking fish, by any chance?"

I shake my head. "Not yet."

"Shame," he says. "Some excellent halibut arrived today."

"I have no doubt you could make it taste good, but it'll be better appreciated by the other diners." I momentarily peel my eyes away from him to glance around the room, and find that many of those diners are watching him, several of them blatantly turning in their seats to do so. One of them is quite obviously taking a picture with their phone.

It turns out that Kai and Gage aren't the only ones with enthusiastic fans.

"Looks like you're pretty popular," I say.

Now it's Thorn's turn to blush. "Mostly people who watch my videos," he says, as modest as Gage.

I can't blame people for looking at him. I'm pretty sure I'd be happy watching him boil water.

He glances over his shoulder and nods at a couple of his fans, but quickly fixes his beautiful brown eyes back on me.

When he arches a thick brow, I swear my ovaries light up like winning slot machines, and I completely forget what we were talking about, so when he says, “How about mushrooms?” it takes me a long moment to make sense of his question.

“Mushrooms?”

“I don’t remember whether you like them or not. We have a take on beef stroganoff that’s really popular.”

“That sounds good. I’ll have that, please.”

“Asparagus okay?” he asks, the smooth tones in his voice making it sound like the best thing ever.

“I did grow up to like vegetables, yes.” I put my hand down when I catch myself twirling my hair around my finger. What is going on with me?

“You don’t hide them under your napkin anymore?” Thorn teases.

I reach for the white cloth that’s folded into a fancy shape. “This one looks big enough if I need to get rid of anything.”

When a laugh rumbles out of him, my pussy responds instantly, and I can’t help but wonder if there’s a chance my fantasy alternate-universe world is going to collide with reality.

LEXY

Later, back in my room, my belly full of the most delicious rendition of beef stroganoff that I could possibly imagine, I once again try to make lists to get my life in order. Clothes I need, a plan for a car, change of address notifications, things to research about my new job. There's so much, yet all my brain wants to list are the things about my three old friends that I can't stop thinking about.

Thorn's easy laughter, how Gage's hand felt holding mine, the way Kai has shown me how mind-blowing an orgasm can be. All of this and so much more is jumbled in my head, and I can't sort it out.

I had hopes of reconnecting with my old friends, but everything that's happened in such a short span of time has completely exceeded any expectations, and I'm realizing how truly unprepared I was for it all.

Honestly, there wouldn't have been a way to prepare for everything I'm feeling.

A knock at the door startles me out of my thoughts. After looking through the peephole, I swing the door wide. "Gage. Hi."

I step back to welcome him in, but he hangs in the doorway and holds out a key.

"I have an extra car you can drive," he says, his arm extended, a black and silver key fob held between his thumb and finger.

“An extra car?” He’s offering it like it’s a spare t-shirt I can borrow.

“Yeah. You’re welcome to drive it for as long as you need to.”

I take a step backward. “I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can. It’s no trouble at all. My insurance will cover you as the driver. It even has a full tank of gas.”

I frown at him, not so much in confusion or frustration, but simply staggered by his generosity. “I —”

“Just take it. It’s not a problem.” He takes one of my hands and places the key there, wrapping my fingers around it. My skin heats instantly, not just on my hand, but up my arm, across my chest, and downward.

“C’mon in.” I manage to move back a step, even though an invisible force seems to be drawing me to him. “Thank you for this,” I say, holding up the key before setting it on the table by the door. “I really appreciate it.”

He nods in response as he scans my room. “Nice place,” he says.

“It’ll be fine for a little while. Would you like something to drink?”

“Water,” Gage says, and it’s a good thing, because that’s all I have. I need to add beverage shopping to my to-do list, when I can get my brain back online.

I pour a glass for him from one of the bottles in the mini fridge, and we settle onto the couch, which is really more of a loveseat.

“When will you start your job?” he asks. He’s leaning back against the cushions, his legs spread comfortably in front of him, faded denim wrapped around his thighs in a way that has me biting my lip and trying not to stare.

“Soon. Very soon.” I desperately need some kind of distraction, and I hope work will do the trick. “I saw Thorn tonight, down in the dining room. I’m excited about planning weddings at this property. It’s lovely here.”

“It is.” Gage’s focus is fully on me, making me wonder whether he’s talking about the hotel.

And all at once, I wonder what the hell I’m doing, delaying the inevitable, keeping myself from an experience that will surely be spectacular and wonderful. I’m in Vegas, after all, a town built on fantasy, so I should get busy following mine.

I’m not going to be here forever, maybe a few months, or a year at most, while I regain my equilibrium and prepare to move on to the next phase of my life, so it doesn’t make sense to waste another minute.

It’s clear from the groupies I saw at the tattoo shop today that the men don’t suffer from a lack of attention. And why would they—they’re gorgeous. So I know this won’t be anything serious with me, just old friends with amazing benefits while I’m back in town, spending time in this alternate reality.

All of this goes through my mind in an instant, as I reach out and touch one of his solid thighs, my hand not even coming close to spanning the width of it.

Gage’s hand comes to my cheek, and then his lips are on mine for a kiss I realize I’ve been waiting fifteen years for.

GAGE

Her lips are softer than I imagined. Her taste is sweeter.

And the way she responds to me is like something out of my fantasies, only far better.

I knew she'd return, and I knew we'd be together, but now that she's in my arms, I realize all of my wishful thinking couldn't begin to compare to how good the reality of it is.

My fingers sink into her welcoming curves as I pull her onto my lap and deepen the kiss. Her mouth opens to me, and my tongue finds hers, both of us moaning at the discovery.

Her knees come on either side of my hips, pressing against me, molding herself to my body as her hands slide around my neck and up into my hair.

And her breasts. Fuck, her breasts press into my chest, so perfectly full, so soft, so utterly feminine, and my cock kicks against my zipper, ready to claim her.

I wanted to take this slow, and I will. I'm determined to make this special for her and give her everything she needs, but right now, I need to touch her everywhere. I need to know every inch of her, and make every bit of her mine.

Her hands and mouth tell me she feels the same.

In sync from the start, both of us pull back for a moment to take a breath, our chests already straining to bring in enough oxygen to fuel the rush of desire. Our eyes meet, and so much is said without words.

I want you. I need you. I love you—yes, I've always loved her. And let's fucking do this. At last.

The two-second break only intensifies the passion, and we're back at each other, grabbing at fabric, kissing and biting, ripping away clothing to find more bare skin.

I flip her onto her back, flat on the sofa, and only when I have one of her nipples in my mouth do I pause to take another breath.

Her pulse pounds through her chest as I flick my tongue over her hardened peak, my lips wrapped around her breast. "Lexy." Her name is a whisper. A prayer of thanks as I nuzzle the space at the center of her chest and brush my cheek against the delicate skin there.

"Gage." Her hands urge me upward for another kiss before they tug at the back of my shirt.

I'll give her everything she wants.

I rise up to pull off the t-shirt, and Lexy draws in a breath. "Fuck, Gage. Look at you."

Her eyes roam side to side, from my neck down to my belt and back. She curls up so that her hands can trace the path her eyes made.

"How did you get a body like this?"

Her question doesn't require an answer, but it does make me grateful for every hour spent at the gym.

"And this artwork." Her fingers dance across my chest, my arms, my neck, down to the top of my jeans, and back. I wait for her to notice it, and when she does, her voice is a whisper. "Gage."

Her eyes search mine, shift down to the tattoo that covers my heart, then back to my eyes, still searching.

I don't know what I could say, even if I could speak.

"It's me." She presses her palm across the now-faded image, one of the first tattoos I ever got. It's not recognizable as Lexy; in fact, no one except Kai and Thorn know that it's her, but she

knows because it's a silhouette I drew of her long ago, a girl standing alone on a hill, her back straight and strong, her hair blowing in the breeze.

Her eyes are wide when I lean in to kiss her, and as I pick her up, her arms wrap around my neck and her body curls into mine.

When I lay her on the bed, her hands reach for me again, as if they're on a mission to map my skin.

"Your body is so beautiful," she says on a sigh.

"Not even half as beautiful as yours. As you are." And she is beautiful, but I'd love her no matter what, because her physical appearance is nothing compared to her soul, and the way that she completes mine.

Her fingers tug at the snap on my pants and then draw down the zipper. Her eyes widen, and then her warm hands wrap around my cock, which is semi hard and quickly turning to granite.

"Gage, I want you inside me."

I had other plans. Slow, sensual, extremely detailed plans for what I wanted to do to her first, but they can wait, because whatever Lexy wants, Lexy gets.

She lets go of me long enough to push her pants and underwear off of her hips, and with a few reverent strokes of my thumb, I find that she's more than wet and ready for me.

Her hips jerk when I brush over her clit, and her mouth falls open. Her legs spread wide, welcoming me in as her hands pull at my shoulders, urging me closer.

My eyes are fixed on hers as my cock presses into her, finally going slow, inch by wondrous inch. Her gaze darts to the side as she bites her lip, but then she meets me again, staring back as her hips lift, taking me further inside her.

The two of us moan together, and my eyelids squeeze shut, taking it all in, recentering myself.

We may have gotten off to a quick start, but that's not how we're gonna finish.

“Doing okay?” I ask. Her hands are digging into my shoulder muscles, and her eyes are closed, but they flutter open at my question, and she nods quickly.

“Yeah. Good. Great.”

My lips curve into a smile before I dip down for a kiss.

I haven't moved in her yet; I've been savoring her and letting her adjust. When I finally pull back, it's tortuous heaven, her inner walls gripping me tightly, urging me to return.

I press in again and we both moan.

My arms slip around her, hugging her to me, her soft breasts pressing into my chest as I start to stroke inside her.

I slide one hand down to squeeze her bottom before pressing her hips up into mine, removing any space between us there, creating a friction right where I hope it will feel best for her.

Her face confirms that I've got it just right.

“Gage.” Her breathing grows shallower as her fingers dig in deeper, anchoring me to her, as if I would ever leave.

I watch her face—her beautiful, perfect face—as she slowly and steadily loses control.

Her nipples pebble against my chest, a fine sheen of sweat coats her skin, and when the moment comes, her head arches back, her graceful neck stretched beneath me as she cries out my name again.

Somehow, I manage to keep myself together as her pussy squeezes my cock, her body throbbing around me, her hand clamping down on my arm.

Her release is long and deep, and when she finally opens her eyes, tears seep from the corners, sliding down her cheek.

I reach to wipe them away, but she turns her head, as if wanting to hide from me.

I lay a kiss on her cheek and brush her hair back from her face. More tears fall, and she still doesn't look at me, but she tangles her leg around mine and wraps her arms around my neck, keeping me close.

After a minute or so, when I'm mostly only aware of her heartbeat and the warmth of her body pressed against mine, I roll onto my side, bringing her with me, tucking her head to me, holding her tight.

"Sorry," she says, her voice a soft puff of breath on my arm.

Mine is a fierce whisper in response as I pull her closer. "Don't ever be sorry."

We rest like that for several more minutes, until her breathing is slow and steady and her fingers begin to tease my skin.

Our bodies have come together. We've been as close as two people can be. I could die a happy man right now.

But I'm just getting started.

LEXY

Gage hasn't even come yet, and I need to do something about that, but part of me wants to run and hide. I want to crawl alone into some dark corner where I can soothe my heart, which feels like it's just shed a hard outer shell, exposing something new, raw, and fragile.

It's so intense with him. I knew it would be, and that's why I tried to wait. I trust him completely, but I've also never felt so vulnerable.

When he was inside me, he wasn't fucking me. He was making love to me. There's no other way to describe it.

It was so different from my first time with Kai, so slow and sensual. But more than that, it was tender. That's what gets me, the tenderness.

It's far too much to process, and I don't want to think; I just want to feel.

When I trace over one of the tattoos on his arm, he pulls me closer, but I don't want to cuddle right now. I slide my leg over his thigh and use the momentum to shift positions, bringing my hips over his, straddling him as I push him onto his back.

God, this man is gorgeous, and I need him to smile, not keep looking at me like he's afraid I'll cry again.

A large percentage of the skin on his torso is covered with ink, but I take inspiration from a bit that's not. Before I can overthink it, my fingers reach for one of his nipples and give it a light pinch.

His mouth drops open in response to the surprise move, and his eyes go wide before they crinkle at the corners. Retaliation comes swiftly.

Before I know what's happening, he has me on my back, and now he's propped over me, his eyes dancing with mischief. He has one of my hands trapped in his, but before he can restrain the other, I aim to give him another pinch, laughter bursting out of me when I'm successful.

"You're being a bad girl, Lexy." He's on the verge of laughing, too, but there's a deeper edge to his tone that sends more heat straight to my core.

"I *am* being bad," I agree, as he cages both of my wrists above my head in one of his big hands. "What are you going to do about it?"

His eyes search my face, and I'm fairly certain that this isn't how he intended the night to go, but to my relief, he plays along.

Glancing around the room, his gaze settles on a nearby chair. "Bad girls lose privileges," Gage says. Releasing me for only a second to leave the bed, he returns with my scarf and uses it to secure my wrists to the headboard.

My mind flashes back to my night here with Kai, when he acted as though *he* was tied up, but I hastily push those thoughts from my head. It's too confusing for me to think about both men, and what it means that I'm having sex with each of them.

I spent years crafting a well-ordered life for myself back in Atlanta—a couple of nights back in Vegas, and it's suddenly all kinds of complicated.

"What else happens to bad girls?"

He's on his knees next to me, his long, thick cock dangling between his muscular thighs, and though I'm excited to be tied up, I'm already frustrated that I can't reach out and touch him. I think I spot the beast tattoo he told me about earlier, the one he got when they opened their shop, but I'm helpless to explore it.

There's a twinkle in his eyes as he scans my naked body. "Bad girls need to be taught a lesson."

Every inch of my skin heats under his appraisal, and fresh arousal drips between my thighs as I watch him watching me.

As punishment, he leaves me lying there far too long—long enough that I'm squirming restlessly and twisting to attempt to wrap my legs around him. It's not until I say his name, my voice full of need, that he finally touches me.

I thought his hands would offer relief, but they only bring more delicious torture. He strokes every part of me, slowly and thoroughly, from my feet, up to my hips, over every curve, my face, my arms, and even my hands in their binds.

He finds a few spots I never knew were ticklish, and many more that build my desire until I'm a whimpering, begging mess. "Gage, please."

My old friend's stubborn side has come out to play.

He brushes his lips over mine, allowing his hard chest to graze my rock solid nipples before he pulls back. "Gaaaaage." His name stretches out on a pleading moan.

His cock, which is now hard and appears to be as achingly ready to fuck as I am, nudges my hip, and I bite my lip, thrashing my head side to side, not sure how much more I can handle. My pussy throbs for him.

His fingers tease my inner thighs, which are already spread so wide for him, and I scream his name, hoping like hell that the walls are soundproof. If I'm kicked out of this hotel for causing a disturbance, it will one hundred percent be his fault.

"Gage!"

He kneels there, looking down at me as he strokes his cock.

Just when I'm ready to combust, he bends and swipes his tongue over my clit, making me see stars.

But it's just one touch and then he's back up on his knees, stroking, his cock getting so hard that I can tell he's torturing himself too.

“Gage, what happens to bad girls?” My voice is shaking, positively desperate, and finally he takes pity.

“Bad girls,” he says, moving between my legs, “need to be fucked hard.”

LEXY

At last, he feeds his thick cock into my pussy, filling me with one smooth stroke, his hips crashing into me, jolting both me and the bed. His teeth graze over one of my nipples as he draws back and pushes into me over and over, hard, just like he promised.

It's so good.

Another orgasm races up and overtakes me, holding me for a long time in a blissful nothingness that's everything at the same time. Gage keeps pounding me, keeps sucking my nipples, keeps teaching this bad girl a lesson with each stroke of his cock.

When I come back to myself, my eyes open to find him watching me. His pace has slowed, though he's still pressing in deep, hitting a spot that's satisfying and unsettling at the same time. At some point, he's untied my hands, so I'm finally free to touch him. One of his hands grips my hip, and he's making me his. *I've always been his.*

His dark eyes barely blink, and they're saying so much.

My impulse is to look away, but I force myself to hold his gaze as he fucks me slowly, deeply, and thoroughly—as he makes love to me.

My hips rise to match his rhythm, my inner walls squeeze him tight. Our eyes are locked on each other as our breathing grows shallow, our hearts connect to beat together.

He brings me to the edge again, and then sends me over with a whisper of my name. “Lexy.”

As I start to come, I’m aware of his body stiffening over mine, and a sound rumbling from somewhere deep in his throat. We’re coming together, and the beauty of it pushes past my fragile heart to pierce my soul.

I’m shattered into a million pieces, and I don’t want to be put back together.

Gage spends the night with me, and instead of crawling off into a dark corner like I wanted to earlier, I cuddle as close to him as I can, grateful for his warmth and tender strength.

I have the sense that I’m in the middle of a storm, and maybe he’s the one who started it, but he’s also the one who can keep me anchored and safe.

When I wake up in the morning, I’m still in his arms. We’re spooning, like I did with Kai, but I’m on the opposite side of the bed this time, facing the other way, and I realize I’m not bothered about it, even though I’m usually very particular about sleeping on “my” side of the bed.

I’d probably always be comfortable with Gage, in a sleeping bag, on the floor, outside on the ground, anywhere.

He knows when I’m awake because his embrace tightens, giving me a hug to start my day. “Good morning.” The thick, sleepy quality of his voice awakens more parts of me—very specific parts—but I’m not sure more sex is the best idea, not yet. Though I’m very tempted, I need to find my equilibrium first.

I understand deeply now why people say sex “rocked their world.”

“Good morning.”

He answers my greeting with soft kisses, on my shoulder, my neck, and then after turning me toward him, on my lips. “How

are you feeling?" He presses his lips to the center of my forehead.

"Wonderful." And it's the truth in many ways.

"Me too." His smile is so warm and genuine, I can't help but smile back at him.

We talk for a while, nothing consequential, and he holds me all the while, seemingly in no hurry to let me go. Eventually, with resignation in his voice, he says, "Unfortunately, I have an early client today."

But he doesn't leave abruptly like Kai did. He showers, and doesn't push when I decline his offer to join him there. After he's dressed, he's generous with warm hugs and lingering kisses, and I know I should stop comparing him with Kai, but it's hopeless. Of course I'm going to; how could I not?

They're both so important to me, and both so strong in their individual ways, yet very different. I'm incredibly grateful that they're not making me choose between them, because I never could.



After Gage leaves, I shower and try not to think too hard about how I feel about everything that's happened. Something tells me that I can't sort out my feelings by making lists right now, and it's better just to let things be.

Once I'm dressed, I go down to the hotel's cafe for breakfast. Clare is there, talking to the hostess, and once she sees me, she invites me to join her at a table.

"I've already eaten, but I could always use another cup of coffee," she explains.

"You probably have a long day."

"I do, but I'll let you in on a little secret. Sometimes I sneak in a nap mid-afternoon when things slow down."

"Very smart."

“How are you settling in?” she asks.

It’s a complicated question, because I’m not feeling very settled at all after my unexpectedly intense reunions with Kai and Gage, but for the purpose of Clare’s inquiry, I simply say, “Very well.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Thank you so much for offering me the room here. It’s lovely, and very comfortable.”

“Good, good.”

A waiter approaches with coffee, apparently anticipating Clare’s needs, and after a quick glance at the menu, I give him my order.

As my new boss mixes sugar from two packets into her cup, she says, “I know this job and your stay here weren’t anticipated, and I do want to give you time to settle in, but I’m also eager for you to get started as soon as you’re ready.”

“I think I’m ready. I still need to get a business wardrobe sorted out, but I can get started today, if you’d like.”

“Excellent. I can show you to your office when you’re finished with breakfast, and you can definitely ease into your schedule. Take some time for shopping and whatever else you need to do.”

Her generous and laid-back attitude, even though she’s obviously a very successful business operator, are such a surprise.

I always felt like Scott’s family, and sometimes even Scott, would give me the side eye if I so much as left work half an hour early for a dentist appointment.

We talk for a few minutes more, until my food arrives, and then Clare leaves me, telling me where to find her when I’m ready.

Suddenly starving, I dig into my omelet, which is delicious and accented with a few uncommon herbs, and I think of Thorn, wondering if this is another recipe he developed.

After my first few bites, I pull out my phone so I can check messages while I eat. At the top, there's a text from Gage. "Last night was amazing. I hope you have a wonderful day."

My body lights up with a warm glow, from my cheeks down to my toes. It *was* amazing. There's no denying that. "You too," I reply. It's completely inadequate, but all that I can manage right now.

Eager to focus on something that's easier to understand than my feelings, I quickly finish my breakfast, tip the waiter, and head upstairs to find Clare, who shows me to my office. It's a much bigger space than I'm used to, well equipped, and with a lovely view of the resort's lush pool area.

My first thought is that this job is going to be hard to leave when it's time for me to return to reality. My second is that I need a bathing suit, stat.

Clare spends about an hour and a half with me to begin my job orientation. She gives me a tour of the banquet space, and introduces me to the other meeting staff, most of whom are general meeting planners, while my focus will be on weddings. After she leaves, with the promise that we'll talk again soon, the resort's IT specialist comes in and gets me set up on their computer and phone systems, and gives me an overview of the software they use.

After that, I order business cards, organize my desk and filing system, review the hotel's website, and make several notes about things I need, questions to ask, and ideas I have. Caught up in details, I lose track of time, and just when I'm realizing that I'm hungry, there's a knock on my office door.

Thorn is there, holding a tray with a covered dish. "Ready for a lunch break?" he asks.

THORN

I'm never fully prepared for the way I feel when I see Lexy, even when I'm expecting the encounter.

It's a rush every time, and I'm surprised that my feelings for her have lasted for so many years. On the other hand, I'm not surprised at all. Because this is Lexy we're talking about, and maybe you never really get over your first love, even though at that young an age I didn't truly understand the depth of my feelings.

She rises from her chair and gives me a big smile. "Hi! How did you know I was here?"

"New travels fast around the resort." Moving closer to her, I lower my voice. "And I have several spies working for me here in the office."

She nods solemnly, in on my joke. "Noted."

As I set the tray on her desk, my face cracks into a grin, like it does most of the time when I'm with her. "I brought lunch for you."

"That's amazing! And perfect timing; my stomach was starting to protest."

"It's a chef's superpower, knowing when people are hungry."

"I still can't get over you being such a hotshot chef," she says. "Though I'm certainly not surprised you're so popular, especially after tasting your fabulous food last night."

My chest swells with pride. "I'm afraid this meal is much more humble, but it was prepared especially for you."

Her eyebrows go up. I watch her face closely as I remove the cloche, and see the moment the memory surfaces.

“Oh my gosh, you remembered!” The way her eyes light up makes it hard not to stare at her for longer than would be considered acceptable. I’m like a little kid again, hopelessly in love with my older brother’s friend.

She seemed so mature back then. Even though we were only one year apart, the age difference automatically made her cooler and smarter, and certainly unobtainable. She never treated me like a nuisance, even though she could have.

She looks at me very differently now, though, and I’m aware that our age difference doesn’t mean a thing, not anymore.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I say, still teasing. “Quesadillas and tomato soup are the only thing I ever make for lunch.”

“I can’t believe you remembered.”

“Of course I did.” The last time I served this to Lexy was the day that made me want to become a chef. I was alone with her, because Kai and Thorn were at school. They were already in high school, while Lexy and I were still at the middle school, and we had a half day.

She came over to the house, and I could tell immediately that something was wrong. Eventually, she confided in me that her parents were fighting again, and she didn’t want to go home.

I was desperate for some way to cheer her up, and of course we were hungry, so I made quesadillas and reheated some of my mom’s homemade tomato soup. It was simple, but Lexy was so impressed that I was able to make the meal, and her praise made me feel like a king.

More importantly, as we ate, we talked, and her mood shifted. I learned how food has the power to provide comfort, and that cooking for someone is a way to care for them.

“In all these years, I’ve never had this exact combination again,” she says. “Grilled cheese, yes, and those are certainly good, but they’re nothing like one of your crispy, flaky, gooey

quesadillas.” She reaches for a wedge and brings it to her mouth, and I have to force myself to look away.

“Sorry, I’m being rude,” she says after she’s had two big bites. “Have you eaten yet? Have some.” She nudges the tray in my direction, where I’ve been standing, happily watching her eat.

I put up a hand, refusing. “I usually don’t eat lunch since I spend all day tasting food.” I pat my midsection with the same hand. “I have to keep in shape.”

Her eyes follow my hand, and I’m fascinated when her cheeks redden. “Doesn’t look like you have any problems there, but I won’t complain. More for me.”

She dips a spoon into the soup, and I nearly get a hard-on from the blissful expression on her face when she tastes it. I’m thrilled that my food still brings her pleasure, but now I want to make her face look that way by using my hands, my mouth, and my cock.

“Thorn, this is so next level. So much rich flavor. You really undersold it, calling it a humble meal.” She takes another big spoonful.

“Glad you like it.”

“Have a seat.” She gestures toward the chair closest to her desk. “Unless you need to go?” She sounds like she hopes I can stay, and I’d make the time, even if my staff was waiting for me. As it happens, I can spare at least ten minutes.

“How’s your first day going?” I ask as I sit.

“So far, so good. From everything I’ve seen, it’s going to be easy convincing couples to hold their wedding receptions here, especially with the food on offer.”

“That’s good to hear. Let me know what works for your schedule, and we can prepare a menu tasting for you, so you can speak from experience on all of the items.”

After swallowing another bite of quesadilla, she says, “Wonderful. I’ll be available for that whenever it’s convenient for you.”

“I’ll check the calendar and let you know.” I’m quiet for a minute, letting her eat, before I ask, “How does it feel being back here?” What I really want to ask her is how it feels being back in our lives, but there’s no easy way to word my question.

She looks thoughtful before answering. “It’s definitely strange being back. I never imagined that I would be. But then this Las Vegas is very different from where we grew up, isn’t it?” She gestures at our surroundings, much more opulent than our childhood neighborhood, which could truly be described as humble.

“It is,” I agree. “How did you like living in Atlanta?” As soon as I ask, I wish I hadn’t. I don’t want Lexy thinking about where she’s been; I want her to stay here.

“It was nice. Parts of it.” She shrugs and returns her focus to the food, which is nearly gone.

It’s a conversational dead end, and though there are hundreds of things I’d like to ask her, most of my questions would give away far too much about how I’ve always felt about her. A fresh start will be a better approach.

“Would you like dessert?” I ask, rising from my seat.

Her eyes widen. “Oh, I’ll bet that’s incredible, too, but I probably shouldn’t.” She slides her chair back and lays her hand on her stomach, mimicking my gesture from earlier. “I guess I’d better keep in shape, too.”

I let my eyes skim her body, slowly and obviously this time, unlike the covert glances I’ve been stealing. “Your shape is absolutely perfect.”

Though her cheeks redden again, and I can tell she’s flustered, she doesn’t look away as I smile at her.

Maybe Gage was right. Even though my brother’s laid a claim on her, maybe there’s room for other possibilities.

LEXY

Though I'm more excited than ever about working here at Belle Epoque, it's hard to focus on my new job after Thorn leaves.

He's just so ... grown up.

And though I see elements of Kai in him, he's definitely his own man. Not as direct as his older brother, maybe even a bit guarded, but much more charming.

The food he brought really got me in the feels, more than he knows. I'm so flattered that he remembered the lunch the two of us shared, after all these years, and if I'm not mistaken, preparing that exact meal for me today was more than a sentimental gesture.

He's a flirt. A masterful one.

I can't help but wonder if he charms everyone like that.

When he made the comment about my body, I had an impulse to tell him that I'm involved with Kai and Gage, but then I remembered that I'm living in a fantasyland, one where I have multiple boyfriends who don't mind sharing me.

Of course, I know they're not actually my boyfriends, and none of this is a permanent reality, so I think it's okay if I flirt back with Thorn. It'd be hard not to.

I just need to keep things honest with each of them. If Thorn continues to flirt, I'll tell him about Gage. Kai made things obvious the other day, so I'm sure Thorn knows about that, but in case he doesn't, I'll talk to him about Kai, too.

What a strange parallel universe I'm living in.

Later in the afternoon, I go back to my room to retrieve the keys Gage gave me. The car that's parked where he told me to find his looks exactly the same as the car he'd been driving yesterday.

The interior smells like Gage, stirring up memories of last night, and what it felt like to wake up in his arms.

My desire to be in his arms again is palpable.

Looking around inside, I'm pretty positive this *is* the exact same car I was in with him, and I'm exasperated that he would give up his own car for me. He must have paid for a ride home this morning or called a friend to pick him up, and I need to find out if he actually does have something else to drive. If not, I'm definitely giving his keys back, no matter what he says.

This was very gallant of him, but I can't let him put himself out for me. Fantasyland depends on everything staying lighthearted, emotionally-charged nighttime encounters notwithstanding.

Though there are nicer places to shop, I head for the mall we used to go to when I was young.

Many of the smaller stores there are different now, but all but one of the main department store anchors are still in business. Though we sometimes browsed in those and took advantage of an occasional sale, the majority of my childhood clothing came from bargain retailers and thrift stores.

Today, it feels like an achievement to look through the racks at the most upscale of the stores and not worry too much about the prices. I'm not wealthy by any means, and my life is currently in a state of limbo, but I've come a long way, and I'm proud of the hard work I put in to get here.

Shopping is always a great distraction, but even now, I can't get the men out of my head. As I try on outfits, I can't help but

wonder what Gage would think of a certain blouse, or Kai a skirt. Thorn is probably the one who'll see me most often in my work clothes, and he's definitely on my mind as well.

The selection of swimsuits is down to one small rack in a back corner at this time of year, so I decide to look online for that. I buy a few work outfits, with a lot of versatile mix-and-match pieces, and a couple of casual items for relaxing. The lingerie department catches my eye on the way to the register, but I resist.

Maybe I'll come back for that after my first paycheck.

For dinner, I go down to the hotel's restaurant. I can't deny that I'm hoping to see Thorn again, but he doesn't appear. It's probably his night off, or maybe he's just busy in the kitchen.

I'm disappointed, but I tell myself it's a good thing. I really do need this alone time to process my thoughts.

For better or worse, the evening brings even more alone time.

I was sure Kai would call, or maybe Gage, but I don't hear from either of them. This bothers me more than I want to admit, and I'm too restless to settle down to read or even watch a movie.

I'm staring blankly at the view from my sliding glass door when my mom calls. The high-pitched tone of her voice is half an octave shy of panic. "Lexy, what's going on? Where are you?"

"I'm okay, Mom. Everything's fine."

"Where are you?"

"I'm still in Nevada. Sorry, I should have told you."

She lets out a long breath, and then her voice is noticeably more relaxed, though still edged with concern when she asks, "Why are you still there?"

"Scott and I broke up."

"I figured that out this evening when he showed up on my doorstep with a box of your stuff. He seemed to think you might be here. What are you still doing there?"

I step out onto the patio for some fresh air to counteract the flare of anger at Scott. “We broke up here at the wedding. He had no business bothering you.”

“He was okay. Just took me by surprise, is all. He said when he got home from work, most of your stuff was cleared out, and he figured you did it. He brought over some things that were still there.”

Hillary must have gone to our place, I think. Then I mentally correct myself. *His* place.

“How kind of him.” I can’t keep the irritation from my voice, though I suppose he didn’t do anything wrong in this particular situation, as long as he wasn’t harassing my mother.

“Are you okay, Lexy?” Her voice is soft now, like a hug.

But actually, it’s amazing how very much okay I am. “I’m fine. Really. The breakup was ugly but brief. I’m still in Vegas because there was a hotel owner at Dad’s wedding who offered me a wedding planner position at her resort. It’s just temporary, but the timing was perfect.”

“You’re no longer working for Scott’s family?”

“Apparently my employment with the Peytons was contingent on my relationship with him.”

“That’s not right.”

“It’s for the best, really. Also, I’ve been catching up with old friends here.” I pause for a moment, during which I decide not to elaborate. “It’s a nice change of pace.”

“How long do you think you’re going to stay there?”

I let out a sigh. “I’m not sure. I’m not really making any plans right now.”

“You, not making plans? Are you *sure* you’re okay, Lexy?” Affectionate laughter accompanies her words. She knows me so well.

“I’m fine. Really. I promise.”

Confident that she’s finally reassured, I ask how she’s doing and we catch up on a few small things before we click off. A

missed call notification shows up; I hadn't heard it come in while I was talking.

It's Scott. It doesn't appear that he left a message, but a few moments later, a text appears.

A long text.

I skim through his words. A long text with a lot of fucking nerve.

The basic gist of his message being that if I'm ready to make amends, he's ready to listen and consider us getting back together.

How generous of him.

Fighting the temptation to fire back a venomous reply, I instead draw a large and fragrant bath using some of the bubbles provided among the hotel's little bathroom amenities, and sink into the warm water right up to my chin.

I soak long enough to get thoroughly relaxed, body and mind, then I dry off, put on my pajamas, and get into bed. It's early, but I could use the extra sleep. It's not as though the last couple of nights have been very restful.

With the bath having worked its soothing magic, I drift off easily into a dreamless sleep, so I'm disoriented when I'm awakened by tapping at my door.

LEXY

A quick look at my phone tells me it's well past ten. Not exactly late, but not the usual time for visitors.

There's no one visible through the peephole, and having been asleep, I don't have a good sense of how much time has passed since I heard the knocking.

When I open the door and look down the hall, I see Thorn walking away. Hearing me, he turns, his posture straightening and his lips curving into that beautiful grin. "Lexy. You *are* here."

"Yeah, c'mon in."

Seeing my pajamas once he's inside, he apologizes for waking me.

"It's no problem. I'm glad to see you."

"I actually came by to see if you wanted to go for a ride ... on my bike."

Sleep is nice, but it doesn't compare to a motorcycle ride where I'll be snuggled up behind someone like Thorn. "Sure, I'll get changed."

He takes us east, out of town, across the flat desert vista, and then up into the mountains. It's a crisp, clear night, and I'm exhilarated by the rush of wind, the warmth of Thorn's back against my front, and the brilliance of the stars overhead.

We follow a winding road through the hills to a lake, where Thorn turns off, retrieving some items from his saddlebags after he parks. We walk to a nearby picnic area, and he serves us wine and cheese.

“This is delicious,” I say, savoring the smooth flavor of the cabernet and the richness of the aged cheddar. “I’ve never had a moonlight picnic before.”

The light glimmers off the lake, giving our surroundings an almost ethereal glow. “Can we come back here in the daytime sometime?” I ask. “It looks so beautiful in the moonlight, but I’d love to see it better.”

“Of course,” he answers. “Anytime you like.”

“I know you’re not often free during the day.” I don’t want him to think I’m taking these glorious moments for granted.

“I do get the occasional day off,” he says, and there’s a hint of teasing in his voice that fades when he adds, “Especially when it’s for something important.”

His words warm me, and I smile at him across the picnic table. He holds up the wine bottle. “More?”

“I would, but I’ve had just enough for a nice little buzz. I want to stay alert and enjoy every second of this.”

“Good idea,” he says, and I’m sure I hear an undertone that promises there may be more to enjoy before the evening’s through.

We linger a few minutes more before he asks, “Would you like to see my place?”

I don’t hesitate. “I’d love to.”

His apartment is very different from Gage’s, with more color, lots of plants, and dark woods. It’s very welcoming, and I instantly feel relaxed and comfortable in his space.

Thorn's personality and sense of humor come through in little details I find as I look around. Framed posters, whimsical artwork, little items on shelves that appear to have been collected while traveling.

"Are you hungry? I know my schedule is irregular, but I'm going to make dinner," he announces after tossing his jacket onto a chair.

"I could eat." The fresh air must have roused my appetite. "Anytime your food is on offer, I'm going to be hungry," I add, earning another of his gorgeous grins.

"Can I help?" As soon as the words leave my mouth, I wonder if he'll be offended. Offering to help him prepare a meal is like offering to help Michelangelo paint a ceiling. But this is Thorn, and I should have known there wouldn't be an ego trip.

"If you'd like." His warm expression makes me eager to follow him into the kitchen.

He sets me up with salad ingredients, a knife, and a cutting board, while he puts on water to boil fresh ravioli he has on hand. I'm focused on the job of slicing a cucumber, until the smell of something else he's working on at the stove draws my attention.

Once I glance up from my work, I'm immediately distracted by his back. He's so tall and strong, and the way the thin cotton of his shirt hugs his broad shoulders as he stirs a sauce has me momentarily mesmerized.

"What are you making?" I ask, my mouth watering for more than one reason.

"Sage and browned butter sauce with toasted walnuts."

"It smells amazing."

He tosses a smile over his shoulder, his eyes crinkling at the edges, and it's with a fair bit of willpower that I manage to stay at my station rather than go over and wrap my arms around him as if we were still on his bike.

The food turns out to be delicious, of course, and between bites, he and I talk and laugh, reminiscing about the past and

catching up on each other's lives. We have more wine, too, and I can't help but think how different my life is here compared to how it was with Scott. Staying up late, having a second dinner, the motorcycle ride and moonlight picnic—it's all so refreshing. I feel so free.

I insist on helping him clean up, and when the last dish has been washed and is in the rack, he and I are standing next to the sink, mere inches apart.

“Want me to take you back to your place?” The quieter tone of his voice makes the implications clear.

I shake my head no, taking a step closer to him.

LEXY

The invisible pull is strong, but I keep my hands to myself as I look up at him, waiting, because his eyes seem to hold other unspoken questions.

I know he wants to be with me, but something is holding him back.

“I should probably tell you ... I’ve been seeing your brother and Gage,” I say.

He gives a small nod, not surprised, but still watchful.

“It’s an ... open-ended situation.”

Another nod, and then his hand comes up to lightly stroke my arm, sending a warm pulse of energy to my core.

His expression poses another silent inquiry, which I answer by holding his gaze and closing the distance between us another inch.

The tips of his fingers trail up my arm, his gaze intense. I wonder what he’s thinking as his thumb traces over my lips, his eyes never leaving mine.

I’m not breathing when he finally bends to kiss me.

It’s just a dizzying brush of his lips at first, then his hand cups my face, and his mouth meets mine with more intention.

He pulls back, looking into my eyes again, as if he’s waiting for me to protest, or maybe, like me, he can’t quite believe this is real.

It's stunning to realize that this remarkable man is the young boy I used to know. But it's true, and it makes this moment even more meaningful.

His fingers tip my chin upward, his mouth covers mine, and then there's no holding back. His kiss holds more than passion; there's an eager curiosity, and the promise of what's to come.

He turns me slightly, his body pinning mine to the counter. The desire that I was feeling in his kiss is verified as his cock hardens and presses against me.

My hands wrap around his middle, and when I moan in response to his tongue touching mine, he immediately scoops me up and carries me down the hall, still kissing me, and so distracted that he bumps into a couple of walls, making us both laugh.

There's a dimmer switch on his bedroom's overhead light, which for some reason makes me wonder how many women he's entertained here; but I brush that thought away, because it doesn't matter. Obviously someone as charming and attractive as Thorn wouldn't be lonely if he wanted company at night.

The room is decorated in deep, rich earth tones. The comforter he lays me on is soft and luxurious on my skin.

"Lexy." He pauses to look at me lying in the middle of his big bed. His eyes have gone dark, erasing any questions that lingered there.

"Thorn."

"You have too many clothes on." He descends as he says this, his teeth taking hold of the bottom of my shirt and tugging it upward. He pauses to kiss the exposed flesh of my belly, and then pulls the shirt up further, still using only his mouth.

His breath heats my skin as he runs the tip of his nose over my bra. His lips press kisses along the swell of my chest, and I feel the weight of his erection as he stretches out above me.

Never staying in one spot very long, he nibbles and nuzzles various parts of me, lighting me up, setting me afire. I reach for him every chance I get, exploring his body while also attempting to remove his clothing, but he doesn't make it easy.

Eventually my frustration builds, and when I sit up to reach him better, he curls behind me, and suddenly we're wrestling for position, hands and mouths claiming spots on each other's bodies, legs tangling, arms wrapping around one another. This tussling brings back childhood memories, too, but as grownups, it's oh so much better.

I manage to get his shirt off, and I put the game on pause to drink him in. "Thorn." He's all abs and pecs and biceps, smooth and tan, rock solid beneath his skin. When he's not in the kitchen, he must be in the gym or outdoors, pushing his body to its limits. There are a few inked areas that draw my eye, but not nearly as much body art as Gage and Kai have.

When the other two men come to mind, my first instinct is to push away the thoughts, but my greedy brain takes a moment to indulge a new fantasy.

Kai is so intense, and Thorn is so playful. What would it be like to experience those energies together? And then there's Gage, a teddy bear with a surprising dom edge. Internally, I shake my head to clear it. It's true I've been living in an alternate reality, but my imagination is starting to push things a bit too far.

Thorn brings me back to the present moment by taking one of my nipples between his lips, sucking it into his mouth, and then letting it pop out, before repeating the action with the other one. My bra was one of his first victories in our wrestling match.

His grin is wicked as he unzips my jeans, then tucks both hands in the sides of the waistband, and pulls them down, taking my panties along with them. The narrow pants legs get caught on my feet, and he makes a dramatic play of tugging them off, making me giggle.

All this laughter in the bedroom is new to me, and I like it. I absolutely don't want to think about Scott right now, but I can't help but recognize that he'd have been horrified by me giggling at any point during sex, including foreplay. He never found any of the occasional awkwardness or bodily sounds funny; I can barely remember him smiling.

Thorn's happy expression, meanwhile, is a thing of beauty, and right now, he looks extremely pleased. "God, you're gorgeous, Lexy." His eyes dance over my body, and his hands soon follow, sliding over my hips, down my thighs, and then back up, parting my legs. He's zeroing in on the spot that's already soaking wet for him, and I'm eager for him to go there, but first, I initiate a sneak attack.

Rolling out from under him in one quick motion, I turn, launch my weight at him, and somehow manage to pin this strong man down on the bed, my body straddling his hips. His eyes shine with delight and darken with desire as he submits to my will.

I shimmy backward to make room to work at the button on his pants, then I pull down his zipper, slide the band of his briefs out of the way, and claim my prize.

And what a prize it is. Thick and long, and growing harder at my touch, the velvety skin stretching in my hand.

"*You're* gorgeous, Thorn." I can't help but return his compliment. "Not just this part of you, but all of you," I add with another giggle. "Maybe especially this part, but definitely all of you."

Still grinning, he props himself up on his elbows and watches as I stroke him, and I take the opportunity to explore and experiment, occasionally watching his face for feedback to find out exactly how he likes to be touched.

The area where the head of his cock meets the shaft appears to give him the most pleasure, so I focus my attention there, circling and teasing and stroking, until he grows restless with impatience. A deep, low growl comes from his throat when I bring my tongue to stroke the spot.

I'm looking forward to finding out how much of his cock I can fit in my mouth, when suddenly *I'm* the one under attack. Thorn rolls me over, pins my hands in his, and uses the weight of his body to spread me open wide as he buries his head between my legs.

THORN

My staff and I prepared an exclusive five-course meal earlier today for a small group of executives, whose company apparently had more money than it knew what to do with. Delicacies were flown in from faraway places, and married with the freshest ingredients from local farms. Only the best of the best, and I sampled all of it to ensure it met the highest standards.

Everything was delicious, and yet none of it tasted as good as Lexy.

Two long swipes of my tongue on her beautiful pussy, and I already know I'll never be able to get enough.

She squirms beneath me, still playing our game, trying to break free, but I flick my tongue over her clit, and her muscles relax, her weight sinking into the bed as she lets me have my way with her.

Confident that she'll finally keep still and let me give her pleasure, I release her hands so that I can make better use of mine. My mouth still feasting on her pussy, I cast a glance upward over the soft swell of her body, meeting her eyes before I reach up to play with her nipples, while the thumb of my other hand joins my tongue in stroking through her wet folds.

Since Lexy came back to town I've been thinking about this exact scenario, wondering if it would ever be anything more than a hopeful fantasy. She's here with me now, and I'm using all of my senses to take in every detail as she responds to me.

And she's so responsive.

Her breathing changes as my finger strokes in steady circles; her skin heats and I'm surrounded by the sweet, musky scent of her. When I press a finger inside her hot pussy, she gives a soft moan, and when I suck her clit between my lips, she cries my name.

I keep at her, and it takes no time at all to bring her to the brink and take her over. I fuck her with my fingers and keep licking as her thighs squeeze around my head and her hips thrust up, pressing her pussy into my face. Fuck, she's sexy, especially when she's losing control.

I lick faster and keep her coming, until she's whimpering, begging for mercy and telling me she needs a break.

I start to pull away, but she reaches for my arms, keeping me close. "That was incredible," she pants. "So intense."

I watch her face as she recovers, her cheeks flushed, her chest heaving with her ragged breaths. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Sorry if I ..." She's suddenly hesitant and embarrassed, casting a glance downward to where she had my head clamped between her thighs moments ago.

"Fuck, don't ever apologize for that." I can't help but laugh. "I'd be happy if you did that all fucking day long."

Her eyes go wide and then she grins. "Seems like that could be a little inconvenient when you're at your restaurant."

I shrug a shoulder. "I'd make it work."

She erupts into laughter that lasts a good, long time before she takes a deep breath. Seeing that she's recovered from that first round, I roll onto my back, bringing her along with me, so that she's straddling me once again.

"Have your way with me," I tease, stretching out, arms spread wide.

"It's about damn time."

Her eyes dart around my body like she doesn't know where to start, but my cock is begging for her attention. I'd like to be patient, but it's too hard now, both figuratively and literally. I wrap my fist around the base and stroke over my length. "Climb on, Lex. Fuck me."

She arches a brow and gives me a devilish grin, and for a moment, I'm afraid she's going to tease me and make me wait. I'm relieved when she says, "I couldn't possibly say no to such a cordial invitation."

All joking is left behind as she lines up over me. I help guide her hips, and then she's sinking down onto my hard cock, her wet heat enveloping me, her walls so snug around me, I have to grit my teeth not to blow my load as soon as she reaches the base.

I've never had endurance problems, but with Lexy, everything's different.

I let her set the pace, and thankfully, I manage to hold on as she starts to ride me, slowly at first, then gradually faster, until she's bouncing on me, looking so unbelievably sexy that I have to close my eyes a few times, much as it's hard to tear them away from her.

When I see and hear that she's getting close, I stroke my thumb over her clit and she explodes, her body stiffening, her mouth rounding into an O. As her pussy starts to clench around my cock, I flip both of us over and drive into her, fast and furious, joining her with my own desperate release.

Our bodies are one for that long moment, writhing together, hearts pounding, my cock pulsing deep inside her throbbing pussy as she takes everything I've got.

I stay inside her long after I'm empty, my head nestled into the crook of her shoulder, our chests rising and falling together. Eventually, I draw out of her, roll onto my back and bring her against me, cuddling her close, her head resting on my arm.

"That was ..." she starts.

"Pretty good," I finish, knowing she'll be able to tell from my actions, my tone and my expression that this is the

understatement of the century.

“Yeah, pretty good,” she says, joining in on my joke. “Except for the way you made it all so difficult, making me fight for what I wanted.”

I hug her to me and lay a kiss on her rosy lips. “You loved every minute of it.”

“You’re right. I did. This was the most fun I’ve ever had in bed,” she says, and her comment feels almost as good as everything we just did together.

LEXY

After a brief rest and a tall glass of water, I'm ready to go another round, and so is Thorn. It's hard to believe I was going to bed early tonight, because I am brimming with energy now.

"I'll make it easier on you this time," he says. "What position would you like?"

"Let's see." I mimic holding a menu, my eyes scanning downward before my hand turns an invisible page. It's filled with even more enticing options than those at Belle Epoque's dining room. "I'll have an order of doggy style," I say, putting on a fancy voice.

Thorn wraps his arms around me, delivering a big, warm hug before shifting me into position and feeding his cock into my pussy, filling me from behind, slowly and thoroughly.

"Mmmm. This is exactly what I had a taste for," I tell him, and there's a chuckle rumbling in his throat as he starts to fuck me.

"You can order this anytime. I also offer twenty-four-hour room service."

"I'll make a note of that," I say, and then I can't say anything more because he starts to pound the breath out of me.

It's so good. So, so good. And when he reaches around to rub his thumb on my clit, I come apart.

But I'm not alone. Incredibly, Thorn joins me again, a desperate-sounding "oh fuck" falling from his lips as his cock stiffens and swells deep inside me before filling me so full that his cum runs down my leg.

I stay the night, not that there's much left of it. In the morning, we shower together, because I regretted passing up that experience with Gage, and also because time is tight and I really need to wash up.

We do, of course, make time for shower sex, my back pressed against the wall, my legs wrapped around Thorn's middle as he rocks into me, slow and steady, the perfect pace for a morning fuck.

Maybe it's because we're both tired from lack of sleep, but the vibe is entirely different from the night before. There's no teasing or playfulness, and it's somehow much more intimate, the water running down our bodies, the steam building up around us.

His expression is tender but serious as he looks into my eyes, and it leaves me feeling vulnerable, though I try not to show it.

While I get dressed, Thorn whips up a quick breakfast that is nothing short of amazing. It seems simple, just thick-cut bacon on toast, but each ingredient is high quality and perfectly made, and there's a creamy, buttery spread that makes me want three more of his breakfast sandwiches.

"What's on here?" I ask, licking my lips. "It's so good."

His teasing tone returns when he says, "Come back when you can stay longer, and I'll show you."

He takes me back to the resort in a dark blue sports car that hugs the ground, its engine a low rumble as he zips around traffic in the already-crowded streets of the city.

There's a reserved parking spot waiting for him in the Belle Epoque garage, and before I can get out of the car, Thorn is there, opening my door for me. His arm is around me as we amble along the walkway that leads from the parking area to the hotel, and just as we're about to go in the door, Kai comes out.

My body instantly stiffens. We're not doing anything wrong, and Kai has actually talked to me about this very thing, me being with his brother *and* with Gage. He's the one who originally brought it up, but I still somehow feel like I've been caught doing something I shouldn't.

"Morning, brother," Kai says, staring straight at Thorn, and I'm listening hard for his tone, trying to find out if there's resentment there.

I brace myself for some kind of confrontation, until I notice one corner of Kai's lips turn up, ever so slightly. His focus turns to me then, and he pulls me into his arms and kisses me like it's the two of us who just spent the night together.

I don't get a sense of competitiveness, though, or feel like he's trying to claim me. He's just giving me a warm—very warm—greeting, and when he's done, he releases me and steps back, leaving me next to Thorn.

"Have a good night?" Kai asks us both.

"Yes," I say.

"Good. Got any plans for tonight?"

I feel awkward again. Is he actually asking me out right in front of his brother? Something inside me curls up, but when I become aware of my automatic reaction, I stop and try to shift my mindset.

I have nothing to apologize for. This is my fantasy come to life, and the men all know they're sharing time with me. Since they all seem to be okay with it, I'm going to keep enjoying this alternate reality for as long as it lasts.

"No, I don't have any plans."

He nods, his dark eyes flashing. "Then I'll see you later."

LEXY

Three weeks later

I look out the window of my room at Belle Epoque at a sheet of gray. Las Vegas has decided that its one day of rain this month is going to be today, on Thanksgiving. At least it's supposed to let up by this afternoon, when the Sanchezes are hosting all of us—including my mom, who's flown out for the holiday.

I don't know what I was thinking, inviting her to come here. It was an impulse; I wanted to do something completely different than the last several years, and Mom hasn't been back to Vegas since we left.

She arrived two days ago, staying in another room at the resort, and so far it's been fun. We took in a revue on the Strip, did some shopping, and enjoyed some delicious meals. But there have been some nerve-racking moments, too.

Thorn came out while we were having dinner last night, and of course he remembered my mom. She remembered him too—and the moment he left our table, she pinned me with an eagle-eyed parental stare. “Are you seeing him?”

I sputtered. “What? Why do you ask?”

“I'm not a fool, Lexy. I saw the way he looked at you, and you got as nervous as the proverbial cat the second he appeared.”

“I did not,” I protested, somehow regressing to my teen years despite knowing better. With a sigh, I tried to formulate a more adult response. “We've been getting reacquainted, but it's nothing serious.”

That's what I keep telling myself. I've been seeing Thorn, and Kai, and Gage for the last several weeks, my fantasyland visit stretching out for longer than I'd thought possible. I've grown dangerously accustomed to having one of them with me most nights, and I'm steadfastly refusing to think about how I'm going to feel when I have to go back to my normal life.

Because I know it's inevitable. Every time I visit Beasts Ink, I get dagger stares from the groupies. They're a painful reminder that the boys I knew have become men whom I know only in part, who have whole sections of their lives where I'm not welcome.

I don't begrudge them their success, or their celebrity, but being in the spotlight is not something I've ever wanted. I'm more comfortable working my magic behind the scenes, and these past weeks have only reinforced that understanding.

Tonight, though, is my most immediate problem. How on earth am I going to get through Thanksgiving dinner without my mother—not to mention the Sanchezes—figuring out the truth about me and the men?

Letting the curtain fall, I flop onto my bed, arms outstretched. A little part of my brain says that we should just tell our parents the truth, but I'm afraid that would bring my alternate reality to a screeching halt and send me crashing back into the mundane universe. And I'm not ready to give up my men. Not yet.

Every moment with them makes me feel alive like nothing else. Thorn and his smile, his easy ways melded with earthy sensuality; Gage and his tenderness, tempered with dominance; and Kai and his inferno, igniting me on every level.

When I'm alone, I sometimes entertain the most ridiculous fantasy of all: that it could go on forever, the four of us bound together in some magical way that lets us defy the world's demands and expectations. But in my more sober moments, I know it can't last.

Eventually, we'll want the ordinary things people do with their lives: marriage, children, domestic stability. Respectability.

Things that our arrangement makes impossible, no matter how wonderful it is to be with each of them.

“I still can’t get over Gage lending you a car, and one as nice as this,” Mom says. We already had this discussion when I picked her up from the airport, but me taking an extra couple of seconds to find the knob to turn on the windshield wipers, which I haven’t needed until today, has kicked it off again. “He must be doing really well for himself.”

“I guess he is,” I say, hoping it ends there. If I wasn’t preoccupied with pulling out into traffic, which is much heavier than I expected, I’d be quicker in coming up with something to change the subject.

“And he must really think highly of you to lend you a car.”

I find an opening and finally manage to pull out. “You know we’ve always been good friends.”

“What does Thorn think of Gage giving you this car?”

I give her a quick glance, frowning. “Gage didn’t give me the car, Mom. I’m borrowing it.”

“You know what I mean. If you and Thorn are dating, I think he might have an issue with another man, even a mutual friend, loaning you a luxury sports car. It’s been nearly a month, hasn’t it?”

I *have* had this car much longer than I intended. I tried to give it back, but Gage insisted I keep it, even though I strongly suspect he bought himself a new vehicle after he loaned me this one. He doesn’t seem the type to have a garage full of extravagant vehicles, even if he can afford it.

Gage is generous to a fault, and clever about it, too. We’ve gone shopping together a few times, and I’ve found myself eyeing some little item at a store; once it was a bangle for my wrist, another time a small ceramic cat. I’m never aware of Gage being nearby at these moments, but somehow, a few

days later, the items in question have mysteriously appeared in my room, sitting on the table by the door.

It's obvious that he's responsible for the gifts, but he's given himself deniability. If I pressed the issue, I could make him stop, but I think that would hurt him, and I'm not willing to do that.

"Things with Thorn are very casual," I finally reply as I signal a left turn.

"Lexy, you know I don't normally pry, and I've been trying not to, but your breakup with Scott and your impulsive decision to stay out here have me concerned."

Looking at the situation from her point of view, I guess that makes sense. I've always been someone who has their life planned out in as much detail as possible. No one would ever describe me as spontaneous, yet my decision to stay here was definitely that. It makes sense that the person who knows me best would be worried.

I've never had much reason to keep parts of my life secret from her, and it doesn't feel great doing so.

"Things with Thorn are casual ... and things with Gage are casual, too." It feels good to admit this to her, even if it's not the complete picture, though it immediately occurs to me that my timing could have been better, being that we're headed over to sit around a table with Gage, Thorn, and the entire Sanchez family.

"Thorn's parents don't know we're dating," I quickly add. "Could you ... not mention it today?"

There's silence from her side of the car until I look over to find her looking at me, her face lined with concern.

"Is there a reason you're keeping it a secret?"

I try not to think too hard about my answer, because I don't like keeping secrets from the Sanchezes, either. I've been joining the family dinners there every week since I came back to Vegas, and I love the warm togetherness they provide, but it's been tricky.

I hate not being completely honest with them, but I just don't think they'll understand about me dating all three men. I try to put my mind firmly in a just-really-good-friends mindset every time I go over there.

"They've always treated me like a daughter," I say slowly. "I'm not sure how they'd feel about me dating their son, and I don't want to complicate things."

She's quiet for another long moment. "What does Kai think? I assume he knows."

I immediately envision myself unhooking my seatbelt, opening the door, and hurling myself out into oncoming traffic to avoid answering this question, but it turns out I don't have to, because my mom reads me way too well.

"Lexy? Are you seeing Kai, too?" Her voice rises, full of disbelief.

My silence answers her question, and I let it hang there, only giving her a quick look before I return my focus to the road.

"I see," she says finally. "Of course, there's nothing wrong with dating multiple men. That's what dating is for, but dating two brothers and their best friend definitely makes things complicated."

When I still don't respond, she asks, "Do they all know you're dating the others?"

"Yes! Yes, of course they do. I may be opting not to tell Kai and Thorn's parents, but I wouldn't deceive any of the men."

"It's still hard for me to think of them as men," she says after a pause. "I was so surprised when I saw Thorn at the restaurant. So different from the young boy he was when we moved away."

I nod, keeping my eyes straight ahead.

"After you told me the older boys had a tattoo shop, I looked them up online," she continues. "I saw pictures of Kai and Gage. All three of them have grown into such handsome men."

We're getting close to the Sanchezes' house, but it may not be too late for me to jump out of the car. "For the next few hours, can you please pretend I never told you any of this?" I beg.

"Of course, dear. Of course."

And I do trust her. I wouldn't have let myself confess any of this to her today if I didn't believe she could be discreet, but it's not going to make the day any easier.

KAI

“Remember, you’re under strict orders,” Gage says in a low tone to both Thorn and me, but it’s mostly directed at me. The three of us are alone in the dining room.

“What do you mean?”

“No shenanigans like last week,” he says. “I don’t know what you were doing under the table, but Lexy was not happy about it.”

“I disagree. She liked it a lot.” Gage doesn’t need to know this part, but when Lexy and I got together at my place after dinner last week, she was already wet and ready for me as soon as she walked in the door.

“It’s Thanksgiving,” Thorn says. “Our grandparents and cousins *and her mother* will be here. Don’t make Lexy have to sit here trying to keep a straight face while you cop a feel.”

I nudge my little brother out of the way with my shoulder before laying down a plate from the stack I’m holding. “Sometimes you’re no fun, Thorn.”

“That’s not what Lexy tells me.”

I give him another bump, harder this time, but I’m not as jealous as I pretend to be. Though he always stops short of sharing intimate details or saying anything crude, Thorn delights in reminding me that he’s spending time with Lexy, too.

He says it to get a rise out of me, but the joke’s on him. Strange as it is, I’m glad he’s happy, and I’m glad Lexy’s the

one making him happy.

She's making me happier than I've ever been, and it's clear Gage has an extra spring in his step these days, too.

We're all happy, and I know Lexy's happy, too, except ... she's holding back. Apart from brief moments, it never feels like I have her fully present with me. I don't think it has anything to do with Gage or Thorn, though. In fact, I'd bet money that she holds something back with them, too.

It's probably because of her jerk of an ex. I know she needs time to heal, and I didn't even give her a minute to take a breath after her breakup.

I couldn't help myself.

I've been trying to give her time since then, but I don't want to wait any longer.

It bothers me a lot that Lexy hasn't made any moves to rent an apartment. Aside from her job, there's nothing holding her here, and I don't like it.

"Our parents aren't dumb," Thorn says. "They know something's going on; they just don't know what."

"Lexy doesn't want them to know," Gage says.

Maybe I shouldn't be teasing Lexy at our family dinners, but I'm getting tired of keeping things a secret. I'm not sure my parents will approve—in fact, I'm pretty sure they won't—but they'll get over it. They love Lexy, and they love Gage and Thorn and me. Once they get used to the idea, everything will be fine.

My thoughts scatter as guests start arriving: cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and a few family friends. We have extra tables set up for all the people. There are two turkeys with all the trimmings, plus tamales and mole.

Lexy and her mother are among the last to arrive. Before I have time to do much more than say hello and take the bottles of wine they brought, my mother bustles up and seats both of them at one of the overflow tables, with several of the cousins.

My first reaction is anger. Lexy belongs at the main table, with us. Before I can say anything, Thorn grips my shoulder.

“Our grandparents are at the main table in the place of honor,” he says. “You know that. Are you going to tell Mama that she needs to move them?”

“Of course not,” I mutter.

“Let’s just enjoy the day. We have lots of other opportunities to spend time with her.”

“Not enough.” It comes out almost a growl.

It’s not true, not really; Lexy spends as much time with me as any person reasonably could who works a full-time job and dates three men. But I want it all. I want to tell the world she’s with us. “We should have our own table,” I grumble. “Just the four of us.”

Gage, who’s come to stand near us, raises an eyebrow. “Do you really want to make an issue of it, today of all days?”

“Yes, dammit. I do.”

He doesn’t answer, just waits for me to finish venting and come to my senses. “Sometimes I hate how logical you are,” I tell him.

“I know.”

I straighten a crooked chair with more force than necessary. “This is a day for family. And she’s ours.”

“Most of the other people here are also your family.”

“That’s different.”

He watches me, his eyes seeing everything, as usual, and not just what’s on the surface. “You want us to have our own family. The three of us and Lexy.”

Beside me, Thorn goes still. I blow out a breath. “Yeah. I do.”

We’ve been having this whole conversation under our breaths, surrounded by people, most of whom are seated by now, many of whom are looking at us strangely.

“We’ll have a better shot at that,” Gage says very quietly, “if we don’t make a scene today.”

Damn him, he’s right again. My parents are one thing, but causing a scandal in my extended family will not do Lexy any favors in the long run.

“Yeah,” I say. “And fuck you very much, by the way.”

Gage smiles. He knows that’s shorthand for our entire friendship, not any kind of insult.

“Did it occur to you,” Thorn says, “that Mama didn’t seat Lexy with us exactly so she could avoid us making a scene?”

It hadn’t. That makes me mad all over again, makes me want to rebel like the teenager I haven’t been in years. But I rein it in, for Lexy’s sake.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s go say a proper hello to Lexy and her mother before we eat.”

THORN

Our own family.

As strange as it sounds, as soon as Gage said it, I felt the rightness of it in my gut. Why should we have to give up the best thing that's ever happened to us?

I'm distracted all through dinner, thinking about it. We guys have all got our own places, but we could live together. It'd take some doing, sure, but Thorn and I managed it growing up, and Gage practically lived with us, he was over so often. We could make it work.

Lexy, though. What would she think of this grand idea?

I get the feeling, sometimes, that the situation with the four of us is ... not exactly a game for her, but not something she takes all that seriously, either. Like we're a bit of fun she's having on her way to bigger and better things.

I try to ignore that feeling, because I'm not sure it's real and not just my insecurity talking. I'm not insecure normally, but the rules are different where Lexy's concerned. The thought of losing her makes me feel hollowed out inside.

The thought that she doesn't feel about me the way I do about her is a physical pain, like a jagged edge dragging itself across my soul.

I know it's similar for Kai and Gage. Not that we've talked about it, but I know my own feelings, and I can guess at theirs with a high level of confidence. This is not a game, not for any

of us. We're enjoying the hell out of our time with her, of course, but it's about so much more than pleasure.

"Are you all right, mijo?" my mother asks.

"Sí, mama." I smile at her and drag my mind back to the meal. I can't see Lexy from where I'm sitting, so at least I'm spared the effort of trying not to steal looks at her. Kai, across the table from me, is fighting that battle and losing.

My phone vibrates with the pattern that signals an urgent text. "Excuse me," I say, and slip into the backyard to check it.

It's my sous chef. That's not good. The resort is serving meals today, and typically I would be there, but Clare gave me the day off. She's gotten word that other restaurants are trying to lure me away, and letting me spend this holiday with family was likely part of her efforts to keep me happy at Belle Epoque. If only she knew that as long as Lexy's working there, I won't be going anywhere, no matter what I'm offered.

The sous chef wouldn't be calling me unless it was serious. Sure enough, when I call her back, she tells me she's sick, coughing and sneezing, and can't safely be anywhere around food preparation.

I'll have to call in one of the sous chefs from our backup list. Which means I'll need to go in myself, because I'm ultimately responsible for what comes out of the resort's kitchen, and while our substitutes are all competent, I still need to be there for consultation and a closer level of supervision than would ordinarily be necessary.

I go back inside and quietly explain to my parents what's happened, and apologize for needing to leave early. They're sorry, of course, but they understand.

Looking across the table, I meet my brother's eyes. Kai looks like a pressure cooker ready to blow. I move around to stand behind him and Gage, lean down, and repeat the same explanation. Then I turn my head to Gage and mouth silently, *Get him out of here.*

Gage nods. Kai doesn't look like he'll last much longer without saying something he'll regret later. Most of the time

he can keep a lid on whatever emotions he's got going on, but this is Lexy, and the more my brother wants something, the more his impatience can get the better of him.

I make my way past the extra tables, making a general announcement as I go that I've been called in to work, getting a collective sound of disappointment in response. I usually hang out with the younger cousins after dinner, playing games with them outside to burn off their energy and get them ready to crash when their parents take them home.

I catch Lexy's eye briefly, and nod to her mother, but don't stop to talk. As I make my way to my car, I send up a quick prayer that the evening doesn't end in disaster.

GAGE

“Let’s start on the dishes,” I say to Kai. He always does better when he can keep busy; unless he’s working on a tattoo or some other kind of art, sitting still is not something he’s good at.

He pushes his chair back without a word, and we start collecting plates and loading the dishwasher, a Mother’s Day gift from Kai and Thorn a few years ago. Mrs. Sanchez still does the dishes by hand sometimes, but she loves having the dishwasher for big meals like this.

We quickly have enough for our first load, and get the machine going. I look around for something else to keep us occupied, and spy one of the uncles outside with a bunch of the younger kids. Nudging Kai, I say, “Doesn’t Juan like to watch the soccer games?”

Kai rolls his eyes at me. “Football, you mean. Or American football, if that’s all that’s on.”

“Whatever,” I say, just to piss him off and distract him from brooding about Lexy. “Let’s go relieve him so he can come in and watch tv.”

So we go outside and spend an hour with a bunch of wired-up kids, running them ragged. It’s a good workout. As the aunts and uncles start to collect the young cousins in preparation for leaving, Kai folds his arms and watches them go.

“You want kids?” he asks suddenly.

I stare at him. “What?”

He jerks his head at the departing horde. “Kids. You want ‘em?”

So much for distracting him. I say softly, “You mean with Lexy.”

“Of course with Lexy. Who else?”

“That’s really up to her,” I point out.

“Sure. But if she’s willing.”

I let myself imagine it. A tiny person, held in Lexy’s arms, sleeping or squalling or smiling. The wave of longing that hits me is so strong my knees almost buckle.

With an effort, I stay upright. “Yes,” I say, and am surprised that my voice sounds more or less normal. “If she’s willing.”

Kai just nods, as if confirming something he already knew.

And I feel like a man standing on a precipice, daring the wind not to gust and blow him over the edge.

LEXY

Reality seems to be demanding my return sooner rather than later.

I know Mrs. Sanchez didn't mean anything bad by seating Mom and me here with the cousins. I remember, from Thanksgivings the boys told me about when we were growing up, that the family elders have the seats of honor at the main table. We're being treated like family, which is its own kind of honor.

But I can't escape the feeling that Mrs. Sanchez wanted me out of the way. I've noticed her noticing, these past few weeks, the undercurrents connecting me to her sons and to Gage. Mr. Sanchez has been more circumspect, but I have no doubt he's noticed too.

And while I know it's a busy day, and Mrs. Sanchez is the hostess, she was warmly polite but not much more when she greeted us and led us to our assigned places. Was it just because she was distracted, or was it a subtle sign of disapproval?

I hate that I'm feeling this way about a couple I love and respect, and I do my best to put it out of my mind and focus on the cousins around me, who are a friendly bunch on the whole. But that turns out to be its own minefield.

"I hear you're dating Kai," one of them says, her young face a mask of innocence.

"I heard it was Thorn," another chimes in.

“Really?” a third cousin says. “I heard it was Gage.”

Maybe there’s a trap door under the table that I can use to escape. Avoiding eye contact with all of them, I say, “We’re just good friends.”

Laughter greets this pronouncement, and then I’m hit with questions from all sides, all of which I refuse to answer. Desperate to change the focus to something—anything—else, I remember Kai mentioning that one of the cousins does community theater, so I ask her about her latest role.

She’s more than happy to claim the limelight, and tells us at length about her roles, her costumes, her directors, her co-stars, and all the backstage drama, drawing everyone else in with her stories. I drop in strategically-timed questions whenever the conversation starts to flag, and that gets us through the meal.

Before dessert is served, Thorn walks by and says something about being called in to work. He sends me an apologetic look, but that’s all.

It’s completely unfair of me—I’m sure he didn’t invent whatever work situation requires his presence—but I’m envious of him escaping scrutiny so easily. Too bad I don’t have an emergency wedding to deal with.

The whole time, Mom keeps her word and doesn’t mention the men at all, but I can feel her watching me, observing every tiny detail of my behavior. So I try to distract her too, asking questions about her friends back in Atlanta, her favorite shops, and the neighborhood dogs’ escapades. It helps, a little.

When it’s time to leave, Kai and Gage are nowhere around, so we thank Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez and head out to my car. Part of me is relieved that I didn’t have to tell the men goodbye in front of witnesses, and part of me feels strangely forlorn.

The second we’re in the car, my mom lets out a sigh. “Go ahead,” I say, as I turn the car on and get us on the road. “Lay it on me.” I might as well get it over with.

“They’re all fine young men, Lexy. But do you really know what you’re doing?”

I don't know what to say. On the one hand, no, I have no idea. I'm following my gut, my fantasies, and maybe my heart, but definitely not my brain.

On the other hand ... I think back to some things I've read online, and a conversation I had with my old friend Ava recently. "Mom, did it ever occur to you that my organizational tendencies might be a trauma response?"

"A what?"

"Sorry, that's a loaded word, but that's what the professionals call it. I mean that maybe I felt a greater need to be organized than most people because it gave me a sense of control in my life, when there were a lot of other things that were out of my control that were stressful."

My mother's lips tighten, and I reach over and take her hand, squeezing gently. "We've talked about this before. I'm not blaming you, not for anything. You did the best you could at the time."

"I know, Lexy. But ... I never really got over your father's behavior, his betrayal." She's never remarried, and barely even dated, so I nod. Yes, I know that.

"Your father was just one man, and he hurt me in ways I could not have imagined. With three men ... I'm just worried that you might be setting yourself up for more hurt than you can handle, than any one person could handle."

I squeeze her hand again. "I understand, Mom, and I appreciate that you're concerned about me, truly. All I can say to that is ... they're not Dad. They're nothing like him. He can't stand them, did you know that?"

My mother's laugh is soft and tinged with bitterness. "He used to complain to me about them. He was sure they were leading you astray."

"And given his extramarital activities, I think the professionals call *that* projection," I say pointedly.

"Yes."

She sounds tired. I move the conversation hastily on, not wanting Mom to have to revisit painful memories any more than she already has. “The thing is, they were my friends. My very good friends, in the truest sense of the word. There was never anything inappropriate.”

“I kept a close eye on you,” she says. “I knew they were important to you, but I watched for any change in behavior, any sign that, well, something bad had happened. I never saw anything. But it never occurred to me to worry about you being organized.”

I give her hand another squeeze. “Mom, you’re a good mother. I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

That gets me a smile. “Anyway,” I go on, “the point of all that is ... maybe it’s okay for me to be a little less organized these days. Maybe that’s actually a good thing.”

My mother’s lips twitch. “I hope you’ll agree there’s a difference between ‘a little less organized’ and dating three men.”

I have to laugh. “Yes, but they’re a special case, because of how we all knew each other growing up.”

“I can see that.” She pauses. “Just be careful, Lexy love. I know they’re all friends, but men can be very competitive and possessive, and things could easily go wrong. And a man and woman’s friendship doesn’t always survive a romantic relationship, even when it’s just one on one.”

I go cold at that warning, but I try not to let it show. “I’ll be careful,” I promise, because it’s the only thing I can say.

We arrive back at Belle Epoque, and I tell Mom good night once we’re inside. I’m tempted to try to find Thorn at the restaurant, but I know I’d only be a distraction from his work. Back in my room, I decide it’s time for another bath to soak the tension out of my neck and shoulders.

I’ve gotten myself a bath pillow, and it cradles my head while I recline in the steamy warmth. I get so relaxed that I doze off for a few minutes, until the water cools. Climbing out, I dry off, get into my pajamas, and crawl under the covers.

And there, I finally let myself face the implications of everything my mother said.

I meant what I said to her about it being okay for me to be less organized—a little, not a lot. But am I involved with the men as some sort of overcorrection? A phase I'm going through before I come back to the center?

The thought turns my stomach. I know my men mean more to me than that; I've spent weeks appreciating the unique qualities in each of them that I cherish. The thought that I'm just using them ... no.

Will they hurt me? Not intentionally. I know it will hurt the day I have to let go of my fantasy world, and I can't escape the feeling that that day is much closer now than it was even this morning. But these men will never treat me the way my father treated my mother.

Of course, it's not as if I'm married to them. None of us have made any promises to each other. There's an understanding that this unconventional situationship won't carry on forever, but it's getting harder and harder to label it all as casual.

And when it all ends, will we all still be friends?

LEXY

I finally drift off to a sleep filled with uneasy dreams that gradually become more clear after I wake up and move through my morning routine.

Kai was in my dreams, seeming moody and conflicted and ready to combust, which, after some time for reflection, I realize is how he appeared yesterday at Thanksgiving. It's not unusual for him to be temperamental, but he wasn't happy yesterday, not like he's been when it's the two of us alone.

And Mrs. Sanchez was in my dreams, too, sitting me down at her dining room table and telling me how wrong it is for me to be dating her sons. She was both angry and sad, and at some point, my own mother appeared at the table, giving me the same message, and I had the overwhelming feeling that I was letting everyone down, the men included.

My body feels heavy as I style my hair. I'm weighed down by reality, fully aware that I've been avoiding it.

The thought keeps nagging at me that what the four of us are doing could be deeply troubling to Kai and Thorn's parents, and I couldn't live with myself knowing I've disrupted the tight bonds the family shares. Maybe the situation is already causing problems, and that's what had Kai upset yesterday.

I'll have a talk with him as soon as I can, but today is my mom's last day in town, and she and I are going shopping, our annual Black Friday tradition, Vegas style this year at the shops at Caesar's Palace.

I pick her up at her room, we have breakfast in the café, and then I drive us over to the Strip. I'm relieved that my mom seems to be in a good mood, untroubled by our conversation yesterday.

Even though, thankfully, she isn't bringing up my men today, it doesn't matter, because my head is constantly filled with thoughts of them. I should be getting in a festive mood with all the winter holiday decorations that surround us, including a huge Christmas tree in the Forum Shops, but all of it leaves me cold.

And as the day goes on, the two of us shouldering through the crowds and not finding any bargains at all, I find myself thinking that it's probably time to start making exit plans, not just from the crowded mall with all of its artificial opulence, but from the town itself.

I've been having fun here, but everyone knows that a visit to fantasyland doesn't last forever.

On Saturday, after sending my mom off on an early flight, I decide to go into the office. Clare isn't expecting me, but it's not uncommon to come in on Saturdays in my line of work, and I'm happy to keep busy.

There are a couple of new inquiries to respond to and other emails to answer, and while I attend to all of that, in the back of my mind, I start to think about who would replace me when I leave.

Another one of the meeting staff, while not a weddings specialist, knows quite a bit and filled in before I was hired. She'd be the most likely person, and on a nearby pad, I jot down some items I'd like to cover with her before I make any formal announcements. When I decide to go, I don't want to leave Clare in the lurch.

Mid-morning, Ava calls. "What are you up to? Want to go to lunch today?"

She and I have been having lunch together about once a week, and I hung out with her and a group of her friends once for a movie night. It's been really nice reconnecting with her, and it makes me realize that I was so caught up with Scott and his family and my job, I hadn't taken the time to develop many meaningful friendships in Atlanta. I have Hillary there, but we barely got together once a month. We've probably talked more since I came back to Vegas than we did when I was in Atlanta.

"I've been working today," I tell Ava, "but a lunch break would be lovely."

Ava doesn't care much for cooking, but she is a foodie, and she's been introducing me to Las Vegas's culinary delights week by week. Early on, I suggested we eat at Thorn's restaurant, and we did, but of course, she had already eaten there twice before. She's watched every one of his cooking videos.

"Do you like Thai food?"

"I do, though I haven't tried much beyond spring rolls and chicken pad thai."

She laughs, and I can imagine her rolling her eyes at my unadventurous palate. "I'll hook you up. I need something spicy after my family's bland Thanksgiving dinner. So many starches, so little flavor."

Now I'm the one laughing as we make plans to meet in an hour at the restaurant she names.

Ninety minutes later, my mouth is on fire and I'm waving for the waiter so I can request a refill on my water. The item Ava suggested that I order for myself is delicious, but now that I've sampled her spicy basil chicken, I don't think I'm going to be able to taste the rest of my food.

"I warned you," she says, looking both sympathetic and amused.

I pointlessly fan my open mouth with my hand. "You did, but you're shoveling in forkfuls of the stuff. I figured, how bad could it be?"

She watches as I gratefully acknowledge my newly-filled glass of water and then proceed to down more than half of it. “Speaking of hot and spicy,” she says, casually loading her fork with more noodles, “how are your boyfriends doing?”

“Why do you insist on calling them that?”

“Why do you insist on pretending that they’re not?”

I shake my head as I push my plate forward an inch. Thankfully, there wasn’t much left to eat. “We’re friends, Ava. Thorn takes me for rides on his bike. I go to galleries with Kai. Did you know he’s big into art collecting?”

She lifts her brows and shakes her head, waiting for me to continue.

“He owns several pieces from a couple of local artists, and he’s always on the lookout for new talent he can support.”

“Fascinating,” she says blandly.

“Gage has taken me on hikes. We were out just last weekend.”

She eyes me as she chews and swallows. “If you’re all just friends, and if those aren’t dates, then I guess you wouldn’t mind if I asked one of them to go out with me?”

I don’t know exactly what my face is doing in response to this idea, but whatever it is, it makes Ava burst out laughing. “Girl, you’ve got it bad! Just admit it.”

When I shake my head, dropping it into my hands, she says, “Just own it. You’re a lucky woman. Are you really dating all three of them?”

I look up at her, my shake turning into a nod. “It’s just temporary,” I say. “Just while I’m here. I know it’s an impossible situation.”

She frowns at me as she reaches for her Thai tea. “Why?”

“I mean, it’s not reality, is it? Dating three men. Somehow, they’re all okay with it, but I know it can’t go on forever.”

“Why not? Are they wearing you out?” She lifts an eyebrow, indicating that she’s talking about tiring bedroom activities. I feel my cheeks start to color, and this time it’s *not* from the

chili peppers. Certain parts of me *have* gotten a little worn out, but I've persevered like a trooper. A thoroughly-satisfied trooper.

Again reading my expression, she sighs. "I wish I was getting workouts like that. It's been a bit of a dry spell for me."

"Really? I thought you and ... was it Erik? ... were dating. The guy who was at your place on movie night."

She shakes her head. "We *are* actually just friends, unlike you and your *boyfriends*, and don't try to change the subject."

I raise my hands, pleading innocence. "You're the one who changed the subject."

Ava cleans the last of the incendiary food from her plate, licking her lips to get every bit of the sauce. "I think it's incredibly romantic, you reuniting with childhood friends after all these years. It sounds like they really care for you. Why would it matter that there's three of them?"

An ember of hope begins to glow in my chest. I hadn't expected this response from Ava, and is it possible that her take on our unconventional situation could be more realistic than my mom's?

Of course, my mom wants to protect me, but her warnings are very much influenced by the way my father hurt her. I know that Kai, Gage, and Thorn would never hurt me like that. Not if they'd vowed not to, and never intentionally, even without us having a commitment.

The waiter brings the check and I grab it, even though I may need to dip into my savings account to purchase new taste buds after trying Ava's food. She reaches for the bill a moment too late.

"You paid for our last lunch, and the one before that. This one's on me," I say, handing over my credit card.

While we wait for the waiter to return, my newly buoyant mood leads me to ask, "Have you been to their shop? Beasts Ink?"

It's only a few blocks away, and the close proximity has been on my mind all throughout lunch. At Belle Epoque, I may occasionally wander past the kitchen to catch glimpses of Thorn, and I feel the same pull to get a tiny fix of Gage and Kai to get me through the rest of the day.

There's no denying that my men are addictive.

LEXY

It turns out that Ava never has been inside Beasts Ink, so we stroll down the street, taking in the Christmas decorations on the Strip as we go. She says she went by the shop once, with the intention of checking it out after watching their reality show, but there was a big crowd at the door—mostly women, of course—and she ended up turning back, not wanting to wait.

There's a crowd there again today.

“This isn't nearly as bad as last year,” Ava says, making my eyes go wide. There are at least eight people at the door, six of them women, and I wish I didn't automatically count the women and wonder if any of them are Kai's and Gage's types.

We've talked a lot about the years we've been apart, but I carefully avoided asking about their romantic relationships, because I knew it wouldn't feel good to hear about them.

I'm glad there's less of a crowd than Ava experienced, but it also makes me wonder if their popularity is waning.

Clearly, they're not hurting for business, but maybe they're not earning what they were in past years.

The two of us slip in behind the small cluster of people in the doorway. There's a heavy cloud of perfume hanging in the air. I stretch on tiptoes to catch Brax's eye and wave, making sure he sees that it's me sneaking in, and not a random fan.

He nods and grins, lifting his chin in greeting before his eyes shift to Ava.

“Who’s that?” she whispers, turning back to give him another look as I lead us to Ember’s desk.

“That’s Brax. Maybe I can introduce you on the way out.” He’s deep in discussion with the perfumey women, who don’t look much older than eighteen.

“Please do,” Ava says, and her tone of voice has me doing a double take at the guard. I guess he is an attractive man; I hadn’t noticed, having more than enough men to occupy my attention, but it looks like Ava definitely appreciates him.

“Hi, Lexy.” Ember gives us both a warm smile, lifting her brows in inquiry when she looks at Ava.

“Ember, this is my friend, Ava; Ava, Ember, the woman who keeps the artists’ hectic booking schedules straight.”

The two of them shake hands and exchange pleasantries while I look around the space. My dilemma when coming here, aside from dealing with the groupies, is who to go to first. Both Kai and Gage emit such a strong pull that it’s often impossible to decide who to visit first, which is why I often start with Ember, who tells me which of the men might be able to talk and which of them are deep into a project.

Kai is currently bent over a man’s bare leg, but I don’t see Gage at all.

As if he’s feeling the same pull I do, Kai glances up, immediately meeting my eyes. He tilts his head, beckoning me over.

“Looks like Kai has a free moment,” I tell Ember.

On our way over to his station, Ava and I pass two of the other artists. Pierce greets me by name and gives Ava a friendly nod, while Zeb remains focused on his work. When Ava and I reach Kai, he’s hunched over his client again, so we stay quiet, letting him find a stopping point in his work, which is a dark, furry doglike demon running from the burning gates of hell on the side of the man’s calf.

Another time I was here, I watched Kai inking a butterfly that was so delicate and realistic, it looked like it could take flight from the woman’s shoulder. His artistic range is incredible.

“Time for a break,” he tells his client, who grunts in response.

When Kai slides back in his stool, the man stands up, stretches, and says, “I’m going outside for a smoke.”

“Be back in ten,” Kai says as the man walks off, then turns his full attention to me.

“Do you remember Ava?” I ask.

“Course.” He gives her a chin lift similar to the one Brax gave me. Rolling closer to me, his hand slides up my forearm and comes to rest at the crook of my elbow.

When I glance at Ava, she gives me a look that says, *How did you ever try to deny that this is more than a friendship?*

“How’re you doing?” he asks, his attention momentarily making me feel like I’m the only person in the room with him. He brushes his lips over the inside of my wrist, and I dissolve into a puddle on the shop’s shiny hardwood floor.

There’s commotion near the entrance, and when I look to see what’s going on, I’m pierced with multiple angry stares from the current group of women clustered near Brax.

One of them waves her hand over her head and calls out for Kai, and just the sound of his name coming from her bright red lips is enough to make my blood boil.

“Kai, over here! I want to get a picture!”

Brax steps in front of the woman, effectively blocking her view. Others are still gawking, and I hear various feminine voices saying, “Who is that? Who are those women with him? He’s kissing that woman’s hand!”

I catch a scowl slide across Kai’s features, but by the time he looks up at his fans, his expression is neutral. He lifts his hand to give the horde a small wave before turning his back to them. “What are you up to today?” he asks, glancing again at Ava, though his eyes are spending most of their time eating me up, or at least, letting me know he wants to eat me up later.

“We just had lunch. I thought I’d stop by before I go back to work.”

“You’re working today, too, huh?” He hasn’t touched me since the groupies made a scene, and my skin aches for him, though I suppose it’s best that he keeps his distance here.

Ava has turned away from us and busied herself looking at a table full of ink bottles and equipment. I take the opportunity to ask, “Is everything okay with your parents?”

When he frowns, confused by my question, I add, “Your mom seemed a little distant on Thanksgiving. I didn’t know if it was just because she was busy, or ...”

He understands what I leave unsaid, and shakes his head. “She’s okay. Are you still available this evening?”

As I nod, my stomach gives a little flip from a combination of nervousness about what he’s not saying about his mom, and excitement about seeing him later, even though we’ll be at a public place, helping out at an animal rescue organization the guys support.

My stomach gives another flutter when I hear Gage’s voice. “Lexy.” He communicates so much just by saying my name. I feel cherished and desired by the way those two small syllables pass his lips.

The way he’s looking at me says even more.

“Gage. How are you?” I turn to let him know Ava’s here, too, but she’s wandered back to Ember’s desk, both of them looking toward the door, or more accurately, toward Brax.

Gage wraps one of his arms around my shoulders and pulls me in for a kiss, and when we part, I’m determined to keep my focus on him and Kai, and ignore the raised voices at the entrance.

It’s then that I notice something’s going on with Gage. His typical calm and even expression is buzzing with a different kind of energy that I can’t quite read. Kai notices it too, and asks him what’s going on.

“I just got off of a call with Art Gilchrist. He’s the producer we worked with on our show,” he adds for my benefit. “He has a lot of interest in a new show, a different concept. He wants to talk to both of us tomorrow.”

Kai shakes his head once, dismissively. “He’s always saying that.”

“This is different,” Gage says. “Apparently the right people are interested. In fact, he’s in contact with a couple of networks and there’s talk of a bidding war. This could be big. It could make it easy to open another location *and* do more special projects.”

Gage’s excitement about this prospect surprises me. I’ve been thinking their tv days were in the past, but it looks like it may also be part of their future, and I suppose that’s a good thing for them. I don’t know what it means for me.

When I’m with one of them anywhere outside of the shop, it feels like we’re in our own little world together. A new show, and all the new fans it would bring, would definitely change that. But it could also provide a lot of opportunities and resources for them, including the ability to do more philanthropic projects like the park they built in our old neighborhood.

“Gage, your next appointment is waiting for you in the lounge.” Ember’s come over, followed by Ava.

After Gage and Ava exchange greetings, I tell the men I’ll see them later. It’s time to let them get back to work.

Ava and I go our separate ways, and I return to my office, my head more muddled than ever. Ava’s words of support earlier had me feeling hopeful—for what, exactly, I don’t know—but the visit to Beasts Ink reminded me that I don’t fit into their world, and I don’t exactly want to.

I enjoy being a behind-the-scenes kind of person, and that’s not easy to do with them. I couldn’t even get a kiss from each of them today without others taking note.

Clare comes into my office shortly after I return. “How was your Thanksgiving?” she asks. “And your time with your mother?”

“Good. How was your holiday?”

“I was here for most of Thanksgiving, but I think we made it a nice day for our guests. Now, on to Christmas and New

Year's," she adds with a sigh.

While the December holidays aren't especially busy for us wedding planners, it's peak season for the rest of the resort staff, and I assume I'll be pitching in to help with other types of events.

"While we're looking ahead to the new year," Clare says, "I'd like us to talk soon about your plans. You took this job on the spur of the moment, but from my point of view, you're working out very well here."

Before I can respond, she continues. "I've received a lot of good feedback about you, both from others in the meeting staff and especially from clients, and in gratitude for that and because I hope you plan to stay with us for a long time, I'd like to offer you an immediate raise of twenty percent."

"Oh. Thank you." I'm so stunned, I don't know what else to say.

"We can talk about the potential for a higher salary based on your plans here."

"Thank you, Clare. I appreciate that."

"I appreciate you, Alex. You're an excellent planner. I hope you enjoy the rest of your weekend."

And with that, she's gone, and I'm left thinking how ironic it is that I make plans for a living, because I have no idea what to do with my own life in the future.

GAGE

There is a mindset adjustment that's needed when you grow up with very little and watch your family struggling to make ends meet, and then you suddenly have a good deal of money, more than you really need.

There's a guilt that comes with it, and maybe a feeling of being undeserving, even though you know you worked hard for it.

I'm sure Kai and Thorn have faced some similar inner conflict along these same lines. We put our families first, buying them as much as they'll accept, and when it still feels like we have too much, donating time and money helps bring things into balance.

We've always given our time, but it feels good to also be able to donate funds, and one of our favorite organizations is a local animal rescue operation, the same one that now offers adoptions through the pet store.

We've helped out at their shelter several times, but this evening is special, because Lexy's joining us.

Every time I've been here, she and her love of animals have been on my mind, even if thoughts of her sometimes felt distant and abstract. Now she's close and in the flesh—warm, beautiful, gorgeous flesh.

“Gage, you shouldn't,” she says with a giggle, squirming but not moving away from me when I discreetly slide my hand under her shirt to touch the bare skin just above her jeans. I'm not generally into PDA, but with Lexy, I can't help myself.

Kai and Thorn are taking pictures of animals that are new to the shelter, working to show them off to their best advantage for the website. Thorn, who started doing his own photography and videography years ago for his cooking posts, is behind the camera, while Kai helps one of the shelter staff position the dogs and cats and gets them to look at the camera.

Along with shaking toys near Thorn's head, Kai produces an impressive range of sound effects to catch the attention of the shy, easily distractible, and often scared animals.

"Come on, Mr. Boots. You know you want a little fishy, fishy."

Hearing Kai make baby talk is always a highlight. We like to think we're helping the rescue organization, but in truth, coming here is good for our souls.

"He's a stubborn one," Kai says, laying down the fish and looking for a different toy.

"Let me try." Lexy, who'd been laughing quietly at Kai's antics, goes over to stand beside him. She offers her hand to the gray and white cat, who shrinks back at first but then eventually gives her a cautious sniff. She pets him until he's purring, and when she draws her hand away, Kai gets the feline's attention.

"Got it. Perfect," Thorn says, reviewing the images on his camera. "I bet someone will snap up Mr. Boots very soon."

"I wish I could take them all home with me." Lexy's looking wistfully at the row of cages that hold a sobering number of homeless animals.

A quick look flashes across Kai's features, and I know what he's thinking. Lexy needs to put down roots here, because right now she doesn't have an actual home that would accommodate a pet. Her temporary living arrangement is beginning to become a sore spot for him.

When the photography sessions are complete, Thorn goes off with the shelter manager to download the images, while the rest of us spend time in the dog run area, helping the dogs work out their energy as they get more practice socializing with humans.

“Who’s a good boy?” Lexy coos to a playful pittie mix who brings back the ball she threw for him.

Kai’s still watching her, and because I can read him so well, I know he’s forming a plan. “Come over tonight,” he says so only I can hear.

My Spidey sense tingles. “Why? What’s up?”

“Just come over.”

LEXY

After our visit to the animal shelter, I have dinner with Kai at his apartment. His place is distinct from the other men's; the furniture is almost stereotypically dark and masculine, but the pieces are situated sparingly, and don't overwhelm the space. The potential heaviness is offset by throws and pillows in lighter neutral shades.

The real star, though, is the art. I learned the first time I came here that Kai is a serious collector; he especially enjoys finding little-known artists and boosting their careers. Paintings, sculptures, and textiles all have their place.

The styles are different enough that a less skillful arrangement could easily become a jumbled mishmash, but Kai has managed to create his own breathtaking gallery, all the pieces melding into a whole that's so much more than the sum of its parts.

Every time I'm here, I'm impressed all over again. "You know," I tell him, "if you ever decide to give up the tattoo work, you could run your own art gallery."

He smiles. "I'm thinking about opening one, actually, along with the shop. It'll let me give the artists more exposure."

"That's fantastic." I'm not surprised; Kai is one of the most unselfish people I know. He's completely spoiled me, in bed and out. Unlike Gage, he's not much for gifts, though I know he'd be happy to buy me anything I wanted if I asked. But he's endlessly generous with his time and attention.

An art gallery would likely be an expensive endeavor, but I'll bet the potential new reality show would provide all the needed funds and more.

When the doorbell rings, I send him a questioning look. He gets up to answer it, and a moment later returns with Gage beside him.

"Oh! Hello." I'm momentarily flustered; I've been dating the men separately all this time. It hasn't been that difficult, since they each have different work schedules and leisure-time interests.

Having two of them here in a private space, however, is a bit overwhelming. I've enjoyed being able to focus all my attention on whichever man I'm with at the moment, but Gage and Kai together are almost too much of a very good thing.

Almost.

"We're just about to eat," I say. We're sitting on cushions around a low table, takeout from an Indian restaurant spread out before us. I make a mental note to tell Ava that I'm being more adventurous in my food choices, though Kai did ask the restaurant to prepare my butter chicken with a milder spice level than his tikka masala.

"Sounds good." Not waiting for Kai's approval, Gage settles on the floor near me with his usual grace, always a bit surprising in a man his size. I guess the two of them know each other well enough that he doesn't have to wonder if he's welcome.

Kai seems perfectly relaxed as we eat and talk, and so does Gage. I'm the one who can barely focus on her food, whose skin feels too tight, too warm.

Why is it that suddenly, all I can think about is sex?

I had that fleeting moment of fantasy when I was with Thorn, but otherwise, I've kept things so compartmentalized that I honestly haven't thought about being with more than one of them at a time, especially since each of them is more than enough for me.

But now, the apartment is full of their presence, and all I can do is respond. Need pulses under my skin, a steady drumbeat I'm certain they can hear, or at least sense.

They're both quieter than usual, as if they're listening ... to me, and the siren song I'm sending out. *I want you. Take me, have me, fill me.*

Who knew I was such a wanton, needy thing? I've been an eager participant with each of them, but this is a whole new level of desire. I realize, with a little thrill of shock, that my panties are damp.

As if I've sent some sort of signal, Gage leans over and kisses me, bearing me back to the floor. A few seconds later, Kai tugs my pants and underwear off and buries his face between my legs.

I'm so turned on that I come almost instantly, moaning into Gage's mouth. Kai growls against my clit and redoubles his efforts, first one finger, then two, plunging into my greedy depths.

Gage stops kissing me long enough to peel off my top and bra, and then he's back, his mouth on mine as his fingers tease my nipples into stiff peaks. I'm panting, my system already rocketing toward another climax. He breaks off again, nips my lower lip, and clamps over one of my breasts, sucking like his life depends on it, then switches to the other.

Every sensation is amplified. I have so many orgasms I quickly lose count, and the men are both more intense than usual, which is saying quite a lot. Eventually, they scoop me up and carry me into the bedroom, where they switch places, Kai tending to my upper body while Gage settles between my legs.

Kai torments me with softness, touching me everywhere gently, so gently, until I twist and writhe under his hands. When he kisses me, I can taste myself on him, and I whimper into his mouth, frantic.

Gage is rubbing his stubble against my inner thighs, then kissing and licking them, holding my legs apart with his strong

hands. Guttural sounds erupt from my throat, begging without words.

At last, he shifts upward, licks me open ... and closes his teeth very gently over my clit. I come so hard I almost black out. When I stop thrashing, he does it again, sending my hips bucking, pressing me into his face over and over. His hands grip my hips as he devours me, treating my swollen folds as his personal banquet.

When he finally crawls up my body and settles on the other side of me, so I'm sandwiched between the two of them, I'm both drenched with pleasure and hungry for more. Kai cradles my face with his hand. "Lexy. We want you."

"I want you too," I say hoarsely, a little puzzled that it needs to be spelled out.

"Do you trust us?"

And then I understand, and every cell in my body responds. "Yes," I say softly. "Do it."

In answer, Kai kisses me, then opens his nightstand drawer, pulls out some lube ... and hands it to Gage. Rolling onto his back, bringing me with him, Kai lifts me up by my hips and holds me poised over his cock. I sink down, my slick, swollen flesh taking him in a bit at a time, until I'm impaled on him as far as I can go.

Gage kisses my shoulder, runs his hand down my spine, gently tilts me forward, and starts to get me ready. Kai doesn't move, just holds me and lets me focus on the new sensations. Gage is so gentle, so thorough, that there's barely any discomfort, but lots of tiny gasps as he stimulates my sensitive nerve endings.

He takes such care with me that I'm the one who moves things forward. "Now," I tell him. "Now."

Gage kisses his way up my spine, then back down again, before he moves over me. Even after all his preparation, it's a shock when he starts to press into me. When I suck in a breath, he stops. "Okay?"

"Yes. Don't stop."

He takes me at my word, filling me inch by inch, slowly, until I'm stuffed full of him. The men roll us, so we're all on our sides, and stroke my skin, letting me adjust.

It's the most amazing sensation, having them both inside me. I want to cry, but I'm afraid that would distress them, so I will myself not to. It doesn't hurt; it feels incredible. Yes, I feel like I could burst, but only in the most wonderful way possible.

"Okay?" Kai says. I nod, and they begin to move, their cocks rubbing against all my most sensitive spots as they draw back and press in, alternating their strokes. I feel them rubbing together inside of me, separated only by a thin membrane, and it's glorious.

Kai takes my uppermost leg and moves it so my foot is hooked against his shoulder, letting him make even closer contact with me. "Oh, *god*," I moan. "Don't stop."

And they don't, rocking against me over and over again with infinite patience, pausing only when I come, clenching so tightly around them that I come even harder. When they start to move again, Gage gets his fingers on my clit and strums it gently—I don't need much to keep me climaxing.

I lose track of everything—time, space, the entire rest of the universe. There's nothing but the three of us, moving together in a dance that feels like it was always meant to be.

After an infinity of pleasure, the men speed up, which quickly drives me toward another peak. I don't try to hold back my cries as ecstasy spirals up and up inside me, until it explodes. The men follow me over the edge, pouring themselves out inside me, filling me to overflowing.

We don't move for long minutes afterwards, just stay where we are, cuddled together. I drift a little, not asleep but coasting on enough afterglow to light a small city. When I open my eyes, Kai's watching me.

"Everything okay?" he says.

"Oh, god, yes. So much yes."

He smiles. "Good." His eyes meet Gage's over my shoulder, and I can tell the two of them are having a brief but intense

wordless conversation.

The men disengage from me and carry me into the shower, where we all clean up. After I drink a big glass of water, we doze off, but not for long. When we wake up, we don't need words to know that we want more.

Time does one of those strange things where it telescopes out, and the night seems to last forever. Sometime during our extended encounter, it hits me that if I'd stayed in Vegas, my late teen years would have been spent exactly like this, with exactly these men.

I'm so thankful it's happening now. Despite the fact that we're fucking each other's brains out, it's never been just sex, not with them. It's a sacred rite, full of tenderness and respect and affection, and I feel a profound gratitude for my men and the gift of their bodies to me.

KAI

This woman. Fuck.

She's the best fucking thing in the entire world.

Despite our years of friendship, Gage and I had never shared a woman—and after tonight, I know we never will unless it's Lexy.

He and I were on the same page afterwards. We didn't need words to know it. The family I talked about at Thanksgiving—it's real. The four of us fit together, and always have.

We just need to persuade our maybe-reluctant woman that we're where she belongs.

GAGE

After last night, I'm as obsessed as Kai. Before this, I would have been sad if Lexy chose to move on, but life hands out failures and disappointments, not just victories. I could have accepted it.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Now I know better. We had enough sex last night to fill several porn films—and it was one of the most pure experiences of my life. There is no other woman who could complete us the way that Lexy does.

Our solar system will be empty and cold, forever, if our sun doesn't stay where she belongs. She has to feel it too.

Doesn't she?

LEXY

In the morning, I'm tired and happy ... and I feel like my soul's been turned inside out.

After this experience, I'm not sure I can keep pretending that everything's casual between us. Maybe it's casual from their point of view, though—these gorgeous inked beasts with the endless lines of women who want them. So many women they literally had to hire a guard at their shop's door to hold the groupies back.

And Thorn with all of his online fans, plenty of whom make trips to Vegas just to get a glimpse of him.

I don't blame those women for wanting them. What straight woman wouldn't? But I resent the groupies for wanting my friends without knowing them, or even caring about them. To their fans, Kai, Gage, and Thorn are nothing more than fantasy fulfillment.

But isn't that what I've been doing—fulfilling a fantasy?

In my heart, I know it's so much more than that for me, much as I've been insisting otherwise.

As impossible and impractical as it is, I want them. All three of them. But I don't want to share them with other women. I want them all to myself, even though that's hypocritical, since the three of them have all been sharing me.

Apparently, I'm not done lying to myself, though, because I decide that it's just the intense physical experience that has me thinking this way, and it will be best not to think about it at all.

I bury my head in work the next couple of days, determinedly ignoring the gnawing sensation in my chest while I follow up with prospective clients, work on details for upcoming events, and make calls to local wedding planners inviting them to visit our venue.

Just as I'm getting off the line with one of those calls, my personal phone vibrates with an incoming call from my dad, which immediately gets my attention because he's called exactly once since his wedding, just to let me know he and Belinda were back from their honeymoon.

I told him during that call that I was going to be living in Vegas for a while, and though he asked several questions about my job, he only made vague comments along the lines of "we'll have to get together sometime soon." I haven't been holding my breath.

"Hey, Dad. What's up?"

"Alex." His tone is stern, and I immediately go on alert as I get a quick flashback to getting in trouble when I was a child.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a minute to talk?" A little voice in my head warns me to say no, but then I'd be filled with curiosity for the rest of the day, even though I'm pretty sure I'm not about to get a dinner invitation.

When I tell him I have time, he launches in with vague phrases that immediately make my stomach sink to the floor. "I was afraid this would happen. I warned you. They're bad news, Alex. Bad."

I push back both my irritation and dread. "Dad, we've talked about this. I know you don't like them, but you don't really know them. They're not kids anymore."

His heated tone grows colder, which is somehow even worse. "I know enough, Alex. I know you left your stable, successful boyfriend and are now messing around with *two* men."

I get the impression that it's hard for him to say the part about there being two men, and I'm relieved that he doesn't know it's actually three.

“You’re not a kid anymore either, Alex. This is real life.”

“I’m well aware, Dad.” Even as I say it, I question my words. I haven’t exactly been treating this like real life, have I?

“Don’t you want to get married, Alex? Have children? Are you even thinking about your future?”

I start to interrupt to remind him that my biological clock is not exactly on its last hour, but he keeps going. “All this is to say nothing about your career. How do you think things will go when your boss finds out that her wedding planner, the one she hired to help engaged couples celebrate their marriage, is not only unmarried, but involved in a polyamorous relationship? You’re thumbing your nose at the whole institution of marriage.”

This is rich, getting a lecture on marriage from my dad. There are so many things I could say, and maybe if I wasn’t at work, I might share a few select thoughts, reminding him of the many ways he’s disrespected the sacred vows of marriage, but I’m holding back tears, and keeping a level tone right now would be impossible.

“Life isn’t all fun and games, Alex. Your actions matter.” He lowers his tone, signaling that his diatribe is coming to an end. “Stop and think about what you’re doing.”

I’m shaking when I manage to say, “Thanks for your input, Dad. Bye.”

With the back of my chair turned to the door of my office, I blot my eyes with a tissue and hope no one comes in before I can pull myself back together.

After all this time, my father’s opinion shouldn’t matter so much, and maybe it doesn’t. It’s more the fact that what he’s saying is right in line with the concerns my mom voiced when she was here, and my own worries about what Kai and Thorn’s parents would think if they knew what was going on.

Even though I’ve been having the time of my life, I have to admit that I have my own discomfort with this unconventional relationship, for a couple of the same reasons my dad pointed out.

My stomach sinks further, down to basement level. How did my dad know about me and Kai and Gage? It's highly unlikely that my mom told him, considering she hasn't spoken to him in years. If he knows, anyone and everyone might know.

My skin goes ice cold at the implications, and I'm about to head to the restroom, or maybe even back to my room, to have a more private meltdown, when my phone rings again. Surely, my dad has said everything he needed to say. I'm about to reject the call when the name catches my eye.

It's not my dad. It's Scott.

I haven't heard from him since he sent the ridiculously pompous text several weeks ago, saying he was willing to consider us getting back together.

I should have blocked him, but right now, he seems like the perfect place to vent the anger that I wasn't able to direct at my dad.

As soon as he spouts more nonsense, he's going to get an earful from me.

Except that's not how the call goes.

"Alexandra?" He sounds shocked and relieved that I answered.

"Yes?"

"How are you? Are you doing okay?" His voice is filled with so much warmth and concern that some of the hard edges of my mood soften. This sounds like the Scott I remember from our early days together.

"I'm okay, Scott. How are you?"

There's a short pause before he says, "Not great, Alexandra. I'll be blunt; I miss you."

When I don't respond, he says, "Thanksgiving was miserable without you here."

I wasn't prepared to hear any of this, and don't know what to say.

"Everyone was asking about you, and I didn't know what to tell them."

I make a small sound of acknowledgement to fill the silence. It occurs to me to point out that he could and should have told his family that we broke up and that's all they needed to know, but the urge to be confrontational has left me.

"I don't want to spend Christmas without you, baby. When are you coming home?"

Does he truly care for me, or does he hate being single? Maybe showing up to his family holiday alone was a blow to his ego.

But Scott has always had other options. I've seen other women checking him out, even when I was with him. He's an attractive man, so if it was simply about image and companionship, I'm sure he could have found someone to replace me.

"We need a chance to work things out," he says. "You can't just throw away all of the years we've spent together."

Is that what I'm doing?

"What do you say, babe? Are you ready to come home?"

"I ... I don't know."

Is Atlanta still my home? Maybe I could build the kind of family there that I've always envisioned myself having. Maybe, here in Las Vegas, I've been trying to fit myself into memories of the past rather than creating my future.

LEXY

The unsettling calls keep coming.

The next day, it's Ava.

"Been on any social media apps lately?" she asks without preamble.

I'm still half focused on an email I was composing when she called, so I answer distractedly. "Only on my work account, I think. What's up? Something I need to see?"

My brain catches up then, and I realize that her tone, like my dad's yesterday, does not hold the promise of a pleasant call. In fact, the bearer-of-bad-news vibe is heavy when she says, "You might want to check your mentions."

I reach for my cell phone and bring one up. "What's going on, Ava?"

The number of notifications are alarming.

"Are you looking?" she asks. I can see her cringing in my mind's eye as clearly as if we were FaceTiming.

There are pictures. "Shit!" I say, keeping my voice low, remembering my surroundings. I scroll to find more and more pictures. Kai kissing my hand. Gage kissing my lips. Me hugging each of them goodbye.

Those were clearly taken at Beasts Ink, but there are more. Gage and I walking down the street together, Kai opening his car door for me, my head resting against Thorn's back while he's giving me a ride on his bike.

They're like paparazzi pictures, but they may have been taken by fans.

"Did you find the posts?" Ava asks.

"I found a lot." More curse words come, but I keep them in my head.

There are video clips, too. And captions.

And comments. So many comments.

*"Look at this slut." "Fame wh*re" "Is she trying to date all three of them?"*

My stomach churns, and I'd run to the bathroom if only I could stop scrolling.

"You okay, Lexy?"

"No."

"I wanted you to know what's out there so you weren't taken by surprise, but now that you know, you should stop reading. No good can come of reading everything."

Definitely nothing good can come from any of this.

"There are some positive comments," she says. "Along the lines of *you go, girl*. Stuff like that. Everyone else is just jealous."

I haven't seen anything supportive, not that it would matter. I don't want my private life out in the open for everyone's judgment and amusement. It's been bad enough dealing with my parents' opinions; now the whole world wants to chime in.

And wasn't I an idiot for thinking I could get involved with all three of these men and not be criticized for it?

Another post: "What trash!" I'm pretty sure the label is entirely directed at me, but all at once, it occurs to me how this kind of publicity could hurt Thorn, Gage, and Kai. A lot of men aren't comfortable sharing a woman, and they may harshly judge men who do.

Their fan bases could turn on them, and Beasts Ink and this resort's restaurant could also suffer as a result.

“Lexy?”

I realize I haven’t said anything for at least a minute, and I’m still scrolling. I close the app and try to draw in a deep breath. It’s very possible that I may vomit.

“Thanks for letting me know, Ava. I need to run. I’ll call you later.”

I don’t exactly run, but I do hurry out of my office and down the hall. The privacy of my room’s bathroom is my destination, but I don’t make it there.

“Alex. Can I have a quick word?” Clare’s coming in the opposite direction, and her tone doesn’t leave room for me to deny her request.

“Clare, hi. Sure.”

“Something’s been brought to my attention. We should probably discuss it in my office, but I’ll be brief.” After looking both ways to ensure the hallway is clear, she lowers her voice. “I was alerted to some pictures and videos that have been posted online.”

The queasy feeling in my stomach was bad enough, but now my skin is prickling and I feel lightheaded.

“I’ve seen just a few of them, and honestly, I don’t plan to look into it further. What you do in your private life is none of my business, but it can’t be a distraction from your work, or from the events you plan here. It’s best if your private life is just that—private.”

Her eyes are fixed on mine, waiting for agreement. When I offer her a nod, she gives a small one in return. “Very good. Thank you.” And then she continues on her way, leaving me feeling ice cold and too hot all at the same time.

I make it to my room, grateful for the refuge it offers, but also wishing I could run out of the front door of the resort and never look back.

I decide to take the rest of the afternoon off, and when I can't settle my mind or find a way to plan myself out of the turmoil I'm feeling, I crawl into bed, curl into a ball, and listen to sad music until I eventually fall asleep.

When I wake up, it's dark outside, and I'm disoriented. Unfortunately, it doesn't take long for me to remember what had me in bed in the first place.

I get up and pour myself a glass of water and settle at the table with a notepad. I don't know if I'm planning to make a pros and cons list, or plan action steps for my exit from this fantasy life, but all I end up doing is staring at the blank sheet of paper.

Even though being with Gage, Kai, and Thorn is my problem, they also feel like my solution.

I could use some of Kai's irreverence, and I can imagine him telling me to "fuck everyone else's opinions." If only it were that easy.

Gage would offer tender comfort, and the desire to be in his arms right now is almost overwhelming.

But maybe what I need is to have some fun and take my mind off of things until I can think more clearly, and Thorn is the best at making me laugh until I forget all of my cares.

I need to figure things out on my own, though, and I need to get my emotions in order so that I can decide what to do in a logical way.

But my body and my heart ache for each of them, and when Gage sends a text, asking if I can come over, I don't hesitate nearly as much as I should.

In fact, I hurry over to his place, eager for him to make me feel good, because I know he will.

But he's not alone when I arrive.

Kai and Thorn are there, too.

GAGE

I haven't been able to think straight since Kai and I shared the night with Lexy.

But at times, I'm positive I'm thinking more clearly than I ever have in my entire life.

We need her with us—all of us. Day and night. And this routine we've gotten into, of Lexy dating the three of us separately, splitting her time, sharing stolen moments while pretending nothing serious is happening—all of that needs to evolve into something that's so much more.

Kai told Thorn about our shared experience the day after it happened. Keeping it to ourselves wouldn't have been right, and in Kai's mind, including Thorn is the logical next step toward forming our family of four. He'd considered having Thorn come over the other night, too, but didn't want to overwhelm Lexy.

Our plan is to talk things over with her tonight, because whatever happens depends on her, but as soon as I see her face, I know our planned discussion needs to wait.

She's smiling when I greet her at my door, but the expression is thin, only there for my benefit.

She hugs me much too briefly, and as she pulls back, she draws in a breath when she spots Kai and Thorn inside my apartment. "Oh."

"Sorry to take you by surprise. We wanted to talk to you, but first, tell me what's wrong." I still have hold of her arm, and I

give her a reassuring squeeze. She knows she's safe with us. Always.

"I didn't want to talk about it. I thought we could just ..."

There's a subtle tip of her head toward my bedroom as her words trail off.

"We definitely can, but whatever's bothering you, I want to help. Come in."

After ushering her inside, I step back to give Kai and Thorn room to greet her.

"Something to drink?" I ask after they've both given her hugs and kisses.

"Some of your juice? Maybe with vodka or tequila in it?"

"You really have had a bad day," Thorn says, keeping her tucked under his arm as he steers her to the sofa.

"I'm fine."

Kai sits on her other side, turning her toward him, his hands gripping her thighs. "You've said that, but we know better, Lexy. What's going on?"

As I fetch her requested drink, I listen in, only to hear Lexy attempt to evade Kai's questioning. She called me stubborn, but it's the two of them who truly are, if only with each other.

She accepts the juiced-up juice from me with another watery smile, and immediately takes a long drink.

All three of us are staring at her expectantly as she slides a coaster across the coffee table and sets the glass on it.

"It's something I need to work out," she says finally.

"And we can help you," Kai says.

"I just want to forget about it."

"Lay it out there, we'll work through it with you, and then we can move onto other things." Kai punctuates this by sliding a hand further up her leg, his thumb pressing into her inner thigh and stroking.

Her eyes flicker over to Thorn before she glares at Kai and lets out an exasperated sigh. “You’re so frustrating.”

“Yes, I am. Talk.”

After another sip of her drink, she asks, “Have you seen the stuff on social media about us? The pictures of us together?”

Kai shakes his head. “I don’t look at any of that stuff.”

“We hire someone to handle our social accounts,” I explain.

“I’ve seen some posts,” Thorn says, his eyes sympathetic as he strokes Lexy’s hair back from her shoulder. “There’s a lot of shit out there,” he explains to Kai and me. “I’ve learned to ignore all the negative stuff, but it’s hard at first.”

“What negative stuff?” I ask, as Kai’s expression turns dark.

“There are pictures of me with each of you. Pictures that make it clear we’ve ... expanded our friendship.”

“What the fuck? Someone’s spying on us?” Kai gets up, his hands clenching into fists.

“I’m pretty sure it’s your groupies taking the pictures.” There’s an accusatory undertone to Lexy’s words.

I take Kai’s vacated spot on the sofa. “I’m sure the pictures weren’t anything explicit, right? We all have excellent security at our homes.”

“No, nothing explicit, but together, the pictures make it clear that I’ve been dating all three of you, and I’m worried about how that could affect things for you.”

“For us?”

“For your work. Your reputations.”

Kai snorts. “I don’t give a fuck.”

“Well, you should,” Lexy says. “Clare said something to me today about the posts, warning me to keep my private life private, and my dad’s probably seen them. It’s only a matter of time before your parents find out about us.”

“Again, I don’t give a fuck,” Kai says, growing more heated. “What we do is none of Clare’s business either. We’re only

together on your personal time, and she has nothing to say about that.”

“She does if it hurts her business,” Lexy says, moving to get up. “I should probably go. I’m not in the mood to argue about this.”

Thorn reaches for her hand. “Stay, Lexy. Ignore him. Being alone to stress about this isn’t going to make you feel better.”

“I don’t know how you all handle it,” she says, letting him pull her back against him in a front-to-back hug.

I pull her feet into my lap and press my thumbs into her arches, the way I know she likes it. “Just like Thorn said, we learn to ignore it. I used to look at reviews and comments, back when our show was first on. Eventually I decided it was better for my peace of mind not to read any of it.”

“But it affects us. It could affect all of you.” Lexy’s still bothered, but she’s starting to succumb to the relaxing powers of my foot massage, and Thorn is rubbing her shoulders. “And I don’t know how you stand being in the public eye,” she adds. “I hate it.”

I glide my thumb over the hollow of her ankle with light pressure. “Let’s figure something out.”

KAI

We won't be having the discussion I wanted to have tonight.

In fact, tonight's conversation is going to result in us taking a big step backward, but I'm not that much of a selfish asshole to push Lexy into a situation she's not comfortable with.

I don't give a fuck about privacy when it comes to how I feel about her. I want the world to know. I want to tattoo our names on her forehead, and hers on mine.

But even though I can be an impulsive prick, I'm smart enough to know that now isn't the time to talk about the type of commitment I want—the commitment *we* want. We need to go at Lexy's pace, because if she isn't happy, then none of this means anything.

While Gage and Thorn talk to her, I go pour myself a glass of Gage's magical fucking juice, and add a healthy shot of vodka to it, because that was a brilliant idea Lexy had.

When I go back into the living room, my head cooler by a few degrees, the problem-solving discussion has led to its inevitable conclusion: we'll be discreet, because that's what Lexy wants.

I'd move us all to the middle of nowhere to be with her, so I suppose limiting our time together to closed-door spaces won't be so bad. For now.

Meanwhile, I'll be working on designs for those forehead tattoos.

“You good with that, brother?” Thorn asks, wanting my official buy-in. Lexy is lying between them, her previously angry features melted into submission by their massaging hands. As she wiggles to relax further into them, her shirt rides up, and I get a glimpse of bare, creamy skin that’s going to taste a whole hell of a lot better than Gage’s juice concoction.

“Good as I can be.” I swallow the last of my drink, set my glass on the coffee table, and lean down to stroke my hand up Lexy’s calf. “Are you ready for some more in-depth relaxation?”

She smiles up at me. “I will always want you.”

Something about the way she says it sends a trickle of unease down my spine, but I dismiss it as the emotional fallout of the discussion we’ve just had. One thing I’m confident of is our ability to take care of our woman, on every level possible, and I know tonight will bring us all closer together.

Scooping her up, I carry her into the bedroom and set her on her feet, tugging her close and sealing my mouth to hers. Her answering kiss is tentative at first, not her usual immediate and enthusiastic response, and I can tell part of her mind is still on the social media problem.

Pulling back, I take her face in my hands. “Lex. Is this okay? We just want to take care of you, but we can watch a movie or something instead, if you want.”

“No, I do not want.” She kisses me again, then nips my lower lip. “I want the three of you to drive me out of my mind until I can’t think about anything at all.”

I grin at her. “As you wish.” Thorn and Gage have followed us in, and now they move in close. Maybe this evening isn’t going how I expected, but it’s still going to be damn good.

THORN

As soon as my brother told me he and Gage had been with Lexy at the same time, I was envious. Not for the novelty of the experience, but because more of Lexy is always a good thing.

I've never been in a threesome before, let alone a foursome; I like being able to focus on one other person. But this is different. We guys are in sync after a lifetime of knowing each other, and all of us want the same thing: to give her as much pleasure as humanly possible.

We circle her body as we undress her, touching and stroking, kissing and nibbling. As each piece of clothing comes off, we tease her into another layer of arousal. By the time she's naked from the waist up, her skin is sheened, her breathing ragged.

I end up standing behind her as Kai and Gage each take one of her breasts in their mouths. Her moans deepen while I undo the button on her pants and lower the zipper. Suddenly, she gasps, her body arching, and I realize she's come without us even touching her clit.

Fuck, that's hot. My cock is about to poke a hole through my pants. I slide my hand slowly down over her abdomen and inside her panties, knowing I'll find her wet; but she's so slick and dripping that I can't hold back a groan.

"Are you a good girl?" I growl in her ear.

"Sometimes," she whispers, her voice already hoarse.

“Mmm. Good girls get fucked hard; bad girls get fucked harder.” I part her slippery folds and push one finger into her hot, tight pussy. “Do you want our big hard cocks in your sweet little holes?”

“Oh fuck yes,” she moans, gripping my finger so hard that I almost shoot my load, knowing just how good she’s going to feel when I’m inside her. I stroke in and out of her once, twice, slowly and deliberately. I’m doing my best to keep the heel of my hand away from her clit, tormenting her just a little.

She comes even harder when she has to wait for it.

“Thorn, please,” she begs. Gage and Kai are in tune with my plans, and are worshiping her belly, arms, and neck with kisses and licks and little half-bites. She twists in our hands, growing more frantic by the moment.

Fuck, this is so hot. I’ve loved all the times I’ve been with Lexy when it was just the two of us, but all three of us getting her off at once is so much better. Her pleasure gives us pleasure, and being able to witness it and share it with each other just magnifies it.

“Please!” she keens, her voice almost a sob.

I work another finger into her, still pumping slowly. “Tell us what you need, Lex.”

“I need—” she breaks off, panting, then gasps as I brush my thumb ever so lightly over the curls around her clit. “Fuck, I need you to fuck me.”

My patience has reached an end, for now. I press the heel of my hand firmly against her clit, pumping my fingers hard and fast. The sound and scent of her fills the room, stringing my nerves taut as piano wire with anticipation.

She comes again, and I think she might break my fingers before she’s done. Totally worth it if she does. When she goes limp, I hold her up while Kai and Gage remove what’s left of her clothing, then move her to the bed.

I put her on her hands and knees, because I know doggy style is one of Lexy’s favorite positions, and feed my cock into her swollen depths. A guttural sound escapes her as soon as I

bump her g-spot, and I speed up, knowing she's close again. Sure enough, it only takes a few seconds of pounding, my hips slapping her ass, for her to explode into another climax.

When I hold out a hand, Kai hands me the lube. Gage slips onto the mattress, face up, and I pull out so Lexy can ride him while I get her ready. We men haven't had to talk about what's next; the three of us seem to understand our roles instinctively. And Lexy trusts us completely, which makes this so intoxicating and so much more than just sex.

I ease my cock into her ass as carefully as I can, and she rewards me with more deep moans and no sign of pain. When I'm all the way in, I pause to let her adjust.

She looks around, spots Kai, and holds out a hand, urging him onto the bed with us, directing him with her hands to kneel near her head. I can see part of her expression as she closes her mouth over his cock, and it's blissful.

Gage and I start to move, stroking in and out, watching her head bob up and down as she sucks Kai off. I know most people wouldn't get this, but it feels like I'm in church, having a sacred experience. Sure, it feels good—really good—on the physical plane, but it's the fact that it's Lexy, and it's us, that makes this incredible.

We go slowly until Kai comes, and the way Lexy swallows him down almost does me in. But I hang on, and we speed up, thrusting as we listen to her cries, gauging her responses. She soars, like the most beautiful bird, up and up until she shatters.

It's like she can't stop coming, clenching around us over and over as we spear into her, and then Gage and I come too, our growls of "Fuck, Lexy, *fuck*" filling the room as we empty ourselves into her.

LEXY

I'm floating in the world's ultimate afterglow. All four of us, together ... could anything be better? Not for me.

I'm not sure how much time passes with all of us cuddled together before the men carry me into the bathroom for cleanup. After a glass of water, I'm ready for more. The men's attentions have done exactly what I wanted and driven every other thought from my mind.

"All right," I announce as we go back into the bedroom. "It's time for something different."

Kai sends me a look. "Different how?"

I flash him a grin. "I'm sure the three of you, with your creative minds, could think of a few million possibilities. But no, not *that* different."

"Well, then?" Gage says, quirking a mischievous eyebrow.

Sitting on the end of the bed, I gesture to the men. "Gather 'round, please." Their cocks are already at half-mast, growing as I watch, but I want to do much more than ogle them.

"Closer," I say when they're in a semicircle around me. They crowd together, until their beautiful, glorious cocks, now fully erect, are all within easy reach.

"Mmmm." Reaching out, I wrap my hands around the two outermost shafts—Kai's and Thorn's—and start going down on Gage as I stroke the two brothers. I alternate among them all, my head moving like I'm the apple-bobbing queen, my

hands tugging, sliding, touching as much of each of them as I can with only two hands and one mouth.

The men have learned, these past weeks, how much I enjoy pleasuring them like this. Eager to assist me in my endeavor, they squeeze even closer together, blocking out the overhead light, but not so much that I can't see what I'm doing.

I want to take two of them in my mouth at once, but they're too big; I'd have to dislocate my jaw. I do my best to please them, though, taking each of them as deep as I can, and before long my jaw is aching.

"That's enough," Kai decides.

"But you haven't even come!" I protest.

"I'm sure we'll get a chance again very soon."

Before he can say more, Gage picks me up at the waist and tosses me backward onto the mattress. "My turn," he says with a wicked smile, and he falls onto the bed and buries his head between my legs.

The night passes in a haze of pleasure. My men enjoy letting me order them around, though they're just as likely to take control when I least expect it. We don't sleep much, dozing off only to wake again and reach for each other. I have never felt so safe, so secure, so ... loved.

Damn.

This wasn't supposed to be about love.

Afterglow, I remind myself. The world's best. I wouldn't be the first person who's mistaken amazing sex for more than it really is.

When the morning comes, I'm tired, happy, and thankful. And I can feel all the worries I was trying to escape pressing back in on me.

What do I do now?

LEXY

I'm so afraid that I'll never get enough of them.

Seeing them individually, I was already hopelessly addicted; I know that now.

Being with them together? It's become as essential to me as air and water.

When I'm with them, I can't imagine *not* being with them. Forever.

But when I'm alone, which is mostly only during the day, the doubts creep in. Reality creeps in.

This can't go on forever.

The men, even Kai, have been discreet, just as we discussed. We haven't been in public together, but we spend our nights together—all four of us. I was severely sleep deprived for several days, but I didn't care.

I still can't get enough of them, but I hate feeling like I'm sneaking around. I hate worrying about Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez finding out about us. The last time I went to their house for the family dinner, I don't think I breathed the entire time, and the following week, I made an excuse not to go, which felt even worse.

I know what we're doing needs to stop, but I feel like I'm in quicksand—if quicksand were a supremely enjoyable thing that gave you endless orgasms—and I have no idea how to stop sinking deeper.

Even though wedding planning at Belle Epoque slows down during December, the rest of the meetings staff is in high gear managing a tightly-booked schedule of holiday parties, both personal and corporate, so I pitch in to help, and it provides a good excuse not to think about the fact that the current state of my personal life is unsustainable.

The month passes by quickly, and Las Vegas, for all its artificial glitz and glamor, is truly beautiful with all of its over-the-top holiday decor. It's frustrating not to be able to get out and enjoy it with my men. No more shopping with Gage, no nighttime bike rides with Thorn, no gallery visits with Kai.

The sex we have together more than makes up for what I'm missing, but it's not exactly what I'd call a relationship.

Even though I get to see Thorn at the resort almost every day, I purposely keep my distance unless I have to speak to him about a menu, because the last thing I'd want is for Clare to think I'm getting my personal life entwined with my professional one.

All of it is sweet torture, and I don't know if I'm sad or relieved when the work winds down and it's almost time for me to fly home to spend Christmas with my mom.

I'm looking forward to seeing her, but I get a sick feeling in my stomach when I think about spending the holiday without my men, especially because I know I need to use my time away to grow my resolve and develop a break-up plan for when I return.

What we're doing can't go on forever, and I need to be strong enough to stop things. I need to do what's right for all of us.

But first, we're spending one last night together before I leave.

We're gathering at Thorn's, because he has a special menu prepared, and I'm dazzled as soon as I walk into his kitchen.

"How long have you been working on all this? Did you start right after Thanksgiving?"

"Just today, though I prepped a few things earlier this week." He's mincing chives, and it's amazing how a small motion can make his biceps flex in such a mesmerizing way.

But the food temporarily draws my eyes away from him. “This is incredible.” There are conservative portions—just enough for three large men and me—of more dishes than I can count: individual shrimp cocktails, a plate of stuffed mushrooms, little triangles of puff pastry that appear to hold cranberry and a creamy white cheese, skewers with tomato, mozzarella, and basil ... it goes on and on.

“You should have warned me not to eat lunch,” I tell Thorn. “Can I help you with anything?”

“No, it’s all set. I just needed this garnish.” He sprinkles the chopped herbs onto twice-baked potatoes, the bright green providing a perfect contrast to the creamy cheese and bacon, and then steps close to give me a kiss.

I’m torn between craving the food and craving him.

“Where’s your wine opener?” Kai asks as Thorn and I pull apart. He’s holding two bottles in his hand, one white and one red.

“Top drawer, to the left of the refrigerator.” Thorn hands me a small bowl of spiced pecans. “Could you take this into the dining room?”

There, I find Gage lighting the final candle in a cluster of votives housed in glass cylinders of varying heights. They’re the perfect accent to a beautifully understated table set in red and silver. I can’t help but think how elegant this would look at a winter wedding banquet.

“Hi there.” Gage’s arms come around me as soon as I set down the dish.

“Hi yourself.” His kiss is warm and tender.

I tilt my head toward the kitchen. “Does Thorn cook like this for the two of you every Christmas?”

Gage’s laugh rumbles up from his chest as he shakes his head. “This is all for you, love.”

Love.

The word echoes in my head as Thorn and Kai come in, their arms laden with platters, and it continues to play on my mind

throughout our holiday meal, though the delicious food does a good job of keeping me in the moment at least some of the time.

“You really should consider doing this for a living.” I tell Thorn as I hold up a savory bacon-wrapped scallop before making it disappear in my mouth.

He grins back at me. “I’ve thought about it.”

“It’s really wonderful how all three of you are putting your special talents to use in the world.”

“You say that as if the same isn’t true for you.” Gage’s foot finds mine under the table, giving me a private caress.

“I don’t have any talents,” I scoff.

“What about your organizational skills, and the beautifully detailed wedding celebrations you orchestrate?” Thorn says.

“Talents and abilities aren’t the same thing.” It’s possible that the wine Thorn has paired with each course is having a bit of a depressive effect on me, but it could also be the thought that’s been in the back of my mind since we sat down: I may never celebrate Christmas with these men again, not like this. Even if I manage to remain friends with them after I move back to Atlanta—if I move back to Atlanta—things will never be the same.

LEXY

Kai's been watching me closely, and I wait for him to jump in and argue, because he rarely passes up an opportunity, but he remains quiet, his eyes looking ... troubled, if I had to label what I see there.

"You are very talented," Gage says, reaching for my hand this time and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Would anyone like more to drink?" Thorn asks, rising from his chair. "I'm going to open another bottle of the red."

I shake my head. "I'd better stop. In fact, I'm not sure I can eat another bite either. Who wants more ham?" Both Kai and Gage reach for the small slices that remain on my plate.

I'm always amazed how much these three men can put away. As kids, Kai and Thorn in particular were picky eaters, even with their mom's great cooking, but their appetites have definitely grown. I suppose it takes a lot to fuel bodies that look like theirs.

"I don't suppose you want to go out for New Year's?" Kai says after swallowing a big bite, just as Thorn returns with a fresh bottle of wine.

"What will you be doing?" I ask.

"Whatever *you* want to do," Gage says.

"We usually spend it on the Strip. They close it down to traffic. There are fireworks and all sorts of madness. It's pretty wild," Kai says.

"Sounds like it."

“We can stay in, if you’d prefer,” Thorn says. “And there can still be all sorts of madness.” He flashes a wicked grin, letting me know exactly what kind of wild activities he’s suggesting.

They’re aiming to make New Year’s plans with me, and I’m aiming to go to my mom’s and make plans for how to break up with them. It feels cruel not to tell them how I’m feeling about things, but I don’t want to put a dark mood on this nice dinner.

The holiday season definitely isn’t the time for talking about heavy stuff. There’ll be plenty of time for that in the new year, after I figure out exactly what to say to them. If, that is, I can figure out how to end things without also ending our friendship in the process.

“I think staying in would be best,” I tell Thorn, “but I don’t want to keep you from your usual plans.”

Gage has stood to clear plates, and he bends to kiss the top of my head. “You’re funny sometimes.” He says this as if I’ve said something very silly.

“I know you said you’re full, but do you have room for hot chocolate?” Thorn asks. As I start to shake my head, he adds, “Peppermint hot chocolate, with whipped cream and dark chocolate chips?”

“Ooh, I guess I can find some room for that.” Knowing Thorn, the drink will not come from a little packet, and the cream will probably be freshly whipped.

Kai and Gage clear away the plates and platters and won’t let me help. Instead, I’m instructed to relax in the living room. Soft holiday instrumentals are playing, and the white lights on Thorn’s small tree are twinkling in the dimly-lit room.

I close my eyes for a beat, and seal this night into my memory. I’m warm, extremely well fed, and with three of the people who are most important to me. And I may never have this particular moment again.

The drink turns out to be even more creamy and decadent than I imagined, and I know it tastes even better since I’m enjoying it while surrounded by my three men, Thorn and Gage on either side of me on the sofa, Kai just to the side in a chair.

“We’ll miss you while you’re gone,” Thorn says.

I swallow a gulp of the drink—and the lump in my throat. “I’m sure the time will pass quickly. It’s just a week. Will you have some time off over the holiday?” I ask Thorn.

“Most of Christmas Day. I might go in, since you won’t be here.”

“Will your parents be hosting the family as usual?”

“They will.” He slides his hand behind my back, pulling me a little closer. “They’ll miss you being here, too.”

“Please give them my very best wishes. I sent them a card and a little gift.”

“That was nice of you.” Thorn brushes his lips along my cheek to my ear, giving it a little nibble.

“How about you, Gage?” I ask through a giggle as I squirm in Thorn’s arms. “How will you be spending Christmas?”

“I’m flying out to see my family,” he says. “I have a lot of catching up to do with them.”

“They’ll be so glad to see you.” I have fond memories of Gage’s family, and wonder what they would think of our new adult relationship. They might not mind, but I’m not at all sure about that.

“Speaking of gifts ...” Kai reaches down on the opposite side of his chair and brings out a small garnet-colored bag that had been concealed there.

I jump up. “Wait, let me get the gifts I brought.” I have three thin boxes, all the same size, each wrapped in different paper and tied with ribbons.

“Open them at the same time,” I instruct as I hand them each one of the boxes.

All three men tear into the boxes as if it’s a contest, and then each of them pulls out a frame. The photos in the frames are identical, but I chose each frame to specially match each man’s home decor.

“I remember this day,” Thorn says first. “It was epic.”

A low laugh rumbles from Kai's throat. "I still say you cheated," he accuses his brother.

"You're just a sore loser. Look who's wearing the gold medal."

In the picture, I'm standing between Gage and Kai, who have their arms around my shoulders. Thorn's hamming it up, stretched out on his side on the grass in front of us, one hand holding out the construction-paper medal that hangs around his neck, so that it shows well for the camera.

The four of us spent at least a week of our summer vacation that year creating silly games to include in our own personal Olympics competition. My mom officiated with a stopwatch, and when it was all over, she had the difficult job of getting the four of us to stop laughing long enough to pose, so she could capture the moment.

Gage stands and pulls me into a hug before pressing his lips to mine. "How thoughtful of you to find this old picture. Thank you."

"There's a gift card, too," I say.

The pictures didn't seem like enough on their own, so I got Gage and Kai gift cards for the coffee shop that's around the corner from Beasts Ink. Thorn's card is from a spot near his apartment.

Thorn reaches for my hand and pulls me over to him. "Come get a kiss from the Olympic champion." He shoots Kai a cocky look before putting all of his focus on me. "Our three-legged race was the highlight of that day for me," he says.

"But you and I lost that one," I recall.

"Totally worth it to be tied to you. You might not remember, but that event was all my idea." He pulls me much closer to him than I was that day and gives me a kiss that makes me forget he was ever a boy.

Kai pulls me into his lap when I walk over to him. His expression is serious when he says, "This is very special, but you didn't have to get us anything. All we want is you."

I don't know what to say to this, especially because he still has me locked in his gaze, and there's an intensity there that goes beyond even his normal level of fierceness.

He kisses me then, tenderly at first before he deepens the kiss, and then he stills but doesn't pull away, as if he's waiting for me to take the lead, which is unlike him. It's a question, and I'm not prepared to answer.

I kiss his closed lips and then pull back, covering my discomfort with a smile.

Kai hands me the red gift bag. "This is for you."

I find a long, thin box inside. After shimmying off the ribbon that wraps around it, I open the box to reveal a delicate gold necklace.

"It's beautiful," I say immediately, touched that they've given me something as romantic as jewelry.

Kai arranges it so that I can see it better. There are three sparkling diamonds set along the chain, and the piece has a beautiful artisanal quality, making me wonder if they had it made specially for me.

"Oh, wow," is all I can say. *They didn't need to give me a gift, because all I want is them.*

"One gem for each of us," he says.

"It's gorgeous. Thank you." I kiss him again, and this time it's a smooth give and take as his hands slide up my sides, his fingers holding onto me possessively.

But then he breaks away and turns me so that I can go to Gage, who takes me in his arms again, wrapping me in his warmth, his lips brushing mine as our bodies fit together like they were meant to be.

I start to thank him, too, but find that I'm getting choked up, memories both near and distant filling my mind, and when he passes me to Thorn, I have to keep myself from blinking so tears don't fall.

Images of the tattoo on Gage's chest ... the mural at the park in our old neighborhood ... little edible treats Thorn has

brought to my desk at work ... meals together now and in the distant past ... the four of us racing each other on foot as kids, running so hard that we'd lose our breath and collapse together in a heap on the grass ... the four of us tangled up in bed as adults—all of this and so much more speeds through my mind like a movie on fast forward and repeat.

Every moment is beautiful and impermanent, and it feels like it's all of those memories that make up who I am. Like they're holding me together, and I'll fall to pieces or fade away without them.

The tears are uncontainable as Thorn strokes a hand up my arm. When he starts to speak, there's a quaver in his voice that catches me off guard. "Lexy, I love you. I've always been in love with you, even as a boy."

More tears come, and somehow, thankfully, I manage to keep it from turning into a full-blown ugly cry, which is what I really need to let it all out. The men assume I'm touched by the gift—and I very much am, but that's not why I'm crying.

It's just all so unbelievably bittersweet. I'm so in love with them, hopelessly and endlessly, and it's so cruel that love and life don't work that way, a woman being in love with three men.

And it's not fair that their lives are on such different paths than mine, but the paths they're on are what's best for them, and maybe if I hadn't moved away, they wouldn't have found the success that they did. Maybe I would have held that back, and that's the last thing I want to do.

Thorn holds me, Gage and Kai gather in around me, and the three of them wipe away my tears and place their gift around my neck, settling the diamonds at the center of my chest. They bathe me in kisses and caresses until I almost forget my cares.

Then they carry me into the bedroom for the most tender, most pleasurable, most heartbreaking experience I'll ever have.

LEXY

It's raining in Atlanta, a cold, gray, dreary winter day.

The weather in my heart is much the same.

I miss my men so much. I'm miserable here without them. I did my best to be cheerful over Christmas for my mom's sake, though I know she wasn't fooled, but now that the holiday is past I can't seem to shake the gloom.

Scott and I met up once for lunch, and it was a stilted and awkward occasion. We managed some polite talk, but had very little to say to each other. "You've changed," he said finally, though he avoided his usual judgmental tone.

I was silent for long moments before I finally said, "I think I've gone back to being myself."

He didn't even try to bring up the idea of us getting back together. My emotional distance must have been unavoidably obvious, even to him. Or maybe he's starting to get better at paying attention.

It would be one of life's little ironies, I suppose, if me leaving Scott helped him become the kind of man I wouldn't want to leave—in some alternate universe where my men didn't exist.

I can't stop thinking of them as mine. I can't stop thinking of them, period.

The only thing that stops me from taking the next plane to Vegas is knowing that we can't go on the way we have been. I can't be happy if they're not happy, and ultimately, they'll have a better life without me.

I try to make plans; they used to be my superpower. How I'll tell the men it's over, and how I'll help train a replacement before I quit my job with Clare, because there's no way I can stay in Vegas and stay away from the men. But the plans won't come. It's like trying to thread an invisible needle, impossible to bring into focus.

Every day, it gets harder to be away from them, until one night I'm in my old bedroom, eyeing my suitcase and wondering if I can catch a red-eye this evening.

When my mom taps at my door, I'm momentarily startled. She's been leaving me to brood for the most part, baking fresh bread and making some of my old comfort foods, but I've been bracing for her to stage an intervention.

I don't expect what she does say, though. "There's someone here to see you."

I sit up, frowning. "Who is it?"

"He says his name is Art Gilchrist."

I'm even more puzzled now. I don't think I know anyone by that name, though it sounds vaguely familiar. I follow my mother out to the living room, where a man in expensively casual clothing is lounging on the sofa.

He bounces to his feet to greet me. "Lexy, hi. Art Gilchrist. Is it okay if I call you Lexy?" His smile is too practiced, his confidence too smooth. My brain blares a warning: *show business*.

I'm so confused by his presence that I don't correct him on my name. "Um, sure. What's this about?"

"I just wanted to talk to you for a minute; I apologize for dropping in like this. Is it okay if we talk in here?" he asks my mother, and she takes the hint and excuses herself to the kitchen.

I sit on the opposite end of the sofa from him. My brain's had time to add two and two, so instead of letting him launch a spiel at me, I take the initiative. "You're the producer. For the reality show."

His smile is wide, his teeth perfectly white. It's disturbing. "That's right. The network has got big plans, which is why I wanted to talk to you. You see, Lexy—" he leans forward, his tone confidential "—there's an exciting new concept for this show."

"Oh?"

"That's right. It's going to be more than the tattoos—it'll be a dating show also. Sort of a *Tattooed Bachelor*, if you get my drift."

My stomach threatens to deposit my dinner all over his fancy threads. "I see."

"It can't work if the guys aren't single." He hasn't lost the smile, though at least his unnatural teeth aren't visible anymore. "Oh, I meant to say we're bringing Thorn in, too. We'll have some shows that include him and his cooking, with an eye to giving him his own show next season."

Message received. *Hands off all of them*. Of course, he doesn't know that I could never date just one of them, any more than I could pick just one molecule of air to breathe.

I want to punch Art Gilchrist right in his perfect mouth, but he's done me one favor: I know now that I can't go back to Las Vegas, not even for a little while.

All the men's plans, their dreams of expanding their business, of Kai opening his gallery, of them doing more to benefit the community—the money from this new show will finance all of it. It will be so good for them, and enable them to do so much good for others.

How can I stand in the way of that?

The thought of them dating other women, marrying them, makes me want to scream and break things. But they deserve that, if they want it. They deserve their stardom, their success, and they'll use it for good, because that's the kind of men they are.

The best thing I can do for them is stay far away.

My heart feels like a heap of jagged shards in my chest. It's shattered, and will never be whole again. Huge pieces of it are on the other side of the country, irretrievable.

I tried so hard to keep everything light and casual, and failed completely. In this moment, forced to confront the reality of never seeing them again, I can't lie to myself anymore.

I'm not just in love with them, like an intense but temporary infatuation fueled by all the great sex; I love them, all three of them, now and forever, with all of my heart.

But that's my problem, not the men's. "Don't worry," I tell Gilchrist. "I'm not going back to Las Vegas."

The smile gets wider; the teeth appear again. "The network will be very happy to hear that. We'll have to send you a nice New Year's gift."

"No need." I can't wait for him to leave so I can go to my room and cry in peace. Fortunately, he's as eager to get away as I am to be rid of him, and a minute later I close the door behind him.

"What was that about?" Mom asks as I pass the kitchen.

"Nothing," I say quietly. "Nothing at all."

LEXY

Clare Hoffman should be considered for sainthood. When I wrote a very apologetic email to explain that I wouldn't be returning to Las Vegas for personal reasons, she was unbelievably gracious, even offering to provide a recommendation, should I need one.

That is the one positive thing that's happened during the past week.

Outside of that, I've been mopey at the best of times, and at the worst, I've curled into a ball in my bed and soaked my pillow with tears. Or maybe the worst is when the tears won't even come, when I'm just numb.

My mom's been pretty understanding. She's never been the type to say *I told you so*, and she hasn't even asked me about my career plans yet. Or any other plans.

Which is good, because my superpower has deserted me. I'm incapable of planning what I want for lunch, let alone anything more complicated. I alternate between tears and apathy, with brief transition periods from one state to the other when I hate myself for being so pathetic.

My only consolation is knowing I did the right thing for my men. And they'll always be *my men*, even though I know they aren't and they never really were. It was all just a fantasy, and the trip back to reality has been awfully rough.

My mom had a few days off during the holidays, but she had to go back to work yesterday. She'll be off again tomorrow for New Year's Day, and I don't know what's worse—being alone

to wallow in my grief, or trying to hide my feelings when she's home, so she won't be too concerned about me.

I oscillate between having no appetite and wanting to find comfort in food, and I'm looking through the pantry to see what kinds of Christmas cookies are left when the doorbell rings.

The next door neighbor has visited a couple of times since I've been here, and Mom likes to shop for online bargains, so I'm expecting one or the other when I answer the door.

What I find instead are three massive men, achingly beautiful and mightily pissed off.

Even Gage looks stern, and normally-easygoing Thorn is scowling. And Kai? His expression is volcanic, just on the verge of an eruption.

None of them wait for me to invite them in before they storm past me.

Kai turns on me as soon as I close the door behind them. "You left." He steps forward, jabbing a finger at me. "You left us. And this time, it was your own damn choice."

I don't know how to answer him. I'm still trying to make sense of the three of them standing here.

Taking a step backward, I wrap my arms around myself protectively. "Aren't you supposed to be preparing for your new show?"

"We canceled it," Kai thunders.

"You what? Why?"

Gage comes up alongside Kai, fire in his eyes. "We found out what the producer told you."

"Oh." I glance around the room as if it holds the answers, then look back at him. "How?"

"He told us." Thorn snorts in contempt. "Idiot. He thought he was doing us a favor."

My mind is reeling, trying to put together pieces that don't quite fit. "But ... all your plans. Your future expansions—"

“Don’t matter!” Kai roars.

There’s a long moment of silence before I whisper, “Kai.”

“Fuck.” He paces across the room before whirling back toward me. “I’m so fucking mad at you.”

I stare at the floor. “I deserve that.”

“What exactly did he say to you?”

I don’t want to answer. “Why?”

“Because, since when are you a fucking doormat? And why aren’t you yelling back at me?”

A headache suddenly builds right in the center of my forehead. Making my way over to the couch, I sink onto it and raise my hand to rub the spot. “Kai ...”

“Did he threaten you?” Gage asks.

My head whips up. “What?”

He arches an eyebrow as if to say, *You heard me.*

I sigh, feeling weighed down and exhausted, even as a buzz of energy vibrates deep inside me at the nearness of these men. “He said that it was up to me how well your new show would do, because the audience would be upset if you weren’t single.”

“And you believed him?” Kai accuses.

“It’s a dating show, Kai, and I’ve seen your groupies. They’re at your shop every single day, and they hate me. Thorn, you have women proposing marriage in the comments of your cooking videos. What was I supposed to think?”

“You were supposed to fucking talk to us.”

My temper finally snaps. “Right. I was supposed to ask you to give up all your future plans for me.”

Kai shakes his head. “You still don’t get it.”

“Get what, Kai?”

“You *are* our future plans. We only want you.” He pulls me up from the couch, taking my hand and pressing it to his chest.

“Everything else is negotiable.”

I want to believe him. I want his arms to wrap around me and never let me go, but I don't think he's seeing the reality of the situation. It's not just the show. It's our families, it's this unconventional situation, and the way we live our lives ...

Thorn steps up, and I pull my hand back. “Tell us the truth, Lexy. Did you really stay away because of what the producer said?”

“I believed what he said.” I take a deep breath. “And I wasn't willing to share you. I know it's selfish and hypocritical, but I can't help how I feel.”

“Share us with who?” Gage asks.

“The women on the new show. I don't even know how I've managed to share you with all of your groupies.”

“Lex, what the fuck are you talking about?” Kai's anger has diffused into irritated confusion, and I glare back at him, frustrated that he's choosing not to understand me.

He scrubs his hands over his face. When he speaks again, his voice has gone very quiet. “Lexy. None of us has been with anyone else since you came back to Vegas, and we're sure as hell not making a tv show that requires us to date anyone who isn't you.”

A little glow starts to form in my chest. I'd hoped that they weren't seeing other women while they were with me, but we never had any agreements or commitments. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, Lexy,” Gage says. “You're it.”

I'm afraid to let the glow get too big. “But the show ... it will provide so many opportunities for you.”

“None of that means anything without you.” Kai's tone is tender but firm as he grips my hip in his big hand, his fingers pressing in possessively.

Thorn slides his hand around my middle as he gazes down at me. “You're the only thing that matters, Lexy.”

I'm going to cry. I'm not sure everything has been worked out, but for the first time, I believe it can be.

"I love you," I say. "All of you."

"We know," Kai says, "and it's about time you figured it out."

When I give him a playful shove, he grips my wrist in his free hand. "I'm still mad at you, though," he says.

I give him a tremulous smile. "So ... spankings?"

His mouth twitches, and then he bursts out laughing, and the little glow in my chest grows into a fully-formed ball of happiness.

"You sure as fuck know how to bribe me," Kai says, sliding his hand down to give one side of my ass a squeeze big enough to make me jump.

"Come here." Gage pulls me into his arms, covering my mouth with his, making silent promises with his lips and his hands.

Thorn is next, and the look in his eyes makes new tears prickle at the corners of mine. "Lexy," is all he says before giving me the kiss of a lifetime. A kiss I'll never get enough of in this lifetime.

"My mom will be home soon," I tell them when I catch my breath and realize where I am.

"We'll take her to dinner," Kai says, "and after that, we're taking you home. Happy New Year, Lex."

I've never felt more like the new year was the start of something wonderful.

EPILOGUE

LEXY

One month later

“Ooh, that’s so pretty! I love it!” Ava crouches down to get a better look at the patch of skin just below my hip that I’m revealing for her. We’re in a parking lot, but the open car door shields us from anyone else’s view. “Did it hurt?”

I grimace, remembering the recent pain. “It did, but it was worth it.”

It was my idea to get a tattoo, and both Kai and Gage seemed excited at the prospect. I had no idea what I wanted, except for the fact that I wanted both of them to work on it. They collaborated, and finally settled on an abstract design that represents the four of us entwined into infinity. The design is intricate, but somehow appears simple at the same time, and I love it. I love that it will always be a part of me, just as they have always been.

“I take it this means everything is going well?” It’s a straightforward question, but her tone and facial expression are filled with playful curiosity.

I roll my eyes with a good-natured smile. “Everything is fine, thanks.”

She never gets tired of teasing me about my three boyfriends. But there’s a wistful undertone to it sometimes, so I add, “Don’t worry, you’ll find the right person for you. Or persons, who knows.”

Ava shakes her head as we make our way out of the lot on foot. “I just need one. One good, solid, reliable man.”

I grin at her. “That’s what I used to think.” We turn the corner toward Beasts Ink, and I give her a sidelong look. “Might that one solid man be a certain guard at a certain tattoo shop?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Ava says, somehow managing to keep a straight face, but purposely avoiding looking at me.

I nudge her arm with my elbow, happy that I have something to tease *her* about for a change. “I mean ... Ember could have met us at the mall, but for some reason you suggested we stop by and pick her up.”

“As if you don’t come by here almost daily yourself,” she retorts, her face reddening and her stride picking up speed.

Even as I’m laughing, I brace myself for the ever-present cluster of groupies that will be lingering at the shop’s entrance, but to my surprise, the sidewalk is clear today. As we reach our destination, two frowning women are leaving, Brax’s large frame filling the doorway behind them.

He gives me a nod. “Lexy.” Then his voice changes, almost imperceptibly, but not quite, when he says, “Ava.” This isn’t the first time Ava’s found an excuse to come by here with me, and it’s becoming clear the interest is mutual between her and the guard.

“What’s going on? Where’s the usual crowd?” I ask, looking around. Inside the shop, it appears to be business as usual, just no groupies.

“Special clients in today,” Brax says, nodding toward Gage’s and Kai’s stations, and as soon as he says it, I remember them mentioning it, something about football players. “NFL stars,” Brax adds. “I’m keeping the lurkers away today, but you two can go in.”

“I’m glad it’s okay if we lurk,” I say with a laugh. “Thanks, Brax.”

“I’ll catch up to you,” Ava says as she lingers by the door, and I walk in with a big smile on my face.

Ember isn’t currently at her desk, so I head directly for my men, giving nods to the other artists who happen to look up,

but being mindful not to disturb anyone. Then I do a double take, because Gage and Kai's clients are twins, two massively-built men.

Kai spots me as I hover at a distance. "Lexy. C'mon over. Guys, this is Lexy, our girlfriend," he says to the identical men.

Girlfriend. I love hearing him say it, and I love calling him, Gage, and Thorn my boyfriends, even though they are so much more to me. I do worry about how strangers will accept the idea of the men sharing me, but these particular clients don't seem at all surprised, and in fact, they exchange a look, both of them grinning when Kai makes this introduction.

"Lexy, meet Brock and Cody Easton, from the Leopards." I'm not a huge sports fan, but of course I've heard of these two. Everyone in the entire country knows their names. No wonder Brax has been tasked with keeping fans away today. My men are enough of a draw, but if someone were to post about the Easton twins being here, the shop would be mobbed.

"So nice to meet you," one of them says.

"We've been hearing a lot about you," the other adds.

"Very nice to meet you both," I say as Gage breaks away to give me a quick kiss before he gets back to work. Of course I'm curious about the tattoos the famous athletes are getting, but my cheeks go pink when I see the nearly-completed pieces.

Their tattoos are identical; plump peaches so ripe and lush that juice is dripping from them, the kind of peaches that bring to mind a woman's backside. Circling each peach is a banner that reads "Megalicious."

One of the men, Cody I think, catches me looking. "Our wife's name is Megan," he explains.

Our wife. Kai gives me a very significant look.

My mind is reeling. These men are just as public as mine, and they're both with the same woman, and somehow succeeding? I want to ask how they handle the attention, if they get any

negative publicity, if other women are jealous ... but the men are here to get their tattoos done, not to answer my questions.

“Here she is now,” Brock says. Ember’s approaching, along with a beautiful woman with gorgeous red curls.

“Everything okay?” Cody asks. “I thought you were only going for coffee.”

The obviously beloved Megan holds up a shopping bag. “We passed the cutest kids’ store. I had to get souvenirs for the boys.” Giving me a smile, she explains, “Our boys wanted to come with us to Vegas, but sometimes Mommy and Daddies need a vacation by ourselves.”

And they have kids. *Plural*. Kai and Gage are both looking at me now, their eyes full of ideas.

On the way to the mall, Ava and I catch up with Ember, talking about movies we’ve seen, shows we’ve watched, and how our jobs and Ember’s studies are going.

I’m still in my wedding-planner position at Belle Epoque. Despite my resignation email to Clare, she hadn’t hired a replacement for me. “January is a pretty slow month for weddings,” she said, “and besides, I had a feeling you might be back.”

I’m continuing to help out the rest of the team while wedding season gears back up. I’ve got a lot of new potential clients contacting me, though, thanks to Kai.

It took all of his persuasive powers, given my dislike of the spotlight, but he convinced me in the end that we should go public about our relationship. First, there was a message that all three men posted on their social media accounts simultaneously, announcing that they were each, and all, in a committed relationship with me. And then, thanks to a friend of Gage’s who works for a local tv station, we did a brief interview for a segment that aired on a weekend show.

I was afraid it would bring out the haters, and we did get some negative feedback, especially from people who wanted to lecture us about the immorality of our behavior. But mostly, to my surprise, the response has been muted or positive—and, to my immense relief, the groupies have gone silent.

The people who haven't been silent are the ones who are also in poly relationships. Quite a few of them want me to plan commitment ceremonies for them, and instead of being concerned about my private life interfering with my professional life, Clare is pleased that my new niche is drawing in more clients and visitors. Several of the couples who've contacted me have also made favorable comments.

I'm relieved that the outcome has been largely beneficial. Kai, of course, now teases me whenever there's a decision to be made, saying that I should trust his judgment because obviously it's impeccable. I tease him back, but the truth is that his instincts about me have always been pretty solid.

"Have the guys heard anything more about their new show?" Ava asks.

"Things are moving along. Nothing's final yet, but it's close." And no, it's not the *Tattooed Bachelor*. After one extremely heated call that I only heard about after the fact, Kai, Gage, and Thorn severed ties with Art Gilchrist, to put it mildly.

I was afraid that this was a missed opportunity for them, because even though they weren't interested in dating other women, the reality show would have been a huge boost to their careers. However, another development person reached out to them shortly after, this time for a tattoo competition series, in which Kai and Gage will serve as judges. No dating whatsoever, nothing about their personal lives, and no filming at their shop, unless they want cameras there for publicity purposes.

Their time commitment will only be about six weeks to film an entire season, and they should get a lot of exposure from it, so my fingers are crossed.

Thorn wouldn't be involved with the show, but he's perfectly okay with that. All he needs to do is post a new cooking video

to get plenty of exposure, and the increasing business at Belle Epoque is keeping him busier than ever.

Overall, everything is going wonderfully ... with one exception. The one cloud in our bright blue sky is how Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez have reacted to the news of our relationship. There have been no recriminations, no anger, but no words of acceptance or understanding, either.

I know the tension there is not entirely their fault; part of me feels guilty, like my inner twelve-year-old is just waiting for the backlash.

I need to put on my big girl panties and talk to them about it. My birthday is coming up, which is why I've asked Ava and Ember to go dress shopping with me, and the least I can do is start acting like the adult I surely am.

THORN

“Okay, Mama?” I ask.

She pats my arm. “Sí, Tomás.” The two of us have been cooking in her kitchen all afternoon, the first time we’ve actually collaborated on a big meal, and it’s gone pretty well.

Leaning down, I kiss her cheek. “I love you, Mama.”

I get a look back, the kind that says *You can’t sweet talk me*. But I’m going to keep right on using every skill at my disposal to win my mother over, so she can then do the same with my father.

My parents are very accepting people, in most ways. But they have their traditional side, and the news that Kai, Gage, and I are all in a relationship with Lexy has been a big adjustment for them.

We guys sat them down for a talk before we made our public announcement—without Lexy there, because we wanted to protect her if there was any immediate fallout. She let us do it that way, which showed me how worried she was about their reaction.

Because they love us and they’re awesome parents, they’ve tried to understand, but it’s fair to say they’re not entirely comfortable with the situation, which means that Lexy is no longer entirely comfortable around them. And that makes the three of us hurt for her.

If Kai could bulldoze his way to a solution, he would, but he understands that won’t work. Gage hasn’t said much, but his quiet demonstrations of respect for both Lexy and my parents

at our family dinners are probably doing more good than any words.

As for me, I try to keep everything as easygoing as possible, on the theory that time will accomplish what nothing else can.

Kai comes in from the living room and grabs a stack of napkins for the table that's been set up for all the snacks. I glance at the clock on the wall. "She'll be here soon."

"Everything is ready," my mother says, calm instead of excited, and I wish I could borrow some of my brother's steamroller qualities and force her into the right emotional state. Instead, I look over the results of all our work with a critical eye, making sure everything is as it should be.

"She just pulled up," Gage calls from the living room.

"Showtime," I mutter, and take off my apron.

GAGE

I turn and hold my finger to my lips as Lexy climbs from her car. Her expression is subdued, and it makes my stomach tense. Family dinners have become more of a duty than a joy since we went public, and I hate that, for all of us.

My hope is that today might go some small way toward mending the breach. The love and respect between the four of us and the Sanchezes is still there, so I know things will be okay eventually, but my need to take care of Lexy is strong. I want to fix this for her.

I meet her at the door, blocking her view of the living room with my body. “Hi. Come on in.” Her answering smile is wan, and I send up a silent prayer before I move aside, simultaneously turning the lights back on.

“Surprise!” everyone shouts. “Happy birthday!” Ava’s here, and Ember, and Brax, and Clare, along with other work colleagues and friends.

Lexy stares, genuinely shocked. And then her hand covers her mouth, and her eyes fill with tears.

“Oh, baby. Come here.” I pull her in and wrap my arms around her, cuddling her against my chest. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” she manages, her voice thick with emotion.

“Don’t be sorry. Just talk to me. What is it?” I’m pretty sure I know, but I need her to say it.

Still huddled against me, she whispers, “Do you think they’ll ever forgive me?”

My chest goes tight.

And then I snap.

I am normally the most patient of men, but I have had enough. Putting my arm around Lexy's shoulders, I march her into the kitchen.

Mrs. Sanchez is there with Thorn, about to carry the last of the food trays into the living room. Mr. Sanchez has been tinkering in his garage all day, and has just come in the back door. He looks at Lexy, and his mouth tightens.

I pull out a chair at the table and usher Lexy into it. "Talk to her," I order the couple. "Now."

Mrs. Sanchez is staring at me. I take the tray from her hands and go back to the living room.

Thorn follows me. "Good for you," he says *sotto voce*.

I hope I've done the right thing, and not made it all worse.

KAI

I don't think I've ever seen Gage lose his temper before, not really. And sure, he lost it in a very contained Gage sort of way, but that doesn't lessen the impact. When the ultimate good son—and my parents do consider him to be their son, too—starts kicking ass and taking names, it demands attention.

Resisting the strong temptation to stand at the kitchen door and eavesdrop, I turn to the guests, who look worried, even shocked. “We'll get started in a minute,” I tell them quietly. “Have some snacks and drinks in the meantime. What can I get everybody?”

Thorn starts listing the many choices on the table, making chips and dip sound like the ultimate haute cuisine. Of course, he made the dip, so it'll be spectacular, but his over-the-top descriptions of the food get everyone chuckling, and the mood in the room lightens considerably.

The three of us get everyone loaded up with food and beverages, though I have one ear cocked in the direction of the kitchen at all times, ready to charge in there if it sounds like things are going to hell. So far, all I can hear is the quiet murmur of voices. I love my parents, but if they hurt Lexy I swear I will yell at them—which, for all my impatient ways, I have never done.

Gage gets the music going, and he and Thorn start circulating among the guests, keeping everyone chatting and distracted from what's going on in the next room. I need to do that too, but I can't tear myself away from the vicinity of the kitchen,

so I talk to everyone near me in short bursts, then stop to listen.

So far, so good. I take a deep breath and force myself to relax, knowing that will help everyone around me dial it down a notch as well. Whatever happens, we'll deal with it.

I hear chairs scrape, and risk a peek into the kitchen. Lexy and my parents are in a three-way hug; I hope to fuck that's as good a sign as it looks like. A few seconds later, Lexy emerges from the kitchen, and I wrap her up in a bear hug because fuck, I need one.

After a long moment, I ease back and look down at her. "You okay?"

She's been crying, but she nods and smiles. "Everything's okay now."

My parents still haven't come out from the kitchen, so I'm skeptical, but now is not the time to probe. "Have some food. You want some of Thorn's Miracle Dip? Not to be confused with Miracle Whip; that stuff is nasty. His dip, however, is—" I look around and lower my voice "—almost as delicious as you are."

Lexy blushes and makes big *Hush your mouth!* eyes at me. I just grin and start loading up a plate for her.

A few minutes later, Gage goes into the kitchen and doesn't come back. Thorn looks at me with raised eyebrows and goes in there himself, coming back to indicate the other part of the house with a tilt of his head.

There's a side door from the kitchen that leads to the hallway where the bedrooms are. My parents must have taken themselves off in that direction. Are they boycotting the party?

But then Gage comes back with them in tow, and they seem their normal selves. He looks embarrassed, and I make a note to ask him later what that's about.

The time passes more quickly than I'd expected. My parents and we guys stay busy making sure there's no shortage of food or drinks. People dance, laugh, talk, and eat—a perfect party. I

keep an eye on Lexy, and she seems a little quieter than usual at first, but she starts to shine as the party goes on.

Hours later, the last of the guests finally leaves, and my parents are in the kitchen. Before we go to help them wash up, the three of us gather around Lexy. “You don’t have to talk about it if you’d rather not,” Gage says first, before I can demand a full accounting.

But Lexy shakes her head. “They apologized. They said they were too caught up in their own concerns to realize how much they were hurting me, and they were sorry, and they still love me.”

“And what did they say to you?” I ask Gage.

“They thanked me.”

I can feel my eyebrows go up. “For calling them out?”

He nods, his expression mortified. I sympathize. My parents have always been so stable and mature, and all four of us look up to them. It’s a very awkward reversal for one of us to be the wise one. I’m not surprised it was Gage, though.

“Just think,” I tell him, “one day you’ll be old and kids will look up to you.”

He bares his teeth at me in a fierce grin. “Fuck you.”

With that, we all troop off to the kitchen to help with cleanup.

LEXY

“Good party?” Kai asks me. The four of us are gathered in the sunroom at the back of the house while the Sanchezes watch their evening shows.

“It was,” I say. “I don’t really like surprises; I’d rather be the one planning things, as you know. But I was remarkably okay with it. It was a good gathering of people.”

Thorn nudges me. “Did you notice Ava and Brax?”

“Mmm, they spent a lot of time talking.” I smile. “I like Brax; he seems like a good guy.”

“He is,” Kai assures me. “A little rough around the edges, but solid at the core.”

“Speaking of solid,” Thorn says, “We got you a little something.”

“You guys,” I protest. “The three of you are all the gift I ever need.” I’m wearing the necklace they got me; I only take it off to shower.

“You’ll like this,” Gage says. He produces an envelope from his back pocket and hands it to me.

There are a couple of papers inside; the top one features a beautiful photo of a tropical beach. I read the caption and gasp. “Bali?”

“We’ve got tickets for all of us. For a whole week.”

The warm glow starts up in my chest. “How wonderful. When?”

“Now.”

I look around at them, confused. “But our work. We haven’t taken the time off.”

Thorn grins. “Yes, we have. It’s all arranged. I talked to Clare for both of us, and Gage and Kai cleared their schedules.”

My mouth opens and closes again. A few months ago, I would not have been okay with anyone arranging a trip for me—or much of anything else, for that matter. But I trust these men so much that going off with them for a week, on a moment’s notice, is something I’m actually looking forward to.

“I’m just realizing how far I’ve come,” I say. “How good you all have been for me.”

“Samesies,” Thorn says solemnly.

I giggle, and the three of them look at me like I’ve done something wonderful.

Three months later

Lips nuzzle my neck. “Mmm,” I murmur sleepily, and wiggle my butt against the hard cock that’s nestled in its cleft. A moment later, hands and mouths begin a gentle but thorough exploration, waking me from my erotic dreams into blissful reality.

The bed is enormous, custom-made, and big enough to hold all of us in our new home together. We moved in two months ago, and being with all my men every night is even more wonderful than I’d imagined.

Almost every morning starts this way, with our bodies joining. Sometimes it’s me, waking first and sliding down to welcome one of the men into the day with a blow job, and sometimes it’s one of them who gets things going. Either way, if I ever wondered if I’d get tired of having sex several times a day, the answer is an emphatic no.

Whoever's spooning me from behind lifts my upper leg and pushes slowly inside my wetness, filling me with his delicious girth. I groan in delight and open my eyes to see a broad chest, as another of my men fits himself to my front and rocks his hips, rubbing his cock against my clit.

I tilt my head up to see Thorn smiling at me. "Good morning," I say, and then I gasp as the climax hits, any further words dissolving into a long moan as I clench repeatedly around the cock inside me.

Once I have some brain cells back, a look over my shoulder confirms my guess that it's Gage. He smiles, kisses my shoulder, and slowly pulls out, still hard.

Before I can protest, Thorn lifts me, slides under me, and settles me on his cock. I sink down slowly and then lean down to kiss him, waiting for the cool touch of lube against my back entrance.

We don't always end this way, but it's one of my favorite things, having all my men inside me at once. It's a beautiful illustration of the truth that each of them loves me, totally and completely, and I feel the same about them.

A kiss on my ear. "Ready?" Kai asks.

In answer, I turn my head and claim his mouth. The kiss is almost languid, the fire banked but ready to burn bright. Then he starts to press inside me, and I close my eyes to better savor the sensation. I love the amazing fullness of having one cock in my pussy and another in my ass.

Given our varying schedules, I've had threesomes with Kai and Thorn and with Thorn and Gage, as well as with Kai and Gage again. There have also been encounters with each of the men individually. My sex life will never be boring.

Holding out a hand, I summon Gage to the head of the bed, where he kneels beside me. He feeds his cock into my mouth, and I taste myself on him, smiling up at him as Kai and Thorn begin to move.

It doesn't take them long to bring me, but we've all developed stamina, and they last a long time before they finish. They're

always considerate lovers, making sure I come as many times as my body can stand before they finally follow me into oblivion and flood me with their seed.

In the afterglow, we snuggle under the covers for a little while longer before the men carry me to the bathroom for cleanup so we can start our day.

The first thing I do when I go downstairs is feed the pets. Right after we moved in together, we rescued a pair of cats from the shelter. Sable is all black, and Domino is black and white. They are wonderful, and we all spoil them, which they take as their absolute due.

Kai oversaw the decor when we moved in, blending all our different styles into an eclectic but harmonious whole. I love wandering through the house and seeing the little groupings he's put together: one of his sculptures alongside one of Thorn's posters, a plant from me in a colorful pot, and one of Gage's early drawings in a handmade frame. We have pillows and throws, area rugs, candles, textile hangings, plants everywhere—so much sensual delight, everywhere you turn. I've never felt more at home anywhere, and I love that our home is welcoming to others, too.

My mom has come for a visit; the guest room is located downstairs, far away from the master suite for everyone's peace of mind. And we've had the Sanchezes over for dinner, of course. Things are much better with them now.

We stopped to visit Gage's family in California on the way back from Bali, and told them they are welcome to visit anytime. I hope they only show up a few at a time, though, or we'll be bursting at the seams even though it's a big house.

By the time I finish feeding the cats, Thorn has started making breakfast. He lets us assist when we want to, and he's happy to take requests, but there's no question that he rules the kitchen. All of our stomachs agree that this is a very good thing.

Someone's gotten the coffee going, and also started the kettle for tea. I take my seat at the table with Gage and Kai. The cats wind around our ankles, talking to us, as is their habit.

"What's your schedule today?" Kai asks me.

"Busy." Plucking a strawberry from the bowl on the table, I take a bite, savoring the juicy tartness. "I have twelve weddings in May, and then the wedding season really kicks off in June."

I polish off the strawberry. "Fortunately, Clare's agreed to hire another person for weddings, or I'd be working twenty-hour days for the next few months. What about you two?"

"First client at eleven," Gage says. "Phase one of a big fantasy-themed project."

"Nice." His and Kai's tv-show judging stint went well, and the first couple of episodes have already aired, because the network had a gap in its schedule. Which means Inked Beasts, and Kai and Gage in particular, are more in demand than ever. They're making plans to open another location, and they have to be choosy about which clients they take on, since it's impossible to accommodate everyone who wants their talent.

"My first client isn't until this afternoon," Kai says. He wiggles his eyebrows at me, and I know what that means: if I come home for lunch, he and I can have some private sexytimes. I love the moments when we all come together, but being able to give my men individual attention is even more meaningful now that it doesn't happen that often.

I smile at him. "See you for lunch."

Thorn slides our plates in front of us then, and things are silent for a few minutes while we eat. Eventually, Kai pushes his empty plate aside and laces his hands over his chest, watching me with a familiar gleam in his eye.

"What?" I say.

"We have a wager for you."

I almost choke on my bite of food, hastily washing it down with some coffee. "All three of you?"

“Sure.”

I sit back, mirroring his posture but crossing my arms. “Okay, shoot.”

“We can make you the happiest woman alive.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s not a wager. You already have, first of all, and second, all you have to do to keep winning is keep doing what you’re all doing.”

“Okay.” His agreement comes so quickly that I know he anticipated exactly what my response would be. “Then we wager we can give you two thousand orgasms in a month.”

I have to laugh, even as my pussy clenches. “Well, if anyone can do it, it’s you three. But what are the stakes? If you win, you get to give me even more orgasms, and if you lose, you ... have to give me more orgasms to make up for it?”

Gage answers, with a mischievous light in his eyes that warns me something’s really at stake. “If we win, you agree to do whatever we want for one night.”

“Excuse me, but don’t I already do that?”

“No,” Thorn says. He’s got his Very Serious Face on, which always makes me want to laugh. “We exclude all sorts of activities that we suspect are outside your comfort zone.”

I scowl at him. “Like what?”

He gives me his most charming smile. “We can discuss that later. After we win.”

“Hmph. And if you fail?”

“We won’t,” Kai says. “But if we do, then same goes for you—whatever you want, for one night.”

I squint at him, wondering what we don’t already do that I’d have to talk them into. Then it hits me, and I fight to keep the smirk off my face.

“What?” Thorn demands.

I grin at him. “We can discuss it later. If you lose.”

“So you agree?” Gage says.

“Sure. Why not? It sounds like a win-win to me.”

“Then we just have one request.”

“And what’s that?” I arch my eyebrow, waiting for something snarky.

Instead, Thorn brings out a little velvet box and opens it. “You can make us the happiest men alive.”

I stare at the ring—three diamonds, in a setting that matches my necklace. I have to blink back the happy tears that try to flood my eyes. “I love you all so much.”

“We love you, Lexy,” Kai says.

Gage adds, “We want forever with you.”

“I want that too.” I pull the box closer. “I do have one condition.”

“What?” Kai asks, looking almost worried.

“That the three of you get bands made to go with this.”

He smiles softly. “Already in progress, love.”

Gage slides the ring on my finger, and several long hugs and kisses with all three men later, I say, “I really want to call in late to work.”

Thorn nibbles my earlobe. “I told Clare you’d be in at noon.”

My men. They think of everything. “Upstairs,” I say. “Now.”

For an exclusive bonus epilogue with a look into the future for Lexy, Kai, Gage, and Thorn, plus information on upcoming Sin City Beasts releases, [join Stephanie Brother’s newsletter](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

International bestselling author Stephanie Brother writes high heat love stories with a hint of the forbidden. Since 2015, she's been bringing to life handsome, flawed heroes who know how to treat their women. If you enjoy stories involving multiple lovers, including twins, triplets, stepbrothers, and their friends, you're in the right place. When it comes to books and men, Stephanie truly believes it's the more, the merrier.

She spends most of her day typing, drinking coffee, and interacting with readers.

Her books have been translated into German, French, and Spanish, and she has hit the Amazon bestseller list in seven countries.

Keep up to date with new releases at:

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