

IN HUNTER VALLEY,
IT'S OPEN SEASON ON MEN.

MAN SCAPE

on a manhunt



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VANESSA VALE

MAN SCAPE

ON A MANHUNT
BOOK 5

VANESSA VALE



Man Cave by Vanessa Vale

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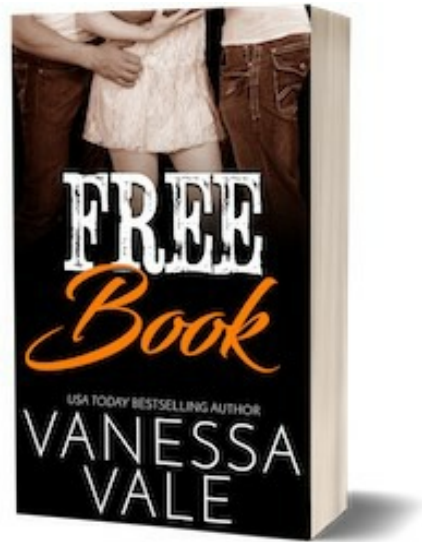
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Don't date your son's ex.

Especially when she's supposedly the town's good girl. But the sweet, shy
librarian isn't a good girl at all.

She can't be, because she wants me—the local lumberjack, and my...wood.

I'm her ex's dad but she says she doesn't want guys her age. Or a
relationship.

She wants a fling. And since I'm leaving Hunter Valley in a few days, I'll
definitely indulge her.

We'll have fun while it lasts and then she'll go back to fooling the town and

I'll just go.

Right?

*In Hunter Valley, it's always open season on men. Will the biggest one in
town be the easiest to catch?*

PROLOGUE



DANIEL

USING MY SHOULDER, I pushed through the door and into the office, my hands full.

“You love gossip, Ang,” I said. “News at Steaming Hotties is that the Hunters—not the owner of the mountain, but the other ones—filed for bankruptcy, their house was repossessed by the bank and they relocated during the night to Florida for the guy to take a job at a golf course.”

I set the office manager’s coffee on her desk.

She eyed me, listening to my words, but not with the usual glee for small town tea spilling. I didn’t give a shit about the crazy antics of others, but I figured for once, I could get the edge on her with some juicy info.

“Gambling. Can you believe it?” I added.

She humphed. “There’s other ways to gamble,” she muttered and I frowned.

Usually, she was as fiery as her red hair and always knew the local news before me.

“What? Did I ruin it for you?” I asked, taking a sip of my black coffee.

“I think you ruined it for yourself.”

“What the hell does that mean? I don’t even know the Hunters. I know Eve, of course.” I raised my to-go cup with the Steaming Hotties logo on the side. “And that’s not the exciting part. I guess Eve’s ex is going to jail.”

I waited for Ang to react, but she didn't. "What's up with you this morning?"

Her eyes widened behind her reading glasses. "Me? I think you have more important things to worry about than other people's problems."

Frowning, I set my cup down, put my hands on her desk and leaned in. "What's going on?" I asked. "No one's hurt?"

Running a tree service company, I always worried about my employees. Chain saws, falling timber and other hazards meant the possibility of bad injuries. That was from working on the trees, not from falling ones. Like the one that we cut up that had fallen through Lindy Beckett's house last summer. Fortunately, no one had been home when her neighbor had played lumberjack.

"No. No one's hurt."

I sighed because it was always in the back of my mind. "Then what's curdled your milk?"

She picked up pink message slips and pushed them into my face.

I snagged them and stepped back.

"I thought you learned your lesson right after high school, Daniel Case Pearson. I mean, I thought out of everyone, you'd know about condoms. Talk about gambling. Getting a girl pregnant? Now? You're forty years old."

I blinked, looked more closely at what Ang wrote. Condoms? Pregnant? What the hell was she talking about?

The test came back positive. You need to call me.

I told you this would happen, but no. You thought a little fun wouldn't have consequences. Call me.

Where are you? What am I supposed to do, take care of this on my own?

Fine, fun was had. Now we face the consequences.

I lifted my head, met Ang's wise, pointed gaze.

"These were on the business voicemail?"

Ang nodded. "I copied those down from the weekend. Exactly as recorded."

"And you think this was me?" I waved the papers. "Chad's a little careless from what I've heard."

"She calls you out by name."

"Who?" I glanced again at the messages. "Who is saying I... I—"

"Got her pregnant?"

I swallowed hard. Nodded.

“Melly Harwood.”

Frowning, I looked to Ang. “Who?”

She shook her head and tsked me like a scolding mother. Since she was close friends with mine, they’d had practice for the past four decades.

“Little Melly Harwood. The librarian. And someone so young, too.”

“Young?”

“She can’t be more than twenty-four. Mabel’s daughter was two years ahead of her in school.”

Figuring out how Mabel’s daughter had any relevance wasn’t important. I didn’t know who she was either.

Crushing the papers in my hand, I crossed my arms over my chest. “You think I got a twenty-four year old librarian pregnant?”

“The messages were all directed to you. Remember, you wanted to *get back out there*.” She made stupid air quotes with her fingers about how everyone in the office thought I should find a woman.

“Fuck me,” I muttered. I ran a hand down my face, stomped into my office and slammed the door shut.

This was a fucking mess.

Dropping into my desk chair, I swiveled back and forth.

What the hell?

I didn’t have sex with little Melly Harwood. I didn’t even know who she was.

The only sex I’d had recently was with my hand and I wasn’t going to share that gem with Ang. My dick and where I put it wasn’t any of her business.

But now it was because she took a long line of messages that made it pretty fucking clear I stuck it in the librarian.

I popped to my feet, grabbed my coffee and stormed out of my office.

“Where are you going?” Ang called as I cut past her desk.

“The library.”



DANIEL

I LIKED SEX. I fucking loved it. Who didn't? I liked to *remember* having it, too. Especially if it involved getting a woman pregnant.

Which I supposedly did.

Not just anyone, but *little Melly Harwood*.

I had no idea who she was, but Ang made her out to be something like the Virgin Mary. Sweet, serene and absolutely, positively *not* sinful. Meaning I'd somehow corrupted and ruined her.

I didn't mind the idea of corrupting or ruining a woman, or doing both at the same time, as long as she was into that kind of thing. But a baby? Fuck no.

Several office voicemails insisted I was responsible for making one.

It had to have been immaculate conception because I hadn't fucked *any* woman in a long time. Yet I couldn't tell Ang that. No way. I wasn't sharing my sex life with a sixty-something who liked to remind me she used to change my diapers.

Who was this woman and why was she accusing me? Why was this mysterious and saintly Melly Harwood telling *me* I had to take care of my responsibilities?

Sure, I'd gotten a woman pregnant once. Accidentally. Over twenty years

ago the summer after high school graduation. And I'd taken *all* the responsibility for that. Why would I start over with a baby now? I was forty fucking years old. An empty nester. Retired business owner. A free man ready to get out of Montana for a while. In fact, my flight to Scotland left in four days.

I was supposed to be relaxed in my newfound retirement. I had money and free time and it was time to enjoy both.

Until I got those messages. I always took care of my responsibilities. Always. I couldn't be laid back, relaxed or leaving the country until this one was resolved.

That was why I was pissed as I stomped out of the library and called Ang. No way were my plans being derailed because of this, of a woman accusing me of something I sure as hell didn't do. If she wanted something from me, like money, *this* was the worst way to go about it with me.

"Pearson Tree and Landscape Service," Ang said through the phone in her upbeat and cheerful voice.

"Where is she?" I snarled.

"Who?" she asked, used to my moods. "Melly Harwood?"

"Of course, Melly Harwood," I countered, as if I went after crazy women every day. "You know well enough I left you at the office twenty minutes ago to track her down. You said she's the librarian. I'm at the library. She's not here. Find her."

"How can I find her?"

"Don't play dumb," I countered. "Use your gossip network or tea spilling club or whatever you call it and find her."

Ang humphed through the phone then put me on hold because she couldn't argue with the fact that she could find someone better than a detective or a bloodhound. Horrible jazz saxophone music filled my ear and I winced. How had I made my customers suffer listening to that?

Not my problem any longer.

Waiting, I paced back and forth across the library's front entry. A woman with one hand leading a toddler and carrying a baby seat with the other approached. I opened the door for her, then went over to the book drop box. I tugged the slot open, shut it. Opened it. Shut it.

A minute later, she was back. "She's at the vet with her dog Fred and—"

"I don't care about her dog. I'm more interested in her pussy," I muttered, the one I never got in.

“What was that?”

I sighed. Hard. “Nothing. What’s the address?”

She told me.

“Thanks,” I said. “And tell Deek to replace that God-awful hold music.”

I hung up and cut across town to the Hunter Valley Veterinary Clinic. The landscape company and the hold music were my brothers’ problems now.

The bell above the door chimed as I went inside the clinic. The scent of cleaning products and wet dog made my nose twitch.

A twenty-something man in light blue scrubs stood from a chair behind the counter. As he saw me approach with all kinds of pent-up aggravation, his eyes widened. He took a slight step back as he tipped his chin back to keep my gaze. That happened all the time. The trouble with being the size of a lumberjack. And actually being one.

“May I help you?”

A dog barked somewhere in the building. An orange cat jumped on the counter and the guy hooked it with a hand and tucked him into the crook of his arm in a football hold.

“Melly Harwood?” I asked.

“Room number three.”

Finally. I headed down the hall with one mission in mind. Find out what the fuck was going on. I was leaving town and I didn’t need this kind of entanglement... or headache. It was *déjà vu* all over again. This time though, I wasn’t nineteen and I definitely hadn’t had sex with the woman.

I didn’t bother knocking on the closed door with the number three on it and burst in.

The action startled the woman who stood in front of a high metal exam table, a tiny dog standing on it. It was smaller than a cat. A Pomeranian? Teacup Poodle? I had no clue. Their heads swiveled and their gazes met mine in unison.

This was little Melly Harwood? She was a gorgeous redhead who I’d clearly startled because the hand on the back of the littlest dog I’d ever seen flew to her chest. She stared at me with wide eyes behind dark glasses.

Holy shit, she was fucking pretty.

Her mouth dropped open and all that came to mind were filthy thoughts of what I could put between those gloss-coated lips. Her hair was half up, half down and fell below her shoulders in soft waves. The fiery color

contrasted with her pale skin.

The only thing similar between the she-vixen I imagined trapping random men and the woman in front of me was that she was little. *Little Melly Harwood* really was small.

I had no idea what I expected, but not... her. Not the petite, curvy thing in a pair of snug black pants and a soft, forest green sweater. I didn't know much about women's clothing, but I knew the color of the damned forest. A crisp collar of a white dress shirt showed at her neckline and the bottom peeked out at the sweater's hem as if she was trying to be a little wild.

Her outfit was ridiculously conservative for someone in her early twenties, like she shopped at an old ladies clothing store. Somehow, the modest and trim fit only accented her curvy figure. How was it even possible that combo was sexy as hell?

Since when did I get hard for women close to twenty years younger?

Not women. *Woman*.

Her.

"Melly Harwood?" I asked, my voice gruff.

The woman blinked behind those glasses as she nodded.

Every single inch of her screamed sexy librarian. Shit, she actually was one.

That only made my fingers itch—and my dick twitch—to mess her all up. Get that hair all tangled from my hands as I held her in place as I throat fucked her. To get some of my cum splattered on those prim clothes so everyone knew she liked to be defiled.

If she wanted my attention, needed me to fuck her, all she had to do was ask. There was no need to accuse me of anything. I volunteered because if there was a woman who needed to get railed, it was her. I'd rail her as hard as she needed. Spank her ass for being naughty. Punish her so she wouldn't do it again. Then make her come because she was a good girl for taking all of me so well.

I took a step back. Where had my mind gone? My need for her was instant and intense. Since when did I look at a woman and think *defile and rail*?

Throat fuck? Cum splattered?

I wasn't sure if those thoughts made me fucking old or a creep.

My dick said neither, that I was a healthy, horny man who saw someone he wanted to get down and dirty with.

She didn't look like she was pregnant, or the kind of woman who might try to trap me. Hell, she didn't look like she'd ever had sex.

I stifled a groan at the thought because I never knew that fucking a prim, virgin librarian was an unfulfilled kink of mine.

"You messaged me," I said finally. "Multiple times."

Her wide eyes narrowed and she pushed her glasses up with one hand, the other on the tiny dog's back. "I messaged you?" she asked, her voice soft, melodic, although laced with surprise, as if someone like her would ever get in touch with someone like me.

I nodded, crossed my arms. "Said I got you pregnant."

Her mouth fell open again. Even wider this time. Shit.

"You got me... what?" she whispered the words as if she was too stunned to speak at full volume.

"Pregnant," I repeated, waiting to tell her she was a very bad girl.

"I... um, think I'd remember if we had sex." A furious blush stole across her cheeks and she glanced away, putting her fingers over her lips as if the words just fell out. The dog—more fluffy tan fur than substance—lifted his head and nudged her elbow, not wanting to be ignored, so her hand dropped to stroke his back some more.

Smart dog. I'd like to be stroked by that small hand. My dick was trying to punch through my jeans to get to that hand.

I cleared my throat. "Obviously, because when I have sex with you, neither of us will be able to forget."

Yes. *When*, not *if*.

She didn't come around the table to slap me, only blushed a little more, if that was even possible. "I think there's been a mistake," she said.

I wanted to relax, but if she was Melly Harwood, then she was the one who left a string of angry messages. How pretty and untouched she looked didn't change that.

Her gaze narrowed, perhaps thinking I was crazy—the feeling was mutual—or as if she was trying to figure me out. Same difference. "Who are you?"

"Daniel Pearson."

Her lips pursed in a very librarian-like way, as if disappointed. "No, you're not."

I'm not? "I sure as hell am," I said, setting my hands on my hips. "Want to see my ID?"

Her green gaze raked over me from my steel-toed boots to the top of my

head, which took a while because I was a big man. Six-five of lumberjack muscle.

“You’re not the Daniel Pearson I know. I’d never bother—”

I cut her off because... what? “How many Daniels do you—” I bit my lip, my words snagged because I figured it all out. I ran a hand through my hair, took a moment to stare at the ceiling tiles. “Fuck. I’m going to kill him.”

“Who?”

“My son. The *other* Daniel Pearson. The one who got you pregnant.”

The idiot! He’d done the one thing I’d drilled into him since he was twelve and started to get hair on his balls. *No glove, no love*. Never, ever, fuck without a condom. He knew the consequences from unprotected sex. Firsthand.

That didn’t mean he needed to have history repeat itself.

So she didn’t baselessly accuse me of anything, but I was still pissed and a hell of a lot jealous that Danny’d been the one to touch and defile *little Melly Harwood*.

One look and for some fucking reason I wanted that to be my job and *only* mine.

“Your son,” she repeated.

“Yes, my son. Daniel Pearson, *Junior*. The one your age who’s missed your messages because he’s in California fighting a wildland fire. The one who got you pregnant.”

She blushed some more and I watched it creep down her neck and beneath her collar. How far did it go? I wondered if that blush covered her large breasts—because they were definitely ample based on the way she was filling out that sweater.

In came the vet, in blue scrubs and a stethoscope around his neck. “Is this the baby daddy?” he asked, eyeing me, then going over to the dog to give him a pet on the head.

Clearly, he had a death wish. How many people had she told about her pregnancy? Did she blather it all over town?

Little Melly Harwood was over her blushing. In fact, while her head was tipped down toward the dog, she was looking up at me through her lashes. Was she biting her lip to keep from laughing?

Yes, she fucking was.

I growled and glared. This wasn’t fucking funny. I knew exactly the repercussions of this kind of situation. An accidental pregnancy derailed my

entire life and I was finally... *finally* getting it back on track after over twenty years. And now when I was leaving town to get my sidetracked life back, now my son got a woman pregnant.

FUCK!

The vet missed it all because the stethoscope had been in his ears and was listening to the dog's heart. Or whatever.

"Well, congrats," he said after a minute, wrapping the stethoscope around his neck again, then ran his hands over the small dog. He looked like an eight-inch cotton ball.

"I'd say Fred's got another week and the puppies will be here. We'll schedule the c-section at the front counter."

Wait... WHAT?

"Puppies?" I asked, staring wide eyed at the tan tiny thing. His tongue hung out and he looked like he was smiling.

"That's right," Melly Harwood said. "I'm not pregnant. *She* is."

I stared, confused, then I realized she was pointing at the tiny dog.

The dog was pregnant.

The dog.

"Fred, the dog, the... what kind of dog is that anyway?"

"Teacup Pom."

"Fred, the Teacup Pom, is pregnant," I repeated, just to make sure I was understanding things. I felt like I got hit by a falling tree.

"Fred's a girl. It's short for Frederica," she clarified, as if that changed anything.

"The dog," I said again.

I closed my eyes, ran a hand down my face. Remembered the messages Ang had taken and handed to me back at the office. *You thought a little fun wouldn't have consequences. Fine, fun was had. Now we face the consequences.*

"THE DOG?" I practically shouted.

"Yes. Your son's dog got my dog pregnant and I need his help paying for it all."

Earl the big, lazy ass dog? The one that had been sprawled on a dog bed by the front window of the office snoring and farting when I left thirty minutes ago? That dog?

The one that needed to face the consequences. Not me.



MELLY

DANIEL PEARSON, *this* Daniel Pearson, was alllllll man. He may have stormed into the exam room like a wild beast, but I imagined he'd be a beast in other ways, too. Ways that made my nipples hard and almost impossible for me not to rub my thighs together.

Yes, my mind went there.

No wonder guys my age—like his son, the one I'd left messages for—didn't do anything for me. Because wow.

My reaction had been instant. Visceral. Chemical. Cellular. Biological.

It was so unlike me to feel this way—hot and bothered—because I never, *ever* thought of anything but hesitation and sometimes a hint of fear around older men. Especially ones who looked at me like he did. As if he was a *very* hungry tiger and I was a piece of meat.

He was tall. I only came up to his chin.

He was wide. Those shoulders barely fit through the exam room door.

He was rugged. Tanned, muscled and windblown in worn jeans that fit molded to sturdy thighs and a blue and gray plaid shirt. Sturdy leather work boots were on his big feet.

He even had a beard that accentuated his square jaw. His dark hair was a little long, a little unruly which he seemed to be. He stormed into the exam

room, growled first, glared second. Threads of gray were at his temples, a blatant reminder he was much older than me.

This man's photo had to be next to the word lumberjack in the dictionary. Romance novels with that trope had him grace the cover.

Over the clinic disinfectant smell, I could swear he smelled like the outdoors, all wild and untamed.

His dark eyes pierced into me the second he pushed into the room, then wouldn't look away. Beneath his glare—yes, he glared—I felt... bared even though I was covered from neck to ankle. As if my conservative work outfit was racy lingerie. I felt small. Feminine. Delicate.

I had a feeling if his hard-working hands, which were like baseball mitts, got on me, would be my undoing. I'd love the raspy feel of them on my soft skin. I'd *need* that touch.

To hear that deep growl murmuring in my ear that I was a bad girl.

I swallowed at the possibility. Him. Me. His hands on me. His body pressing mine into a bed. His—

No. No! I had to be cautious, like always. Wary. Just because there'd been a mix-up—one I couldn't blame him for being upset over—didn't mean he wasn't always growly and intense.

Although my body seemed to like both of those things. It had been six years since the Creepy Carl incident and in all that time I steered clear of men, trying not to draw attention to myself.

I stayed in the background happy to remain quiet and overlooked which was easy to do wearing prim clothes and being a librarian. No guy my age wanted to fuck a shy, do-gooder virgin.

Except in the small exam room, I couldn't avoid Daniel Pearson's hot and bold scrutiny. He saw me and only me. Said *when we have sex we won't forget*.

As if it was a foregone conclusion. Him. Me.

A thrill shot through me because I *liked* the idea.

Then a sense of dread followed, because I remembered what happened the last time an older man took too much interest in me. The guy thought I'd been a foregone conclusion then, too.

That was six years ago, and Daniel Pearson wasn't Creepy Carl.

My body was telling me—via wet panties, hard nipples, and an intense need to go home and wear out the batteries on my favorite vibrator—to jump the big guy. The guy who'd thought I accused him of putting a baby in me.

Which only made me imagine him actually doing that and enjoying myself while he did. If he focused on *other* tasks like he focused on me in the vet office, he'd do it and do it thoroughly. And I'd love every minute of it.

My body might be staging a sexual coup, but my mind?

Freaking. Out.

With a few gruff words and potent glares, he got past the walls I'd put up. High ones, like the ones surrounding a supermax prison. Razor wire at the top. Cameras. Armed guards.

Why was I, hours after the vet visit, still fixated? Why was I attracted to him specifically? I admitted—only to myself—that my vanity, the one I dressed in conservative clothing, was a little boosted. He actually thought there was a possibility we might get together. It had been an ego boost, for sure. Especially when I knew what people said about me. That I was shy. Innocent. Meek. Tame. Fragile. Dependable. Reliable. Helpful. Sweet.

I had my routines. Like on TV, if there was a woman to be stalked and murdered because she was predictable, that would be me. I woke up at the same time every morning. Got in bed to read at the same time. Turned the light out at... the same time. I worked. I did meal prep night. Volunteered at the... yeah, all on an efficient, comfortable schedule.

I was boring *little Melly Harwood* to everyone in town for a reason. I didn't mind being called that because I was the one who'd created the persona. It was better than what they said in whispers across town about my mother whenever she flitted back into town for a few days. None were favorable and all were true. That was why I tried so hard to be the complete opposite. To avoid and redirect the attention of men. I wouldn't be like her. I couldn't.

Yet these... stirrings... I felt for Daniel Pearson meant my carefully built facade had a crack in it. Because I shouldn't get all turned on for a big, rugged lumberjack. A man at least fifteen years older. Who had a grown son I'd dated twice. Who was definitely more experienced... in bed and out. Big, gorgeous, and so out of my league.

Everyone in Hunter Valley would hear of us getting together and think, *like mother, like daughter*. No. I couldn't have that.

No way. He paid for the vet visit, promised he'd make his son get in touch with me when he got back from fighting a fire in California, then left. Unless we had a random encounter in town, I'd never see him again. Except puppies weren't part of my routine. And neither were my thoughts about a

certain lumberjack, although he could definitely star in my vibrator fantas–

“What’s going on with you?”

I blinked, then turned my head to find Mallory Mornay eyeing me.

Crap. I’d been daydreaming about a handsome, older man during tutor time.

I dropped my hand from where I was writing on the white board. “Nothing.” I glanced away, stared at anything but my friend. “Um... why?”

She pointed at the math problem I was putting up. We were in the multi-purpose room in the children’s section, usually used for storytime, crafts, or puppet shows. The library was naturally quiet, except for the sound of a fussy toddler being led out the front doors. “Because ten times ten is not one million.”

I glanced at what I’d just finished writing, clearly without my hand and brain working in sync. There were many extra zeroes and they curved down the board as if I was drunk writing.

I flushed, grabbed the eraser and fixed the answer with a quick swipe over four zeroes. “There.”

I gave a silly smile and an eye roll to Cara, the nine-year-old who I was helping with multiplication. “Whoops.” She dipped her head back toward her homework paper on the table in front of her.

Thankfully the other after-school students who came to the library for a little extra study help were busy with their homework and had missed my mental slip. During this hour, their parents were either running errands or reading a book in a quiet corner.

Mallory took my arm and tugged me into the first row of shelves. Because they were short so kids could reach all the books, we could see over to the small group. Mallory was a first grade teacher and came to the library after school once a week so we could work together on this volunteer program. It was for kids in elementary and middle school. The high school tutor time was on a different day and Bridget Beckett, with her amazing math and science brain, helped me run that.

“What’s up?” she pushed. “It’s not Fred, is it?”

I shook my head. “No, she’s fine. She’s in the back room sleeping.”

Fred always came to work with me. It was a perk behind being the sole full-time librarian in a small town library and the fact that everyone loved my dog. Mallory knew she was having puppies. So did the kids in the group. So did many other people, except Daniel Pearson. Until now.

“Well, I’ve never seen you like this before.” Her dark eyes looked me over as if she could figure it out by my clothes. “You’re... flustered.”

Flustered. Me.

Was I? Yes. Definitely yes.

Who had an attractive man storm into their vet visit and make their panties wet? Yes, my panties got wet.

That was the problem!

I was always stable. Always calm. Placid. My grandmother always told me when I was little that when I was bothered by something—usually because of my mother or any situation associated with her—I needed to make my face as placid as possible, like the surface of a lake at dawn. Smooth. Calm. Perfect.

I looked to a row of books, noticed the spines weren’t aligned and shifted them into an even line. “I... I met a guy I... find attractive.”

When she said nothing, I glanced her way. It seemed my confession had her eyes light up as if I told her Santa was coming tonight instead of in December. “Who? Where? Do I know him? Why him?” She looked me over again. “Oh... you’ve got zings in the things.”

“Zings in the things?” I repeated on a whisper. “Who says that?”

“Me. Now spill.”

“We have to get back.”

She waved her hand through the air like a real teacher, knowing the kids could survive for thirty seconds without attention or being read a story. “The kids are fine. Spill.”

“Daniel Pearson.” I bit my lip after saying it, a little afraid of how she would respond.

“The tree guy who lives down the street from you?” She tapped her lip. “I can see it. He’s hot in a... golden retriever kind of way.”

Golden retriever? Daniel? Oh, she thought—

“You told me he asked you out, but I didn’t know you went,” she continued before I could correct her. “That’s so great.”

The younger Daniel Pearson did live down the street, house sitting for his grandmother. We met a few months ago when he was walking his dog. He’d asked me out and I agreed because he was cute and my age. Fred had liked him, and his dog, too. Obviously.

I grimaced. “No. I mean, yes, we went out twice. Coffee and then lunch, but there’s nothing there.”

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“*Coffee and lunch?* Of course there’s nothing there with those kinds of dates. Public, during the day and I assume you met him instead of being picked up.”

I nodded.

She muttered, “Golden retriever.”

“The dogs hit it off better than we did,” I admitted. “His dog’s Fred’s baby daddy.”

Fred was technically my grandmother’s dog, although with her out of the country, she was pretty much mine. Nana wanted to breed her and planned to take care of the new puppies over the summer when the semester in Europe was done, but it seemed nature had different ideas. Including who the doggie dad was because the Pearson dog wasn’t the Toy Pom of her friend, Nancy Shultz. The intended sperm donor.

“Right. Obviously,” she said. “I don’t understand then. If it didn’t work out, why are you still thinking about him?”

I paused, took a breath. “I’m... um... attracted to the other Daniel Pearson.”

Her brow dropped into a deep frown.

“His... his father,” I clarified.

Her blue eyes widened and her mouth fell open. Then she snapped it shut and tugged me further back into the stacks, almost giving me whiplash.

“Mal!” I power-whispered, a skill of being a librarian.

“Your ex’s father? You little slut,” she said with a smile on her face. Then she hugged me.

“Oof,” I replied, the only sound I could make based on how tight she held me.

When she finally let me go, she asked, “How did you meet him?”

“I left messages for Daniel, the son, because I needed him to know about the puppies coming and to help pay for Fred’s vet visits. He’s responsible and all that.”

“Of course he is.”

“His dad got the messages instead of him and showed up at the vet’s office.” I intentionally left out the fact that he thought I accused him of getting me pregnant.

“How old is he?”

I pictured him in my head. Again. Handsome, virile, rugged, muscly.

“Maybe forty.”

“Wow, um, he must’ve had his son really young.” Then she swiped her hand through the air as if using an eraser to clear the thought. “Doesn’t matter. Does he look like his son but older?”

I shrugged. “A little. But he’s definitely *not* a golden retriever. More like... a... bear. A big, growly, bear.”

“He’s hairy?” She tried not to scrunch her nose up but failed. “Sorry. Sorry, you might like a big snuggly bear. No judgment.”

“No, not hairy. Well, he does have a beard.”

“Mmm, a beard,” she said in a way she’d also say *mmm, chocolate cake*. “Daniel Pearson of Pearson Landscaping?” She tapped her lip. “Yeah, I bet he’s not hairy. He probably man scapes the hell out of that hot bod.”

“Mal!” I said on a laugh, a little too loudly because a few of the kids turned their heads to look our way. So much for me being placid. More like flustered and horny. It was so unfair. The first guy I got zings in the things for and he was every single thing I avoided.

“I mean, he’s big. He growls a lot. At least at me. He’s intense and looks at me like he wants to eat me.”

That confused me most because he was angry enough to storm into a vet’s office yet eye me in a way that screamed, *I want to fuck you*.

Mallory covered her mouth with her hand, but I could still see her smile peeking around the sides and she pretty much whisper-squealed. She leaned close and murmured, “A guy eating you is the best part.”

My inner muscles clenched at the inadvertent picture of Daniel’s head between my thighs.

“He’s old, Mal,” I admitted. “Why would he be into me? Isn’t that... creepy?”

Creepy Carl, the Idaho insurance salesman, had been into me. My mother had told me I was legal, eighteen, and told me I was missing out and should have some fun. With her boyfriend. She didn’t care that the guy we’d moved to Idaho to live with wanted to fuck her daughter. Her hippie free spirited personality didn’t think anything of it.

I had. I still thought of it six years later. How freaked out I’d been. The guy had been a walking red flag and my mother hadn’t seen it. Although, her idea of red flag and mine were completely different because she’d nurtured the idea and encouraged the “open and free exchange of pleasure.” That was why I bought a one-way ticket back to Hunter Valley and moved in with my

grandmother. She was amazingly enough, a famous—at least in the art world—art historian of medieval art and traveled all over Europe giving talks, working on sites, and teaching with the university. She was rarely home, but I never minded. Her home was familiar, enduring and safe. *And* without my mother.

So I'd settled in and never left. Hunkered down in small town life and became... safe. Careful. All the adjectives everyone in town used about me. Because whenever my mother returned, which was often enough to keep her fresh in everyone's minds, I wanted it to be blatantly obvious we were dissimilar.

"Because you're gorgeous with that curly red hair and sex appeal," Mallory added.

"Sex appeal?" I countered, looking down at my work outfit.

She swirled her finger in the air. "Making everyone wonder. You can't hide that hot bod behind a cardigan. Ask Eve Hunter."

I thought of the Steaming Hotties coffee shop owner and had never seen her in a cardigan. But she did have a gorgeous new boyfriend.

"If he's all growly and intense over you, then he's smart. You're a catch and deserve someone who acts that way."

"He looks like a lumberjack," I said, steering clear of that not-safe-for-the-children's-section conversation.

"He cuts down trees for a living," she whispered. "He *is* a lumberjack. That's so hot. And you know what they say about everything being proportional. Does he have big hands?"

"Dinner plates," I said immediately.

"Then you know he's got a big—"

I covered her mouth with my hand, glanced around as if we might get caught just talking about a dick. "Shh."

Her eyes were amused and the second I pulled my hand away, she asked, "What are you going to do about it?"

I sniffed, pushed my glasses up. "Nothing, of course. Doing something about it is *not* me. I do not throw myself at men. What would people think?"

Mallory was in a relationship with the reasonably-new town doctor, who was maybe a decade older than she. I hadn't met Theo James, but she'd told me all about how they met. How she'd only had sex once before and Theo had volunteered to teach her some things. I'd confided I was a virgin because if anyone, she understood since we were close in age and she finally had sex—

besides the fumbling, first time at sixteen—recently.

“Who cares what people think?”

“I do!”

“Every woman in town would tell you to go for it. To take one for Team Womankind. Maybe it’s time to let the *you* who gets eaten by the big lumberjack out to play.”

I was... on edge. Confused and had no idea what to do. I *always* knew what to do because I kept everything in order. Tidy. Before now, it had been easy to ignore guys. To think about sex somewhat detached, because none of them had ever given me... zings in my things. Creepy Carl, who liked the idea of a mother/daughter sandwich had shut all the zings down where a guy was concerned.

I was intrigued by sex, read about it. A lot. I was a librarian, after all. I knew what it would be like but had never been interested. That didn’t mean I didn’t orgasm. I had sex toys. Vibrators. Dildos. Used them solo with a healthy frequency. I was a virgin, but I wasn’t a clueless one.

Now, all of a sudden, a man burst into my life—literally and figuratively—and I was all out of sorts. And I’d be all out of panties if I kept thinking about him and how his beard would feel against my inner thighs.

Wrong. So wrong!

“It doesn’t matter. His son will pay Fred’s vet bills and that will be it. I’m sure I’ll never see Daniel Pearson again.”

“Miss Melly! Are you two talking about boys?”

It was Theresa, a third grader who asked, but everyone in the group was giggling and waiting for the answer.

I gave Mallory a look and returned to the multipurpose room.

“We were looking up stories about lumberjacks,” Mallory said, following behind and giving Theresa a googly face, the kind one made to look weird in a group photo.

Everyone laughed and made various funny faces back.

Mallory turned to me. “We’re far from done on this topic. Drinks. Tonight. We’re hashing this out.”

“It’s my meal prep night.”

The kids chattered amongst themselves.

Her eyes widened. “Meal prep night? Hell, no. My brother’s bar, seven o’clock.”

Clearly she didn’t plan her meals for the week or understand the

importance of a routine.

“I love lumberjacks!” Theresa said gleefully. “They know how to swing an ax.”

Mallory gave me a pointed look before she faced the group. Even an eight-year-old knew the talents of a bearded, big-handed lumberjack.

“Yeah, they’re really big. Like Paul Bunyan,” Keith added. He was in fifth grade and struggled with reading. The fact that he spoke about a fictional character made me feel good.

“Then let’s look up Paul Bunyan books and you can check some out,” I told him.

Keith looked eager and I nodded for him to go to the computer catalog to search.

Mallory came over. “See? Lumberjacks are kid approved.”

My heart raced just thinking about Daniel Pearson. He might be kid approved, but definitely not what I wanted to do with him. And that scared me.



DANIEL

“DANNY, call me. We need to talk about Melly Harwood.”

Stupid voicemail. I disconnected and dropped my cell on the counter and stared out the windows into my backyard. The snow was almost gone, only patches in the shade, but we were far from done with it for the year.

“Still no answer?” Deek asked, sitting at my kitchen table eating a sandwich. His mouth was full, and the words came out garbled. He took a swig of iced tea to wash it down. When I got home from the vet, he was here, my fridge raided. An empty milk jug was on the counter and half a loaf of bread was gone.

He wasn't the only one in my family who just let himself in.

Deek wore steel-toed boots, jeans, and a company shirt—this time of year long sleeved—which all had the usual hint of dust and wood chips on them that came with the job.

“No.” I'd tried calling him three times in the past twenty minutes since I'd been home. Sure, he needed to know he had an actual horndog with Earl, but I really wanted to know what was between him and Melly Harwood. I wasn't naïve enough to think my twenty-one-year-old son was a virgin, but that didn't mean I wanted the sassy redhead to be one of his youthful conquests.

Most guys that age changed bed partners as often as changing socks. I hadn't been like that since I'd had a toddler to raise. What twenty-something woman wanted a guy with that kind of baggage?

None.

That was why I hadn't fucked my way across Hunter Valley or done a slew of other youthful things.

"Isn't that normal?" he asked. "I mean, he's out in the wilderness fighting a fire. It's not like there's a phone booth in the woods. Maybe the cell tower got burned down."

As a part-time wildland firefighter, he got called out to help on fires around the country as needed. It was seasonal work and while it was still wet and wintry in Montana, parts of California were hot and dry. And on fire. He'd been gone ten days already and there was never a definitive return date.

After, he'd be back to work for the family business, possibly not going out again on another fire this year. Or he might be sent on more. Who the hell knew? Summers usually meant fires.

"When's the last time you saw a phone booth? And I doubt Danny would have any idea what to do if he saw one. I doubt he even has a quarter in his pocket. Who carries quarters?"

He shook his head, then took another bite of sandwich. "Kids these days."

Deek was three years younger and of my four brothers, looked the most like me. We had our father's size and our mother's coloring. He kept his dark hair longer than mine and I could see a crease in it from a safety hat he must've had on earlier. We were often mistaken for each other a time or two, but lately my beard solved that problem.

We had three half-brothers: Sebastian, the youngest who went by the nickname Sea Bass; plus twins Saint and Seth. When I was eight, Dad fell for his secretary, Sheila, and divorced Mom to take up with the much-younger woman. At forty-two, he started a second family all having "S" names.

Regardless of mothers, the Pearson brothers had wreaked havoc on Hunter Valley back in our younger days and still did on occasion.

"Then what's the big deal? Why are you so fucking cranky? I thought you liked being an empty nester."

"I do, asshole."

My tone only validated him and I didn't like him being right.

"You sold your business and made a shit ton off me and Sea Bass. You should be smiling." He eyed me, frowned. "Retirement doesn't look that

good on you.”

“You’re still an asshole.”

“Get a beer or something and sit the fuck down. Your pacing is hurting my neck.”

I glared, then did as he said, grabbing a bottle from the fridge. The fridge I cleaned the day before because I was bored. It was a little early for a beer, but who cared? I wasn’t going to be operating heavy machinery or a chainsaw. Those days were over. On Saturday, I was outta here.

Instead of sitting, I leaned against the counter. “Why the hell are you eating my food? Don’t you have a job site to be on?”

“Not your problem,” he said, reminding me that I was no longer in charge. “Why were you in the office this morning anyway? You *retired*.”

I started the Pearson Tree and Landscape Service when I was twenty. At the time, I had a one-year-old and needed more money than being a cashier at the grocery store could make. I’d put out flyers, used my mom’s old mower and cut neighbors’ grass that first summer, taking on more and more clients so I could buy a bigger mower and work faster. Then, one stormy night, a tree fell across the street, and I’d gotten the chain saw out and had the wood stacked in a pile before the city even got a truck out to tackle it. Someone saw what I’d done and had me come by to do their own tree cleanup. Then another. And another. After that, the city called me for tree projects. Over the years, the business grew and grew. Now, in the summer, Pearsons handled the ski resort’s landscaping. The golf course as well. The city hired us for projects greater than their small crew could handle. Local customers like Lindy Beckett who had a tree fall on her house. In the winter, we had just as many snowplow clients and being in Montana, kept busy around the clock. Deek and Sea Bass joined the business ten years ago and now the company had over fifty full-time employees plus many seasonal ones. Now, minus one. Me.

Just last week, I sold my portion of the business to my brothers and walked away. I retired not because I had enough money to do so, which I had, but because I was finally able to live the life I’d put on hold immediately after high school to raise a kid. This meant the hold music, Deek’s lunch breaks, or anything else related to the business was no longer my problem. I frowned, not used to the concept at all. I had to wonder if I ever would. I just needed to get to Scotland and I’d be having the time of my life.

“You eating my food is my problem. Raid your own fridge.” Finding

him—or anyone else in my family—in my house was not uncommon.

“You have better food.”

Completely true. I was used to raising a growing boy who needed a constant supply of large quantities of food. And myself. And, if I wasn't so grumpy, my brothers, too. I expected them to drop in, which they did frequently and without notice.

“Today's job is near here. Had to wait for the utility services locator so I missed lunch.”

“What kind of job?”

He eyed me over the half-eaten sandwich he held with both hands. Not only had he raided my deli meats, but by the slices of green in there, he'd gotten to my ripe avocado, too. “You bored already?”

I continued to eye him.

“Driveway and front walk replacement with pavers, flower bed borders, then when it's time to plant, updated landscaping. With the weather report saying no snow, we'll at least get the driveway done now.”

I grunted. Anyone who had a garage wanted to park their cars in it, especially in the winter, so a hustle on the driveway was important.

“Bobcat? Leveler?”

“Why do you care what equipment we use? Go play golf.”

“Golf? The only golf I've played is the miniature variety with a windmill.”

“Fine. Go toss some trees around. Pack.”

That was possible. I needed to stay in shape if I was going to compete at the caber toss.

“Pack? My flight's not until Saturday.” The Highland Games, the ones in Scotland, were upcoming. I'd dreamed of going for years, but it hadn't been possible. Too busy with a kid and a company and ensuring my employees could pay their bills. Too much responsibility to vacation and throw some tree trunks around.

This year, it was happening. I would spend time in Scotland before the event. I had no hotel reservations. Only a one-way airline ticket and a car rental. I was going to roam. No schedule. No plan. Just fucking do whatever I wanted. It sounded fucking fabulous. As for the Highland Games, I was registered to participate in a few events, including the caber toss. Until I left town, I was a little at a loss on what to do. Deek was right. I was bored.

No kid.

No business.

No woman to... yeah, that was the problem. My dick was mad at me because I walked away from Melly Harwood. And acted like a complete ass. I stormed into a vet visit and pretty much accused her of trapping me with a baby. I never had sex with her but I still went there!

Yes, it was a huge fucking trigger for me, but still. One look at *little* Melly Harwood and I should have laid off the growling. I should've calmly asked her what the messages were about. That there was some kind of mistake. Laughed at how easily they were misinterpreted.

But no. I didn't do that. I probably scared her far, far away.

"Then go practice or something," he waved his hand toward the back window. "You're freaking me out."

"You're in my house. Deal." I went over and snagged a chip from his plate.

He put the sandwich down, grabbed a napkin from the stack in the middle of the table, wiped his mouth. "What's crawled up your ass and died?" he asked in all seriousness.

I pulled out a kitchen chair, dropped into it. "Earl knocked up another dog."

Deek grinned. "Earl? The stud. It's better than it being Danny doing the knocking up."

I had to agree. No way was I old enough to be a grandfather. "Actually, someone thought I had."

He frowned, shoved a chip in his mouth. "Knocked up a dog?"

I gave him a look. "The owner."

His eyes widened. "Someone thought you got the owner pregnant?"

I widened my legs, leaned back. Took another pull of my beer. "I didn't think it because I sure as hell would have remembered. No, Ang did."

"Ang?" he grimaced because she'd also changed his diapers, too.

"Ang," I repeated.

"Since when are you having sex?"

"Since when are you keeping track of my sex life?"

"Since you act like a guy who hasn't gotten laid in years. Oh, it makes sense now. Your shitty mood is because your balls are full. Go jerk off or something."

"Seriously?" I shook my head but wasn't going to tell him he was probably right. My shitty mood was because a sexy woman had me riled and

annoyed. And hard. And my balls were full. And blue.

“Why did Ang think you knocked up a dog owner?”

“You won’t believe this story,” I muttered.

He sighed. “Jesus, tell me already. Unlike you, I have to get back to work.”



DANIEL

I DID. I told him about the messages, about Melly Harwood. The vet visit. The baby saga. I left out how much I wanted to fuck her because the last thing he needed was any more involvement in my sex life.

“Little Melly Harwood got one over on you. Love it.” He grinned as he grabbed his sandwich. Two big bites were all it took to make the second half disappear. “You know, her house is the one I’m working on.”

I perked up because that was one hell of a coincidence. “What? I never saw her name on the schedule.”

He shrugged. “Melly lives with her grandmother. Or, in her grandmother’s house because when I talked with Mrs. Vigaró, she was in Lisbon or London or somewhere in Europe. The contract’s under her name and she said we can do the project anytime.”

“You know her?” I tried to sound casual, but my dick was very eager to learn more about her.

“Mrs. Vigaró?”

“No. Melly Harwood.”

He studied me for a moment, then shrugged. “Sure. She runs the library. Obviously, she knows Danny. And Earl. In fact, their place is right down the street from Mom’s. Since Danny’s staying there, it explains the dog hookup.”

It did.

“What kind of dog does she have?”

“Wondering what Earl’s type is?”

Deek laughed. “You’re just jealous. The dog’s getting more action than you are.”

Unfortunately, it was true.

I thought of Fred. “It seems Earl has the hots for a Teacup Pom. All I know is it’s tiny and a huge fucking ball of fluff.”

Then I thought of the owner, the prim, sexy as fuck, Melly Harwood. Maybe Earl and I shared similar interests. We liked them small, and I could definitely imagine taking Melly from behind.

Deek frowned. “A Toy Pomeranian? How the hell did Earl pull that off? He’s a Bull Mastiff. Maybe you need to get a paternity test before shelling out money for those vet bills.”

“Paternity test?” I wasn’t sure if he was serious or not. “For a dog?”

He nodded. “They have them.”

“How would you know that?”

He shrugged, then tapped the side of his head. “I know weird shit. Everyone wants me on their team for trivia night. You said the messages wanted you—or Danny—to take responsibility. I assume paying vet bills and all.”

I did pay for today’s vet visit, but Danny’d definitely be paying me back. But if little Fred—the Teacup Pomeranian—Harwood was two-timing, then maybe Melly had to go after a different baby daddy to pay the bills.

The thought of Melly looking at another man the way she looked at me earlier... the way she’d blushed? The way she’d smiled? No way. I growled as I took another swig of beer. She and those sweet glances were mine. My dick agreed.

I just had to apologize and not be an idiot. I could do that.

“Huh. Maybe you’re right,” I told Deek. For the first time all week, I had a task. Something to do. Hopefully, *someone* to do. This was the in I needed. I had a reason to see her again.

“I should go over there and find out. Take Earl with me to prove there’s no way in hell he’s the dad. Sea Bass is still dog sitting, right?”

Sea Bass always volunteered to watch Earl for Danny. During the day, Earl snored away at the office, like he had this morning.

Deek eyed me, then smirked and nodded. He stood, took his plate to the

sink, slapped me on the shoulder. “You do that. Give little Melly Harwood a piece of your mind. Or anything else you want to give her.”



MELLY

“I’M BEING RIDICULOUS,” I said to Fred as I drove home. She sat in the passenger seat, eyeing me, listening intently. “I’ll never see Daniel again so these crazy feelings? Irrelevant. Drinks with Mallory? Not necessary. I just need some time with that new book I snagged from the romance section and my favorite vibrator. A few orgasms and I’ll be fine.”

I left work at the usual time and went to go to the grocery store. I knew the owner so Fred hung out behind the customer service counter while I shopped instead of waiting in the car. In the winter, it was often too cold and, in the summer, the opposite. She knew they had treats and was always more eager than me for my weekly shopping.

I knew the aisle layout and food placement and hated when they rearranged. With my list, I was in and out within twenty minutes with my loaded cloth bags—since I was wise to single-use plastic. With my full fridge, this was the night I usually meal-prepped for the week, putting together dinners and lunches that were ready to go, only needing to be heated in the microwave or baked in the oven. I would change into my comfy sweats and put on some music and cook. But Mallory’s forced night out changed my whole routine.

There would be no going braless or sloppy bun tonight for me.

“I made it twenty-four years in this town not laying eyes on him and now he, in all his lumberjack ruggedness, is in my finger vault.” I stopped at the intersection, looked both ways, then turned down my street. “I don’t need to see—”

I snapped my mouth shut as I slammed on my brakes harder than necessary because... yeah.

Daniel Pearson was sitting on my stoop, elbows resting on his knees.

Waiting for me.

My heart pounded and all of a sudden I was hot in my winter coat.

Earl, the horndog, sat beside him and perked up at the sound of my car.

I parked in front of a big pickup truck on the street—the driveway was out since it was half dug up. It had to be Daniel’s because it was as supersized as he was.

Shit.

Shit!

What was he doing here?

I looked in the rearview mirror to see what I looked like, my vanity making me do so. Who was I kidding? I looked like me, without lip gloss.

I took a deep breath because he was watching. I could feel the intensity of those dark eyes from twenty feet away.

Climbing from the car, I went around and let Fred out of the passenger side, where she trotted across the grass and then squatted to pee. Earl lumbered over, his tail wagging. Fred faced him and, if she had much of a tail, it would be wagging, too. Instead, her entire back half swayed back and forth.

Daniel stood and came over. The closer he got, the more I had to tip my head back.

“Hello. Um... what are you doing here?” I asked. Daylight was barely hanging on, and it would be dark soon. And colder.

“I want a paternity test,” he announced.

I blinked. “What?”

“You’ve met Earl?” He pointed to the huge dog that circled Fred. He dropped on his haunches and offered her a playful bark, then leaped around her.

“Of course. Daniel walks him this way.” I pointed down the street.

“To keep things... us straight, call him Danny. And yes. That dog.” He pointed to Earl who was sniffing the frozen grass in a line toward the mailbox

as if he was a hound. A string of slobber dangled from his jowls. “The one who got Fred knocked up.” He tipped his head down to Fred who was sniffing around his ankles. She didn’t seem too keen on Earl, or she was playing hard to get, which I thought was a little late.

“How do you think they pulled it off?” he asked.

“What, sex?”

“Yes. He’s a Bull Mastiff.”

“Okay. Um, snuck in the backyard, I guess.”

He shook his head. “Not where, but *how*. It can’t work.”

I blinked. “You mean he’s neutered?”

I hadn’t really looked to see if Earl still had his balls, and I wasn’t planning on checking right now.

He winced. “No. I mean, he’s big. She’s little.” He ran a hand over his hair. In the fading sunlight, it wasn’t as dark as it seemed in the vet office. More a mahogany than black, with hints of silver at the temples. And the beard... it had a tinge of red in it.

“Does it work for you?” I asked.

His eyebrows went up, then blinked at the unexpectedness of my question. “What?”

“Sex. I mean... you’re big.” Oh my God. Did I just ask him that?

“Always,” he admitted with a heavy dose of confidence. He even rolled his shoulders back in a way that said without words he was virile and potent.

“You’re saying that because you’re big you can’t have sex with someone who’s small? I mean, you’re *very* big.”

He grinned. “Very.”

I blushed because he was inferring *everywhere*.

“I’m sure it’s possible,” I added, because I’d never heard of sex not working because of size incompatibility. I didn’t have any personal experience, but I researched.

His gaze raked over me again, just like in the vet office. Thoroughly, slowly, and from head to toe.

“It’s definitely possible,” he confirmed.

Gah. He was talking about the two of us now, not dogs.

“Lots of ways to do it,” he added, in case I had any doubt.

“Oh, so dogs do it all kinds of ways? I may have missed that animal documentary on canine reverse cowgirl.”

His mouth fell open in something akin to awe. Or surprise at my sarcasm

and momentary sass. I kind of surprised myself, as well. The corner of his mouth tipped up.

“You came over and waited on my stoop because you think I’m lying about Earl getting together with Fred.” Fred barked once, as if she knew we were talking about her, then lay down. I wanted to make sure I had this right. “How do you even know where I live?”

“I have my ways,” he replied vaguely, then pointed at the chunks of concrete driveway.

Oh. I set my hands on my hips. “You think I’m trying to... to trap him? Earl?”

He ran fingers over his beard, suddenly uncomfortable. Was that the reason he came here? It seemed unlikely. Ridiculous, definitely.

“Or do you still think, even after the vet’s office earlier, I was trying to trap *you*?” I added.

Now he looked *really* uncomfortable. I had my answer.

“You did,” I said, shaking my head. “You misinterpreted the messages and you thought I accused you of getting me pregnant on purpose, even though we’ve never met.”

He shook his head. “No. Yes. No.”

“Which is it?”

He sighed, looked at the sky, his boots, then finally at me. “I did. At first. When I got the messages, yes. Definitely. Then I saw you and changed my mind.”

Oh. My shoulders dropped and my anger bled away. Of course. “Right. One look at me and there was no way you’d have taken me to bed. Not *me*.”

Sure, my master plan was to steer clear of men, especially older ones who might hurt me. Perhaps not physically, but with a toss-aside, one-and-done attitude. I didn’t have a carefree perspective on sex or relationships. It was easier to never get involved than to be hurt. Because if my father never loved or wanted me and my mother loved everyone with the same casual association as she did her own daughter, then I wasn’t worth anything permanent. Or for them to stick around.

Sex didn’t have to mean forever, but it had to mean *something*.

What hurt from Daniel’s words wasn’t that I shut myself off from any kind of relationship with a man, but that I wasn’t wanted in the first place. That I wasn’t worthy.

He sighed, ran a hand down his face and for the first time, his growly

demeanor slipped. He eyed me with something akin to horror or panic.

Even worse.

“No. Fuck no.” His voice was still deep and rumbly but came out soft. “That’s not it. Shit, I’ve messed this all up. I didn’t mean... Look—”

“Give me Danny’s number,” I snapped. It was one thing to know I had no chance with a guy like him, but to have him say it to my face was another. As I fished in my purse for my cell, I continued, “I’ll call and leave him a message about all this on his cell instead of at the tree service office. You’re not responsible. You never were.”

I wished I knew that Danny had been out of town. He hadn’t answered his door a few weeks ago when I found out Fred was pregnant, and I never got his cell number. We always talked in person. If I had, I’d have never met Daniel and he wouldn’t... be repulsed by me.

I reached my arm out and waved my cell at him until he took it. Using his big thumbs, he jabbed at the screen. “I want to be responsible, Melly. I’ve fucked this all up. I’m putting in my number because I have no idea when Danny will be back.”

Earl returned from his exploring and approached Fred. Again, they circled each other doing the usual dog get-to-know-you sniffs. Then, in a big dog/little dog way and without any foreplay, he mounted Fred and started humping her. Daniel sure as hell was wrong. The size difference didn’t matter. Fred spun around and snapped at him, making Earl jump back.

“Call me if—” Daniel froze, mid-thumb press and looked down because Earl had given up on Fred and moved to Daniel’s leg. “Earl!”

“Still want that paternity test?” I asked, smirking and giving him the mental middle finger.



DANIEL

I WAS AN IDIOT. I couldn't remember a time when I'd stuck my foot in it any more than I had with Melly Harwood.

Being the oldest of the Pearson brothers, one would think I learned a long time ago not to be such a dumbass. Or that between the five of us, we'd have done every single idiotic thing possible by now.

It seemed, even at forty, that was not the case.

I not only accused Melly Harwood of trapping me with a baby, but then I waited on her doorstep to accuse her of trapping Earl instead.

A big doofus of a dog. Who got tried to get some from a tiny teacup thing and was sleeping off his attempts, on Fred and my leg, in front of my fireplace. I refused to take him back to Sea Bass because I didn't want to explain why I was such a fucking moron.

Instead of telling her she was pretty and that I wanted to peel off every bit of prim clothing and get her filthy dirty and begging for my dick, I accused her of stupid shit. For what? Because she wanted help in paying for vet bills?

I flopped my head back onto the cushion of my leather lounge and stared at the vaulted ceiling of my great room. There was nothing to do to release this frustration except growl. So I did.

“AaaaaahhhhhHHHHHHHHHH!”

Earl opened one eye at the sound, then closed it. Unlike me, he didn't have any problems with the ladies.

Earlier, when Melly got out of her car, she was... fuck, even prettier than I remembered. Everything about her was precise and perfect. Soft. Pretty.

So fucking pretty.

Did I tell her that she was pretty? No. Instead, I opened my mouth and told her I wanted a dog paternity test.

While I waited on her stoop, I did a search on my cell to make sure Deek hadn't been fucking with me. Fortunately, he wasn't, and some people really did want to know pet lineage. I knew nothing about... animal husbandry or whatever dog sex was officially called. Nothing, and it clearly showed.

I ran a hand over my beard.

"Dog paternity?" I muttered. "*I want a dog paternity test.* I can't believe I said that."

I could get drunk, but that would solve nothing. I'd only be twice as stupid in the morning because Melly Harwood would still think I was an asshole and an idiot *plus* I'd be hungover.

No. I blew this one. Epicly.

Then... then! I made it worse. What had I said that made all the light dim in her eyes? Oh yeah, *then I saw you and changed my mind*. She must've thought I took one look at her and knew there was no way in hell I'd get my dick anywhere near her.

"Wrong. WRONG!" I shouted, my voice echoing off the beamed ceiling. One look and I knew she wasn't the kind of woman who did drama or wanted to stir up shit. Except she'd misinterpreted and thought I meant I didn't want *her*. I'd put that droop in her shoulders, wiped the smile from her face and she lost that little bit of sass. I was an asshole and an idiot.

"Guess it's a good thing you're leaving the country for a few months," I muttered to myself. I wasn't staying in Hunter Valley. I was out of here Saturday, ready to move away from home. See the world. Live the life I'd always wanted.

Except instead of being excited about my future, I felt like shit. I didn't like how I'd made her, for one second, think less of herself. Per Ang, Melly Harwood got along with everyone. Except me. And it was all my fault.

I wasn't leaving town until I made this right.



MELLY

“HE SAID WHAT?” Mallory asked. I wasn’t sure if she sounded more amused or appalled.

I covered my face with my hand, my elbow propped on the high-top table. “Do I have to say it again? Once was painful enough.”

“Yes, you do,” Bridget countered, stabbing a mozzarella stick into a dish of marinara sauce.

I knew Bridget through Mallory and at the weekly high school tutor sessions. The two of them had been best friends since forever and kind of came as a package. I liked Bridget. She wore glasses like I did and if it was possible, she was even nerdier than me. She went to MIT and now taught Physics at the high school. I was smart, but not like that. If there was someone who needed to figure out how much tip to leave, it was her.

I liked her and didn’t mind that she now knew about my crazy day.

I opened my fingers and peeked at them. They stared and waited.

And waited.

Fred and I left Daniel on my front yard, not even waiting for him to get a horny Earl off his leg. I stalled inside until he left to retrieve my groceries from my car.

While getting ready to go out—which involved me pacing my bedroom

with a glass of wine in my hand—I teetered between being sorry for myself and stunned by the man’s gall.

I wasted an hour fuming and never did change clothes. All I’d done was put my contacts in, then call a ride share to pick me up.

I groaned. “Fine. He wanted a paternity test for Earl.”

“The dog,” Mallory repeated, just to make sure she had it straight.

I nodded.

She pushed my wine closer and I picked it up and took a big sip. I didn’t remember how many glasses I had. Since her brother owned the bar, she had an in with the waitstaff and must have told them to keep the drinks coming. At least mine.

Usually, I only had one glass because I was a lightweight and I liked to keep my wits about me. The buzz most people loved made me feel out of control. I already felt that way, but now, I was confused on top of it.

“Should I be mad at him or—”

“No *or*,” Bridget corrected. “You should be mad. He’s so tall I have to wonder if the air is thinner up there by his brain.”

“I have to tip my head back to meet those dark eyes,” I admitted. “I feel so small beside him.”

Bridget smiled in a sappy way of someone ridiculously in love. “I totally understand that. There’s something... safe.”

Safe. Crazy, I agreed, even though both times Daniel had been confrontational and imposing. Bridget was in a relationship with Maverick James. He was as big as Daniel, and they could be two marauding Vikings if Maverick grew a beard.

Mallory’s gaze shifted over my shoulder and she waved someone over.

I turned to look but got a little dizzy.

“What’s up?” It was her brother, Arlo. He was several years older so I never knew him growing up, but I’d met him the other times we’d been here for ladies’ night. He held a small stack of dirty plates that he must have just collected from a table.

“You know Daniel Pearson?” Mallory asked her brother.

“Which one? Younger or older?”

“Older.”

“Sure.”

Mallory pushed for more detail. “Asshole? Idiot? Manwhore?”

His eyes widened, then glanced between the three of us, first on Mallory.

“You’re taken.” Then Bridget. “You’re taken.” Then me. “I’m guessing she’s asking for you.”

I could feel the flush creep over my cheeks so I didn’t need to say a word.

He shrugged. “Good guy. Never known him with a lady, but that doesn’t mean anything.” Arlo looked my way. “You like Pearson?”

Mallory pointed at me. “Why else would she be in a funk?”

My mouth dropped open because she blatantly shared my confused feelings. “Mal!”

Arlo eyed me, as if considering something. “I say go for it. He’s a good guy.”

“You sure he’s not an idiot?” Mallory questioned.

Arlo sighed, adjusted the dirty dishes in his hold. “He’s a guy. Aren’t we all idiots?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, just left.

“So maybe he really isn’t an idiot,” she said. “Maybe he’s normal.”

I took another sip of wine. “Is Theo an idiot?”

“He bought me a house,” she countered, tipping her chin down and giving me the look women share that screamed *can you believe it?* “Which makes him the biggest of all the idiots. If there was a club, he’d be the president. They must have special hats or something. With fur and horns.” She stuck her hands by her head and poked fingers in the air to replicate the horns.

That had me giggling, thinking of Daniel with a huge Viking-type hat on his head. He’d be eight feet tall.

“Mav didn’t buy me a house, but you’ve seen him.” Bridget waggled her eyebrows behind her glasses. Both of them were so confident in their men. In their love. “He wears a pink Steaming Hotties t-shirt because he likes the feel of the cotton.” She leaned in and whispered conspiratorially. “I like the way it’s two sizes too small.”

Last summer, Maverick James came to Hunter Valley to build the James Inn—yes, it was named after his family—and met Bridget, who had worked as an assistant for the local construction team. They hit it off and were living together now. And clearly in love. And Maverick James was big. Viking big. Like Daniel. But Daniel wasn’t a city slicker. I doubted he even owned a suit. He was more rugged. More outdoorsy. More... MORE.

“What we’ve learned is Daniel Pearson, the elder, is a good guy. Arlo approved, and a typical male. Which means we need to put them in their place. Did you tell him off?” Mallory asked.

I shook my head, which maybe wasn't a good idea. The room swirled a little. "I went inside and slammed the front door behind me. I left him standing in the front yard with a dog going at it with his leg, because... awkward."

"You should tell him off," Mallory said and Bridget nodded in agreement. "You'll feel better. You should also sleep with him. That will definitely make you feel *a lot* better."

Whatever music was playing through the bar's hidden speakers switched to a country song that was well liked because people around us started to sing along.

I shook my head and spoke up. "No way. I couldn't do that. Either of those things. That's... not me. Besides, Earl proving he's a horndog shut down every reason he stopped by. I didn't even have to say a thing to point out how wrong he was." I raised my arms as if I was praising God. "A confrontation is one thing, but what am I supposed to do, show up on *his* doorstep and point out that he was wrong about the physical abilities of different sized dogs copulating? It's not like it's a topic for the high school debate team and not something you jump a guy after saying. I mean, do I yell at him and then tell him to fuck me?"

They laughed as I caught my breath. Arguing with them was riling me up. And I couldn't believe I dropped the f-bomb.

Mallory played with her stirrer straw in her gin and tonic. "I can't believe he said the size difference wouldn't work, although I know nothing about the dog version of the birds and bees. I mean, he's the *last* person who should be questioning that."

I agreed, but if I did so aloud, I was afraid I'd tell her I wanted to test it out with him. Which I kinda did.

"Oh, I can tell you that the size thing is *not* an issue," Bridget commented. Mallory raised her hand and they high fived.

"See? No size issue. The guy's a normal idiot who has the hots for you. Maybe he's like the boy in elementary school who tugs on a girl's braids and pisses her off because he likes her."

"That never made sense to me," Bridget replied.

"Me neither, but maybe this was Daniel pulling your braid." She took a sip of her drink, then continued. "There's nothing wrong with a fling, Melly. Or more than a fling."

"I have to pee." I stood, held onto the table until the room stopped

spinning a little. They had men who loved them and gave them lots of sex. I felt a little more alone than before I walked in. And I didn't have any resolution on what to do about Daniel Pearson. Which meant I wouldn't do anything. I never did anything. Because a fling? That's what my mother wanted me to have with Creepy Carl when I turned eighteen. If I had a fling now and the town knew about it, it would be the start of the slippery slope to being *Valerie Price's daughter*. "How much wine have I had?"

"Not too much. You still remember his name," Mallory reminded. "And his dick."

"Daniel," I said, walking toward the bathrooms. "Daniel and his dick."

There was a line for the ladies' room. As I waited, I decided I should tell him off. Maybe it was liquid courage or maybe... no, it was the wine. I pulled my cell out and found his number. The one he'd entered earlier instead of Danny's.

It rang, then his gruff voice said, "Melly."

And my panties literally melted.

"Earl proved you wrong," I told him instead of saying hello. "Big and small works."

I went there.

There was silence and I pulled the phone away from my head to see if he'd hung up. "Yes, it did."

"Then is your issue a human thing? You're big. I'm small. You don't think you could get your dick inside me?"

The ladies in front and behind me in line looked my way with intrigued looks. I winced and whispered *sorry* to them. They didn't seem all that bothered.

"Um, what did you say?" It was possible I stumped him, but I had a feeling he wasn't expecting me to say the word dick. It kinda surprised me, too.

"You heard me," I snapped.

"I know I can get my dick in you, Melly. It'll be a real snug fit, but that's what will make it so good."

I got hot all over and I fanned myself with my free hand.

"But you don't want to," I countered. "Put your dick in me, I mean."

The woman in line behind me patted me on the shoulder and said, "You're beautiful, sweetie. If the guy on the phone doesn't want to dick you down, he's not worth it."

He heard. “Melly, where the hell are you?”

Maybe the bathroom line wasn't the best place for this conversation, so I ditched my spot and moved further down the hall. It was darker and quieter the further from the main bar area. There was an emergency exit and a closed door which probably went to an office or a storage room.

“I'm at Kincaids,” I told him. “And you didn't answer my question.”

“How much have you had to drink?”

“Not sure. It's a never-ending cup of wine. An all-you-can-drink glass.”

“Who's there with you?”

I thought I heard a door slam. Was that a car engine?

“There are men all around this place who could get their dick in me without doing geometry first, Daniel Pearson,” I told him instead of answering his question.

“Melly,” he growled. “Are you there with a man? Is he taking advantage?”

I shook my head, but he couldn't see it. “No. I'm here with Mallory and Bridget and the only dick I want to talk about is yours.”

“That's fucking right,” he breathed.

“Just because I've never had sex before doesn't mean I don't know what I'm doing. I have vibrators bigger than what you're packing. And I know it fits.”

Again, more silence. Then a growl. “Stay right there. I mean it. Right fucking there.”



DANIEL

I WAS HALFWAY into town by the time I hung up the phone. I was surprised by Melly's call, not expecting her to talk to me again.

Ever.

Instead of mentally kicking my own ass, I went out back and decided to toss some logs. Running a landscaping and tree service meant I had access to timber and had cleaned up some logs so they could be used for caber practice: lifted, rested on my shoulder and tossed. While they were pine instead of larch like in Scotland, they did the job. With my backyard being big, there was plenty of room to toss trees. Usually I focused on getting the line perfectly straight. Worked on hefting it end over end. Tonight, I used my strength to heft and toss, working off my anger at myself over technique. Throw after throw, my frustration level didn't lessen.

The first thing out of her mouth when I pulled my cell from my jeans pocket was about sex. *Dog sex*, which didn't get me hard. It made me cringe. Especially when I was stuck having Earl hump my leg while she'd stormed into her house earlier.

I agreed that I'd been wrong but that hadn't stopped her from continuing with the last thing I ever imagined her saying. She asked me if I could get my dick inside her.

Yeah, she said that. Filthy words from the sweetest mouth.

I was instantly hard, standing in my backyard with an eighteen foot log propped vertically against my shoulder. Exterior lights illuminated the closest portions of the field. While it hovered just above freezing and my breath was coming out in a white cloud, I was sweaty and my blood had been pumping, but her soft voice and... *Fuck*, those words.

I was ready to find her, get between her thighs and prove to her that I could absolutely, positively get all of my inches inside her.

But I was sure *little Melly Harwood* didn't talk like that usually and that had me riled in an all-new kind of way. She was at a bar with random women in the background telling her she could get fucked up by any guy and I never felt so possessive in my life.

I had a kid and I knew the fierce protectiveness of being a parent. Since mine divorced when I was eight and my dad moved on from me and Deek to making a second family, I knew how important one solid role model was. That had been me. Sole caregiver for Danny and I'd made raising him my mission.

Sure, I fucked, but no relationships. I wouldn't subject him to the same second-family arrangement Deek and I had. Sure, Deek and I got three cool half-brothers, but still. I wouldn't know a legit relationship if it bit me in the ass.

But Melly Harwood and what she said? This wasn't me being a parent, even though she was close to my son's age. This was feral. Possessive. Her drunk dialing at the bar? Someone could mess with Melly and I couldn't stand by and let that happen. She was kind and innocent and I didn't want that to change.

Yes, I'd take that virginity, but I knew what hurt looked like on her face. I'd put it there earlier and I was *never* letting that happen again. From me or anyone else.

Leaning forward, I let the tree trunk fall to the ground with a solid thump, turned and cut through the house. On my way through, I grabbed my keys and was out the front door, all the while with Melly still talking.

Earl didn't even stir from his dog bed.

I asked her where she was and I tore out of the driveway. When Melly admitted she was a virgin, I almost drove off the road. No way would she have told me that if she wasn't drunk. Or tipsy. In a bar full of horny men, she wasn't safe. I hurt her, so I needed to protect her so I told her to stay right

where she was and hung up. Focused on staying on the road and not getting pulled over.

A few minutes later, I burst through the front doors of Kincaids and searched for her fiery red hair and only took a breath when I saw her sitting at a high-top table with two other women.

Three sets of eyes widened at my approach, but I only focused on one.

Wide, expressive green ones. No glasses this time.

“Daniel,” she breathed as I stood directly across the table. “What are you—

“You called.”

“You called him?” the dark-haired woman said. “When?”

“Um, in the bathroom line. You said to confront him, and the wine told me to do it on the phone while I was waiting to pee. Daniel Pearson, this is Mallory Mornay and Bridget Beckett.”

The blonde was Mallory. She was on my left. Bridget on my right.

Beckett... Beckett... “I took a tree out of your house last summer.”

The brunette nodded, pushing her glasses up. Laughed. “You did. Thanks for taking care of that.”

I gave her a small smile and tried hard to keep my eyes on hers instead of drifting to Melly, who looked a little out of sorts. Obviously she was reconsidering her phone call and never imagined I’d show up here.

“That’s my job.” I winced. “Or was.”

She frowned. “The business closed?”

I couldn’t resist, I flicked my gaze at Melly. Without glasses, her eyes seemed wider. Lashes longer. Were those freckles on her nose? I wanted to get even closer and find out, but I had to answer Bridget Beckett’s question.

“No. Um... no. I retired and my brothers run it now.”

I gave up the fight and stared at Melly. She stared right back.

“Wow, congratulations,” Mallory said.

“What are you going to do now?” Bridget asked.

They were pushing small talk, but I wasn’t interested. Yet I had no choice. I crashed their girls’ night and I had to play by their rules.

“I’m going to Scotland to compete in the Highland Games,” I said.

Melly’s eyes widened and dropped to my chest, then arms.

Mallory laughed and out of the corner of my eye, I could see she was looking me over, too. It wasn’t an appreciative once-over, but more like data collecting. “You’re a lumberjack going to... hammer throw—”

“Caber toss,” I corrected.

“—caber toss, which means throwing logs, right?”

I nodded and kept right on staring at Melly. In her front yard earlier, I didn’t notice the small studs in her ears. Or the way her upper lip bowed. Or—

“Recap,” Mallory said. “You. Beard. Throwing Logs. Highland Games. In a kilt?”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit. Okay, well...” Mallory climbed from her stool. “Time to go.”

Bridget stood as well. “Definitely.”

“What? Now?” Melly asked, breaking our connection to look at Mallory in confusion.

“Us, yes,” Mallory told her. “You? No. Daniel came to see you and we wouldn’t want to keep him from that. He can drive you home. Right, Daniel?”

“Absolutely.” I nodded to back up the one word.

Melly’s gaze returned to mine and she swallowed.

“If he’s a dick, Arlo’s here,” Mallory told Melly, but I recognized it for what it was: a warning to me.

“I won’t be a dick,” I vowed.

“But—” Melly sputtered as Bridget gave her a hug. Before she could say anything else, they were gone.

Mallory gave me a chance to make things right and I sure as hell wasn’t going to blow it.

So I pulled out a stool and sat down, grabbed Melly’s and pulled her closer so her knees were tucked between my legs. “Now. What were you saying about how your vibrator fits?”



MELLY

I GROANED. I closed my eyes and, like a little kid, hoped that if I couldn't see Daniel, he wasn't really there.

Oh my God. I should have stuck to my one glass of wine rule! Mallory was a horrible influence because I sat tucked right in front of Daniel Pearson.

I'd told him about my vibrator as an insult to his dick. Now I had to talk about it, not on the phone, but right to his face which was only inches away. I was in a bar full of people, but I was alone with Daniel Pearson. For the third time today.

I'd never seen Mallory and Bridget leave a bar so fast. Well, maybe that time Bridget screamed when she realized she'd sent Maverick the answers to that sex quiz. They'd run out of here that night just as fast.

Now, they'd *intentionally* abandoned me with Daniel. And he was going to drive me home! They *wanted* me to sleep with him.

I grabbed my wine and took another sip. I was tipsy, but not drunk and with what was left in the glass, that wasn't going to change.

"I shouldn't have told you that. I shouldn't have called you," I admitted, looking up at him from my glass.

While his dark gaze still radiated intensity, it wasn't filled with the same anger or frustration it had earlier. He was calm, his body relaxed, and he

wasn't growling. His hands rested casually on top of his thighs, but his thumbs touched mine. I eyed their size—his whole hands, not just the thumbs—the ruggedness of them from hard work.

He had on the same shirt, a deep blue and dark gray plaid flannel. Now, the sleeves were rolled up to show corded forearms sprinkled with dark hair. The shirt wasn't tight, but it was snug, as if he had trouble finding a size that fit him. His beard made him even more rugged and a little wild. I picked up on his scent. Dark and manly and potent.

He and Danny looked alike. Similar coloring, but Danny was built differently. Leaner. Daniel was solid. Like the sturdiest trees in the forest. And had a beard. They were both handsome, but I was only attracted to Daniel. In fact, I wondered what those hands would feel like on my skin, if beard burn really did happen or if it was only a fantasy found in romance books.

“Yes, you should have,” he countered, his voice almost gentle. “I'm glad you did.”

“You do not need to know about my vibrators.”

“Hmm... vibrators. Plural,” he mused.

I took another slug of wine.

My confessions—multiple—confused the hell out of me. Why had I really called him? Why was I sitting here turned on and flustered by this specific man? Why was I not attracted to men my age when the one man who'd driven me away from all of them in general was older? Why was I desperately craving Daniel Pearson when he was everything I tried so hard to avoid?

Daniel was older. Experienced. Not looking for anything serious because he was leaving town. Leaving. As in not staying in Hunter Valley.

I was settled in this town. I had no interest in going anywhere or seeing the world. I'd done it once and made it as far as Idaho and that was enough. I was safe here. Happy. Content.

Except I was also horny. Mallory would call it that. There was no reason to call it anything else.

I was horny for Daniel Pearson and for the first time ever, I had a feeling my vibrator wasn't going to satisfy. And that made me angry and frustrated. And why I called him. I was mad at him for making me that way.

“That's why you're here? Because it was my turn to say stupid things?” I cringed because not only had I mentioned sex toys, but I'd also told him I

was a virgin. Maybe he didn't hear me say that or he forgot. Or that we talked about his dick fitting in me.

"I'm here because you didn't like—"

"I *never* talk about vibrators," I assured him.

"Just my point, and I wanted to make sure you're safe. But nothing you said was stupid."

I gave him a look, one that said I didn't believe him. At all. *Everything* I told him was embarrassing and... God. I told him I was a virgin who used vibrators probably larger than his dick.

"Fine, you were honest, then."

"Too honest," I admitted, frowning. "Wine makes me lose any kind of filter."

"Good, then everything you said was true."

I wasn't a liar. He knew the truth because I called him. Not the other way around. So I nodded.

He gave me a small smile, tipped his chin down. "I like you without a filter, sweet girl. I think—"

"Hey, man. What can I get you?" Arlo came around the table and stopped beside Daniel. They shook hands in a way that indicated they were good friends, or at least well acquainted.

Daniel looked to me, my glass. "Another wine and I'll take a cup of coffee."

I should have told him no to more wine, but I was stuck on him calling me *sweet girl*.

"On it. By the way, I'm eager to get the patio project going. Hoping the weather holds next month for you to get started."

Daniel nodded. "Have you received a contract yet?"

"Yup. All signed. Your brother said it'll be done before the summer and I'm holding him to it. I'll get those drinks."

He disappeared between the tables.

"Sorry about that," he said, focusing back on me and moving his right hand from his thigh to mine. God, his fingers curled almost all the way around and heat seeped from his palm. Scorching. His eyes flared as I gasped at the contact.

He cleared his throat. "Arlo's having the back patio enlarged so he can have more service outside when it warms up. Pearsons is doing the work. Now then, why did you—"

“I’m still mad at you,” I blurted, not wanting to circle back to vibrators or virginity or his dick. Okay, I *was* interested in his dick, but this wasn’t the time or the place to talk about that. But when and where was?

Oh yeah, never. Stupid wine.

“I’m sorry. I was an idiot and that made me a jerk. I’m not a jerk. Not really. There’s something about you though that makes me go crazy.”

I was stunned because... what? I made a man go crazy? Impossible. “I doubt that.”

“I think it’s mutual,” he said, his dark eyes roving over my face. His thumb slid back and forth on my thigh and it was distracting. And very nice feeling.

“Is not,” I countered.

“Is, too,” he said back, as if we were seven.

“Prove it.”

He leaned in real close and his breath fanned across my ear. I shivered. “You’ve been thinking about my dick. Imagining how big it is. Comparison sizing to your vibrators. Plural. Now I’m thinking about your virgin pussy and watching you play with yourself.”

A waitress brought over our drinks and I startled. Daniel pulled back but didn’t move far. My eyes held his.

“Thank you,” he said to the waitress without looking away. He reached out, picked up the fresh glass of wine and handed it to me.

“Trying to get me drunk?” I asked.



DANIEL

I WAS TRYING to get her drunk. Or at least to keep her tipsy. Not to take advantage. Hell, no. But I wanted more of the unvarnished truth from those full lips. The more I learned about Melly, the more I was intrigued. Especially how she used a vibrator bigger than my dick. And she was a virgin. That meant the only thing that had been inside her was made of silicone and driven by her.

“I shouldn’t have told you all that,” she said, taking a big gulp of the wine.

“But you did. Your secrets are safe with me. *You’re* safe with me, sweet girl.”

She flushed and a sound like a whimper escaped, but she washed it down with more wine. She squirmed on her stool. I wasn’t sure if it was because she was aroused or if the talk made her unsettled.

Both were good. It wasn’t like I could do anything about it here in the middle of the bar. I wasn’t tugging a virgin to the back hall or a bathroom stall for a quickie. Not Melly. Maybe someday, because she deserved to know a guy needed to be inside her so bad he couldn’t wait to even get her to a car to fuck her.

But there was no someday. Not with me. I was out of here. Out of Hunter

Valley. Away from a young woman who had her entire life ahead of her. Marriage. Children. Picket fence.

I'd missed out on all of that except the child part. My dreams got derailed once and I wasn't letting Melly Harwood's snug, virgin pussy or her shy smiles let that happen again. I certainly wasn't starting a second family like my father.

But she'd called me. Sure, not one hundred percent sober, but she had. And she'd let slip—without saying it directly—that she thought of me sexually.

Me. Not some other guy who'd give her that picket fence.

I wouldn't be a conscious, breathing male if I didn't get hard and drive across town for more of that.

Why did I care? Why was I even here? I shouldn't be sucked into her green eyes, her sex life or that of her dog's. Danny would be home sometime soon and handle it. He could handle her and Earl and Fred.

But I didn't want him to. I wanted to be the one she called. The one who—yeah, she got flushed over, just like she was right now. Fuck, was it easy to do. And because of how she responded, I was the only one she'd told her secrets.

She glanced away, then back. “Those messages I left. Why did you think I trapped you?”

“Because I got someone pregnant once,” I admitted. “I'm leaving Saturday and nothing's stopping me. Not this time.”

“Danny.”

Just his name explained it all.

I nodded. Everyone in town my age or older remembered when I got Haven pregnant. The wording of it... *I got*, insinuated I did it to her, that she had no involvement in the act. We were nineteen and all over each other. While we'd always used condoms, they weren't foolproof. Obviously. I'd been away at college when she announced she was having our baby and I had to quit and come home. A month after Danny was born, she bailed on both of us, saying she wasn't letting her life be ruined by a kid she didn't want, then moved to Oregon with her parents. I hadn't heard from or seen her since.

I made a life here in Hunter Valley with a baby. I never imagined being a father at nineteen and it had been fucking hard, but my family had stepped in to help, of course. Grandparents and four uncles and we'd ensured that kid knew he was loved and wanted. But the dreams I'd had were put on hold to give Danny the best life possible. Now? It was time to finally, FINALLY,

move away from home.

Danny. I was sitting with a woman who was his age, not mine. Who Melly knew well enough for their dogs to have a torrid relationship. My dick was hard for her, for a woman who should be so fucking far off limits.

“What’s with you and Danny?” I asked.

“Danny? We dated back in January. Twice.” She offered me a nonchalant shrug. “Coffee. Lunch. I’m... um, not interested.” She glanced away. I wondered if talking about a guy with his father was as weird for her as it was for me. Still, I needed to know.

“Why not?”

She blinked. “You want to talk about how your dick fits in me when it seems like you’re trying to matchmake me with your *son*?”

Yeah, really fucking awkward.

I shook my head. “Hell, no. But you called *me* and told *me* about your virginity. You talked about my dick more than once,” I said, voicing my thoughts. “This isn’t happening if you’re into him.”

She took a deep breath and blushed furiously.

“Melly,” I said, the two syllables drawn out.

“Danny doesn’t do it for me. He’s nice and I like him, but he doesn’t make me hot. Guys my age don’t. They’re... not men. I mean, they’re men but they’re not manly enough. Okay? Now you know.” That came out in one swift rush, as if they fell out of her mouth without any ability to stop them.

“Now I know,” I repeated, immensely pleased. Danny was out. Guys her age were out. I was in, yet I needed to apologize for today. She may want a real man, but I’d acted like an overbearing asshole. Not once, but twice.

“I overreacted,” I admitted, giving her a small smile. “Earlier.”

She offered me one back. “You think? Are you always so big and... growly?”

“Yes,” I said right away because I not only stormed into the vet’s office but into the bar, too. And I’d waited earlier on her stoop all big and... yeah, growly. “Why did you call me?” With every revelation she revealed, I had a feeling I knew, but I wanted to hear it from her.

She sighed, her shoulders drooping. “I was mad. The girls and I agreed you’re an idiot and I wanted to make sure you knew it.”

I tipped my head and laughed. “I’m well aware of how many mistakes I made today with you and I’m sorry.”

“Then I say we start over.”

It seemed her little phone call wasn't normal for her. I was catching on that she didn't like confrontation or not liking someone. Or them not liking her in return. It was best to forget we'd been at odds instead of learning from it.

I shook my head. "No way."

Her brows lifted. "Why not?"

I leaned forward, set both hands on her thighs. She didn't pull away, didn't do anything but swallow hard, then bite her bottom lip, then look at my hands. Yeah, she wanted me. A real man. "Because you didn't call me to tell me you were mad about everything I did, but mad because you really want my dick and you thought I didn't want to give it to you."

She gasped.

"You're horny and you want my dick. Admit it."



DANIEL

ADMIT IT.

Would she? There was no question she was aroused and interested. But women were funny. Not *ha ha* funny, but *what the hell were they thinking?* funny. Just like her phone call, she said one thing but meant another. She could toss her wine in my face out of principle alone but would then miss out on a man-made orgasm. Especially since she told me—unintentionally—she was a virgin.

Shit. Shit! I blew it. If she'd wanted me, she'd have said so. Maybe she really was just mad and I'd been all growly when I should have been apologetic and contrite. Now I wasn't sure if I should protect my balls, grab a napkin in preparation for the wine that was about to be flung on me or what.

But little Melly Harwood continued to surprise me because she nodded.

NODDED.

Fuck. Me.

That one little bob of her head and I was up, took her hand and weaved us around the tables and to the back hallway. Never mind what I thought just minutes ago about Melly's snug pussy and shy smiles. I was leaving Saturday. Not tonight. Not right now. Now? I was going to find out just how snug she was.

I skipped the men's room and tried the door marked office. Locked, I tried the other side of the hall. Storage room. Unlocked. Why Arlo didn't lock his shit up, I wasn't sure, but it was only boxes and cleaning supplies. No liquor to steal.

I found a switch on the wall, flipped it on, then shut the door behind us.

"Daniel, what are you doing?" she asked.

I could have answered and told her that our entire conversation was foreplay. That her talking about her vibrators and the phone call... all of it, biggest fucking turn on. I could have told her how hard I was. I decided to show her instead. I stepped toward her and she retreated. Not in fear, but because I was big and I was getting in her space. Good. The wall was at her back. Resting a forearm on the wall over her head, I leaned down and kissed her. My free hand was on her chin, tipping it up.

This wasn't a chaste kiss. Fuck no.

It was hard and fervent, open mouthed and dark from the start and smeared her shiny gloss. Fuck, was it scented like... cherries?

This was what I wanted to do from the second I saw her in the vet clinic.

She whimpered and I didn't stop. In fact, I shifted, lifted her up with my hands on her perfect ass and pressed her into the wall. Instinctively, she lifted her legs and squeezed my sides with her knees. Rolling my hips, there was no question she knew I was hard for her because my dick was nestled right over her pussy. Only our clothes kept me from rocking right inside, nice and deep.

She couldn't miss that I was big and I was going to fit. She was small, so tiny in my arms that there was no question it was going to be tight and she was going to be a fucking good girl for taking it all.

I lifted my head, met her eyes. They fluttered open. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips swollen. Fuck yes.

"Despite what you might have thought, and hopefully this makes it crystal clear, I want to put my dick in you." I rolled my hips and proved what she said on the phone was wrong.

She nodded. "I... feel that."

"About that vibrator. Still bigger than me?"

"I... I, um..."

"If you haven't figured it out, I'm a dirty talker. You said you're a virgin and I'll give you sweet and gentle if that's what you need because I don't want to—

She shook her head. "No. I'm a virgin, not repressed. Don't... don't stop.

I like it. A lot.”

She liked it. YES.

Her tongue flicked out, licked her lips. I watched and pre-cum spurted into my boxers. Fuck, she was so fucking pretty.

“Do you have any idea how much of a little cock tease you are?”

She blinked, trying to come out of her fog of arousal. “Wh—at?”

Too strong? No. She said she liked it. “Calling me, telling me about how tight your pussy is, how you like to play with it with nice, big toys.”

“Daniel, oh... I do.”

“I think you’re a horny little thing. Needing to get off.”

She shook her head, sputtered, but didn’t wiggle to be put down. In fact, she rolled her hips against me, then whimpered again.

That sound and the fact that she was right there with me—and *right there* being a place so fucking dirty...I was going to come in my pants. Now who was the untried virgin?

FUCK.

“I am.”

“Don’t worry,” I growled. “I’ll take care of you. You call me when you need it, sweet girl.”

I glanced around. This wasn’t where I was going to fuck her for the first time, no matter how much she was into it. No one should have that memory with cleaning supplies, shelving, and fluorescent lighting. Anyone could walk in and while she seemed to be a little naughtier than she let on with the virgin librarian vibe, I wanted to take my time with her. And get her bare.

But that didn’t mean I’d leave her pussy aching.

I started to lower her down, but she clung to me.

“Gotta put you down to finger that wet little pussy. You’re wet for me, aren’t you?”

Her knees loosened about me, and I set her on her feet. I settled back to leaning against the wall with my arm. Her hands were on my chest, and I felt the heat of her palms through my flannel. She wouldn’t look up, but she wasn’t trying to get away either. “Gotta hear the words, sweet girl.”

Slowly, she lifted her head. Met my gaze with her green one. “Yes. I’m wet for you. So wet. Daniel, I ache.”

Oh fuck. Melly really was a virgin? I never expected a virgin to say they ached. But why not? She wasn’t a high schooler. We weren’t fumbling in the back of my car. While she looked like she might want flowers and soft music,

gentle words and a tame lover, that wasn't the case at all.

It seemed she wanted to be called out. To be forced to voice her naughtiest needs. And she did.

She fucking ached.

She could be a porn star. It was that starched white shirt collar that made me want to consume her. Just like when I first saw her in the vet's office, I wanted to make her filthy.

"You ache?" I asked, my voice a deep growl. My dick was staying in my pants. It had to. No way could I let it out like it wanted because... fuck, I'd destroy her.

"Yes."

"Your pussy needs to be fucked?" I worked her pants open, then pushed them down her hips.

She nodded and I ran my fingers along the top edge of her panties. Red lace.

FUCK! Total cock tease. The little librarian wore fuck-me red panties.

"Not tonight," I said, as much to my dick as to her. "Not here."

She whimpered, but this time it was from being told no. Turning my wrist, I slid my hand down the front of her panties, felt the soft curls there before her heat. Her sopping wet center.

She wasn't passive. In fact, the second my fingertips brushed over her pussy, she grabbed my wrist. Not to pull it away, but to direct me.

I couldn't help but grin.

"More?"

"Yes."

"Like this?"

"Yes!"

"Two fingers?"

"Oh yeessss."

A hip roll and a moan and I wasn't sure I was going to survive this.

Her pussy was so hot. So tight. So wet and needy. And she was responsive as hell. And liked my dirty talk. She wanted filthy? I'd give it to her.

My hand stilled with my fingers only halfway inside her. Her walls clamped around them and she held onto my wrist like a pommel on a horse. "Daniel," she said, looking up at me.

"Ride my fingers and come like a good girl."

She clenched around me again. “I don’t–”

“Lower yourself. Yes, now up. Good, rub that hard little clit... yes, right there. Oh, look at you go. Fucking yourself on my fingers.”

Holy shit, she was working so hard for it, using me like she used her toys to get herself off. Sure, it was a little clumsy at first, which made me wonder how much of a virgin she was. She found her rhythm, what she needed to do to get off.

“I’m almost–” She bit her lip and rocked some more. Then lifted, dropped hard.

“My dick’s so much bigger than these two fingers,” I murmured, kissing down the side of her neck. She was fully dressed except for her pants open. I wanted to see her tits bounce, to know if that short thatch of pussy hair was the same glorious red as on her head. “It’ll get so much deeper when I–”

She came, her body going taut, then milking me and my dick was weeping with the need to feel those strong pulls all around it.

I was in big trouble here.

Big. Bigger than her favorite vibrator.

When her pleasure finally waned, I slipped my hand from her panties and licked them. “Let’s get out of here. I’m not remotely done with you.”

After what she just did, there was no way in hell she was going to remain a virgin for much longer.

She leaned forward and I thought she was going to kiss me. Maybe whisper in my ear how she wanted me to fuck her first. Missionary, maybe with her hands over her head gripping my headboard. Or from behind so I could press my thumb against her snug little asshole because I had a feeling she was going to get off on that.

Instead of doing either, she threw up.



MELLY

I **ARCHED** my back and whimpered. Daniel's big hands ran up and down my thighs, pushing them wider and wider so he could settle between them. His shoulders, so broad, opened me to him completely. I felt his breath fan me... there. How could just that have me close to coming. And then he kissed higher and higher until he hovered right over me.

Touch me! Lick me! I need to come!

"Please!" I moaned, thrashing and desperate for that first touch. "Daniel."

It never came because I jolted awake. Stared up at a log-beamed ceiling.

I was panting, the sheets and blankets twisted around me.

This wasn't my room.

Why was I wearing just my bra and panties?

Was I still dreaming? My pussy ached and throbbed with need for Daniel to lick me and make me come.

I sat up quickly. Too quickly. My head throbbed. I put my hand on my forehead.

"Oh my God," I muttered, which only made my tongue move, which was furry. My whole mouth felt like it was covered in the mold I found sometimes on old cheese in my fridge.

What happened? Why had I just had a sex dream about Daniel? Did we

do something? Was that why I was in his bed? Was this his bed? Why don't I remember what really happened but am desperately turned on from a dream?

I blinked, then had to do it again because I fell asleep with my contacts in and they were dry as hell.

Was this Daniel's room? The bed was big. Like *big* big. And comfortable. If there was going to be a snowstorm, this was where I wanted to snuggle in and read through it.

Then I heard it. The shower. It was running which meant someone was in it. Naked. Was it Daniel? I rubbed my thighs together imagining him in there, soap bubbles dripping down every hard, rugged plain of him.

I circled back to my first thought. What the hell happened?

I thought back. Kincaids with Bridget and Mallory. Then the storage room where he said all those sexy things to me and I... and then I- "OH MY GOD!"

This really was Daniel Pearson's bed and I had a sex dream with him as the star.

Daniel Pearson really was in the shower.

I had to get dressed before he came out. Had he heard me call out his name in my dream?

Hopping down from the bed, my bare feet landed on plush, textured carpet. I swung around in a circle, which wasn't good for my head, but I had more important problems than it exploding. I didn't see any of my clothes.

The shower shut off and I panicked.



DANIEL

I CAME out of the bathroom, a towel around my waist, expecting Melly to be asleep. When I cut through the bedroom earlier, she hadn't moved. Still out cold. But she wasn't in the bed nor in the room.

She had to be somewhere unless she found her clothes in the dryer. Not wanting her to be alone in a strange house, I opened the door to my walk-in closet to get dressed and hunt her down, then froze.

There stood Melly in one of my flannels, her hands on the buttons trying to put it on. She looked at me as if a deer caught in front of an oncoming semi.

I wondered if my dick got hard because it was morning, because she was standing there in only my mostly-buttoned shirt—which looked hot as fuck—or it just did whenever I saw her again after any kind of break. Even just a few hours. Especially after the night before in the storage room. Holy hell.

Maybe all of the above. Definitely all of the above. Now I knew how perfect her pussy was. How wet she got. How much she loved it wild and was remarkably uninhibited. How she came so hard and—

“Shit, sorry,” I said, my voice rough. I hadn't talked yet this morning and I sounded, yeah... growly. “Didn't mean to scare you.”

Her wide eyes dropped to my chest. Then lower. Then *lower*. Then

jumped right back up to meet mine. I wasn't shy or modest. If she wanted to look at me in just a towel, she could take all the time she wanted. Thank fuck I'd rubbed one out in the shower otherwise I'd be pitching a tent right now.

Either way, I'd even drop the towel so she had the full picture. And that picture was growing seeing her in my shirt. I thought I felt possessive the night before burning rubber to get to the bar, but now? Holy hell. It fell to her knees, but the undone buttons offered hints of pale skin and thick thigh.

"I needed... where are my clothes?" she asked. Her gaze kept flitting to my chest. I was muscular from hard work. I owned a tree and landscape company, but I did the manual labor, too. I never spent my days behind a desk. I had scars and calluses. And every inch of me craved her touch.

"I had to wash them."

"Why?"

I cocked my head. "You don't remember?"

"I remember the stockroom. How I, how we... Then nothing. Did we... um, did we--?" she sputtered, circling her finger in the air.

I couldn't help but smile because she was so fucking cute.

"How you rode my fingers until you came?"

She blushed and with my shirt so big, I could see the color creep all the way down her neck and past her collarbones.

I wondered how often she let people see her like this. While I didn't realize she wore makeup, because she always looked so fresh and natural in comparison to other women, she had small mascara smudges under her eyes. Her hair was smooshed up on one side and she had a large crinkle up the right side of her face. She looked pale and if I had to guess, probably feeling pretty rough.

I never got a taste for wine, but I would assume too much of it made someone feel like shit just like any other kind of alcohol.

"Fuck? I promise, if we did, you'd know."

Her fingers fidgeted on another button. "Oh. Um, okay."

I sighed. "Melly, I don't fuck unconscious women. I *really* like it when you're right there with me. Coming all over my fingers."

She swallowed, stared down at her bare feet. I followed her gaze and noticed hot pink toenail polish. She might be small, but her legs—what I could see of them—were shapely. I didn't think they'd even wrap all the way around my waist when I fucked her.

"Then, um... why did you take my clothes off to sleep?"

“Because you threw up all over them.”

Her head whipped up and she winced. Then she closed her eyes. She must have one hell of a headache.

Her eyes widened. “Oh my God. I forgot that. I got you, too, didn’t I? It’s... um, I remember now. I think it may have been better not remembering.”

“Then I won’t tell you what happened after that.”

Like her passing out. I’d caught her and I’d had to carry her out of the bar. I wrapped her in the old blanket I kept in the back of my truck to keep the vomit from getting all over the seat and drove home with the windows down. My jeans had been covered, too. I hadn’t dealt with projectile vomit since Danny’d been seven.

Until now. Until Melly. I’d wanted to make sure she was safe at the bar, but from passing out? Not what I’d had in mind. But she’d needed me, and I had to be there for her. Dropping her at her house hadn’t been an option. No way could I tuck her into her bed and hope she wouldn’t aspirate if she vomited again.

No. I brought her to my house, stripped us both of our wine-vomit covered clothes and put her into my bed. I went into Danny’s old room and crashed there.

Yes, I’d noticed her fire engine red bra and panties when I got those prim clothes off. I also noticed the wet spot on her panties where I’d made her drip and gush as she came.

There were so many questions I had tied to that color and racy style. I expected plain, pale pink cotton or maybe something with embroidered daisies on it. Not satin and lace that had her secretly asking to be fucked. Well, it wasn’t a secret to me how much she loved what I did to her. Her body was made for me to worship... in the dirtiest of ways.

No matter how hard she made me, how desperate I was to sink into her, I meant what I said. I didn’t fuck unconscious women. I didn’t lust after them either. But I was certainly looking forward to her being sober. And finding out what other colors of panties she liked to wear.

And watching her when I finally sank into her for the first time.

But seeing her in my flannel? Sexiest thing I’d ever seen.

“Thank you, but I can imagine. I’m sure what I did has spread all over town by now. People are going to think—”

“—you have the stomach flu.”

She stared at me, confused. “What?”

I shrugged. No one had to mess with her for drinking a little too much wine. She’d been in a fucking bar, not driving a school bus full of children. But if she was worried about people talking, then I’d give her an out.

No one fucked with little Melly Harwood. No one but me.

“I hear it’s going around.” I had no clue if it was going around or not.

She looked down, rubbed her toe across the carpet, considering the out I was giving her. So what if she drank too much? Sure, I didn’t want to get thrown up on every day, but she was normal. Doing normal things, even with a slightly poor bout of judgment. But it seemed she felt she had to be *more* than that. Perfect.

She wasn’t perfect, that was for sure. But who was? I liked her quirks. Her shyness. No, she wasn’t shy, really. She’d let me have it more than once, especially that phone call. Skittish, maybe? Wary? No, she was cautious. As if she was afraid to try things yet so damned eager to do so. The prim clothes that hid racy lingerie said just that.

“Okay,” she said finally.

A woof came from the bedroom and in stormed Earl, nudging past me and going to Melly. He knocked her back a step and she laughed.

“Earl!” I yelled, but the menace didn’t listen. He nudged her hip with his big sloppy face, then stuck his nose in her crotch for a sniff.

Maybe the dog wasn’t so dumb after all.



MELLY

WHAT I DID with Daniel in the bar. Oh my God.

I learned a few things:

1. I liked dirty talk. Not just dirty talk but filthy talk.
2. He was ridiculously talented with his fingers. I'd come, if I remembered correctly, in a ridiculously short amount of time. Of course, lots of #1 helped.
3. I'd never been so wet in my life. I didn't even know it was possible. #1 and #2 helped with this.
4. I was really into it. Like so into the pleasure Daniel gave me that I'd been ready to fuck him beside floor cleaner and a mop. All because of #1, #2 and #3.
5. Vomit was the biggest cock blocker ever.
6. I wanted more. But #5 happened.

I HAD GONE from zero to ready to have sex at the bar. In a storage closet.

This was *not* me. A storage closet?

Instead, I threw up on him and then passed out. That was why I wasn't surprised when he'd gotten my clothes from his dryer and pushed them at me

to get dressed instead of dropping his towel, stalking over to me, ripping open his flannel shirt I wore and ravaging me.

That didn't happen.

Unfortunately, my green sweater had been a casualty of the evening. It was my own fault, and I couldn't blame Daniel's lack of knowledge about washing wool. Or separating colors, it seemed. He'd tossed everything covered in vomit in the wash together. With, I assumed, hot water. Then he'd dried it all, again, on hot since my soft cashmere sweater now fit a toddler.

He'd driven me home and helped me from his truck. It was probably being a gentleman on his part, but I had a feeling it had more to do with the fact that the drop to my street was too far for me to make without a parachute.

His big hands spanned my waist as he let me down.

There had been no kiss, no goodbye other than a quick nod and a reminder for me to take some headache pills and take a nap. Nothing else.

Of course, two Pearson Tree and Landscape Service trucks were parked out front and a guy in a bobcat with a drill thing on the front was already breaking up my driveway. I forgot about the project Nana had organized before she left on her trip. But it had been open ended, when they would start since the weather was so iffy.

Clearly, it was this morning.

Was it vomit or his-former-employees watching that kept him from anything else, chaste or not? I still did the walk of shame, or what felt like one.

Any dreams that Mallory and Bridget had of me sleeping with Daniel were dashed and in spectacular fashion. I bet they never did the one-two combo: orgasm and vomit.

Fine. Fine!

I hadn't wanted to get involved with him anyway. He was everything I didn't want. Older. Leaving town. Absolutely, positively not interested in anything serious. Just the words "storage room finger banging" indicated casual.

"I was the one who came. Spectacularly. Why am I so irked?" I asked Fred as I poured some kibble in her bowl, eyeing me in a way that told me I was late serving her breakfast. I couldn't remember the last night I'd spent away from home. Maybe a slumber party right after I moved in with Nana. Thankfully Fred had a doggie door—a cat door really since she was so tiny—to the back yard.

With a cup of black coffee, I took three headache pills—one extra because of all the racket outside—and got in the shower. And berated myself again, this time under almost-scalding water, for being an idiot, which was ironic since I called Daniel one last night.

“The one time at sex stuff and I messed up. No guy finds vomit arousing, Melly. No wonder he dropped me off and ran. He should have told me to tuck and roll and just slowed the truck down.”

I squeezed an overly generous amount of shower gel on my lime-colored loofah and started scrubbing.

“I don’t fuck unconscious women, he said. Well, he doesn’t fuck me conscious either. GAH!”

I moodily shaved my legs while the deep conditioner did its job on my hair.

“I don’t want to be noticed by men and now I’m mad that a guy is repulsed by me. What is *wrong* with me?” I shouted, the words echoing off the tile. “Right. Vomit.”

That was what I was thinking an hour later when I walked into Kincaids and tracked down Arlo. Fred slept in the car. I’d called in sick as Daniel suggested and while I should technically be in bed to keep up the ruse, I owed Arlo money.

He was behind the bar attaching a keg to some tubing, which I assumed fed one of the taps.

Standing, he wiped his hands on his jeans and gave me his usual carefree smile. “Hey, Melly. How you feelin’?”

I could feel my cheeks heat, but I reached into my purse for my wallet to redirect my thoughts.

“I came by to pay you for our tab last night.” I set my credit card on the glossy bar surface. “I kind of missed the opportunity.”

He waved his hand. “Pearson took care of that.”

“Daniel?”

He nodded.

“He did?”

“Came in earlier.”

I tucked my card back. “Oh, okay. That was nice of him.”

It was. And thoughtful.

“Want a coffee?”

Did I look that rough? A little extra face powder took care of the dark

bags under my eyes. Or so I thought.

“Sure.” I pulled out a stool and settled on it. The place just opened so there weren’t any customers yet for lunch. Servers were putting condiments on the tables and setting out rolled silverware in preparation for the rush I knew was to come.

He set a mug in front of me, just like the one that Daniel had the night before.

“How’s your grandmother?”

He knew I lived with her, that we were close, if having a video call with her once a week was close. While she was seventy-five, she was the adventurous one. “Leading a class across Europe studying the clerestory window usage in late medieval cathedrals.”

He laughed. “I don’t even know what that means.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Neither did I. I had to look it up.”

“You okay after last night? I was near the front door and saw Pearson carrying you. He said you got sick.”

I had no idea why men called each other by their last names.

“Yeah, I hope I didn’t make too much of a mess,” I said somewhat sheepishly. “I don’t usually drink that—”

He held up a hand. “No worries. I think you got yourself and Pearson. Didn’t even get any on the floor by your table.” His dark eyes held humor as he continued. “You’re tidy even when you hurl.”

Inwardly, I cringed. He thought I got sick and passed out sitting at the high top. He didn’t know we’d fooled around in his storage room. God, I hope I hadn’t made a mess in there.

“Well, I’m still sorry.”

“You doing okay?” he asked, setting his hands on the bar and leaning forward. His smile slipped away, and he looked at me now with seriousness.

“I didn’t know you and Pearson had a thing.”

My eyes flared. Thing? Me and Daniel? “There’s no thing,” I assured him. Other than him fingering me to my first guy-given orgasm.

He cocked his head. “You sure? You two looked pretty cozy last night. He’s not taking advantage, is he?”

That was the second time someone asked me that. I laughed because I’d taken advantage. I’d had an orgasm and Daniel hadn’t. “I threw up on him. No advantage taking was being had.”

He nodded once, then studied me some more. “Look, I’m a bartender.

People tell bartenders stuff they don't tell anyone else. You can talk to me if you want. About him. You. Whether you want him to take advantage. I mean, we don't know each other that well, but—"

He didn't finish and ran a hand over the back of his neck as if he felt uncomfortable, as if he overstepped.

Mallory hadn't called me yet this morning, but I knew she would. She'd want to know everything that happened after she and Bridget left. She was a great friend and she would give me a pep talk. Tell me something about how protective and caring Daniel had been. Something to make me feel better.

No matter what she or anyone else said, vomit on a guy couldn't be sugar coated.

I needed advice. Man tips. From a man.

"I can't sit here and do nothing while we talk," I said. "Give me some silverware to roll."

His eyes widened as if he thought I was joking, but only shook his head and hefted a plastic tray with divided silverware. He sat a pile of white paper napkins beside it. "Have at it."

I grabbed a fork, knife, and spoon from the bucket and then set them in the center of a napkin, then rolled it like an open ended burrito. A crepe, perhaps? Then I did another.

While I got to work, he pulled out a jar of maraschino cherries from beneath the counter and twisted the lid open. Snagging a spoon, he started scooping them out and dropping them into a section of a condiment caddy.

"How do you know a guy likes you?" I blurted.

He froze, mid-tip and stared at me. "Um, we going all the way back to fifth grade with this boy talk? Didn't your mom cover back then?"

I frowned. My mother. She had told me about self-love when I was thirteen, that it was natural. Healthy. Yes, when other mothers were sharing how to use a tampon, she gave me a vibrator. Perhaps it was better than giving me a box of condoms. She held off until I was sixteen for that.

To say that she was casual about sex was an understatement. I had a completely dysfunctional view of men and women.

Arlo saw my look and remembered. "Sorry, okay, yeah, your mom was a little different."

Even he knew about my mom. She was infamous. She popped back in town every year or every few months or so, wanting money or a place to stay when she didn't have a man to support her. She'd latch onto one and be gone

again, without more than a wave goodbye. The last time I got a text.

“Right.” I smiled, a fork in my hand. “Okay, um. How can I know if Daniel likes me? I threw up on him so I think that ended things. Not that there was anything to end,” I clarified.

“Did he specifically say he was into you?” he asked, lifting his eyes from his work to meet mine. I’d skipped my contacts since they’d been in all night and wore my glasses. I pushed them up my nose.

“There were *very* specific words about what he wanted to do with me,” I elaborated carefully. If I was going to talk with Arlo, I might as well just do it. Band Aid ripping off and all that. Yet I wasn’t going to tell him Daniel was confident his dick would fit in me. Or any of the other hot and really filthy things he said. “He said he wants to... with me. You know.”

I flushed. He nodded as he fished out more cherries from the big jar.

“You okay with that? With him talking to you like that? I mean, if the wrong guy says that stuff, you should throat punch him. If the right guy says it and you like the idea, then... maybe you let him.”

“Yes. I mean, no.” I rolled the silverware in a napkin then set it in the pile. “I didn’t want to throat punch him.” I wanted to climb him like a tree.

He gave a curt nod. “Good. A guy ever says shit to you you don’t like, let me know.” He pointed the spoon at me and a drop of pink syrup landed on the counter.

“Thanks. I will.” I made another roll of silverware. “I understand all that. A guy’s into me, I’m into him, we have some fun. I’m not that clueless,” I said, although I was. Totally clueless. I stopped my progress on a roll and stared at him. “I threw up on him, Arlo. He had to do my laundry. And his. I have no idea where to go from here. Who wants to do dirty things with Throw Up Girl? I mean, there’s dirty and then there’s *dirty*.”

The cherry section was full so he screwed the lid back on the jar and turned to put it in the fridge.

“Remember last night I said guys are idiots?” he asked when he faced me again, wiping his hands on a white dishcloth.

I nodded.

“They’re also very focused. If Daniel Pearson says he wants to do dirty things with you, he still does. Throw up is not going to change that.”

“I should just go up to him and” –I snapped my fingers– “say let’s go?”

“You know he’s leaving town? Going to Scotland for a few months and then... well, I don’t think he even knows.”

I nodded. Was this why I shouldn't call him again and tell him to fuck me or because I should? This was casual. Just as casual as what my mother had planned for me back when I was eighteen. Just sleep with a guy and have some fun. It wasn't a big deal. Just sex and pleasure for a little while. Then move on. Another guy after Daniel was gone would come along. I could do it all over again with him too. Then the next, then the next.

I wasn't interested in anyone else. I was hung up, completely and totally, on Daniel. And his magical fingers.

Was that how my mother got started? A talented man in the back room of a bar?

Oh my God, maybe it was.

He rubbed his chin, considering. "Daniel or another guy, I have a feeling that if you went up to any and said 'let's go' you'd have a one hundred percent success rate."

And that was the problem. Was it because it was me, my free-spirited mother's daughter? This was the exact reason why I tried to hide myself.

I pulled my lips to the side. "This is Daniel Pearson though. Big lumberjack? Beard? Growly?"

One vet visit and he saw me. *Saw. Me.* He'd gotten me off. I hadn't even seen his dick. He was an unselfish lover. If he was like Creepy Carl, then I'd be unsatisfied and used. With Daniel, it was the other way around.

Arlo looked me over, then grinned. "The way he was looking at you? Doesn't stand a chance. The biggest trees fall the hardest."



DANIEL

SEEING her in my flannel had been close. Too close. I'd liked the look of her in it too fucking much. What the hell was I doing messing around with her?

I was counting the days until I left town. I didn't even have a return ticket. Melly was a virgin. She'd told me. Sure, it hadn't been intentional, but I knew.

I couldn't have sex with her and then leave the country.

I wasn't that much of a dick.

When I dropped her off, I could've parked, tossed her over my shoulder and carried her into her house. Did every single thing I could think of to satisfy her and initiate her into sex. Hell, we'd still be in her bed.

But no. I'd told her to take some pain pills and I left.

Left. Why?

The obvious. An entire landscaping crew from Pearsons was working on digging up her driveway. I knew every single guy and they were all eyeing me. With Melly. At eight in the morning. Especially Deek, who smirked. No way in hell was I going into her house with her, with all of them watching and then spend the day fucking her brains out.

Sure the jackhammer would mute her screaming my name, but everyone would know.

Hell, Deek would probably come into her house and raid her fridge.

The less obvious reason I didn't linger was that I was leaving town. Leaving. Melly wasn't the kind of woman to have a fling with, even if she agreed to it. She wasn't like the other women I spent time with in the past. They knew the score. Knew it was casual, that it was just for fun.

Melly was smart enough to know the same and agree to it. But I couldn't take her virginity, no matter how filthy she liked me to talk to her or how well she fucked herself on my fingers in the back storeroom of a bar and leave the country.

That was why I wasn't sitting at home packing, which was ridiculous. I only had to throw some clothes in a bag. Going to Scotland wasn't riding a raft up the Amazon. They had clothing stores.

I'd just parked in front of the office when my cell rang.

Danny.

"Hey, kid. How's the fire."

"Almost out. Dad, is everyone okay? I just got a ride into the nearest town to the fire and got your message and I missed a bunch of your calls."

"Everyone's fine, but Melly Harwood called the office to get in touch with you."

"Oh? I think her grandma was going to have us work on some landscape work, but I don't know anything really about it."

"It's not about that. Earl knocked up Fred," I told him.

He was quiet for a second, then laughed. "No shit. You sure?"

"No shit," I repeated. "And yes, I'm very sure. Look, you've got to take responsibility for this. Pay the vet bills and stuff. I covered the visit yesterday."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. That shit's expensive." The one vet visit from the day before hadn't been cheap. "The vet even said it has to be a c-section."

"Well, shit. It's not like I could tell Earl to use a condom."

"You could've had him neutered."

I heard him hiss and my balls felt a twinge of sympathy. "Yeah, no."

"Well, then get ready to pay some parenting expenses."

He sighed. "Fine. I'm racking up the cash here on the fire. I should be home in a few days."

Wildland firefighting paid quite well, especially since room and board was covered. It supplemented his income with the family business and got

him out to see the world and have some adventures. I had to thank my friend Mac, who was the local fire chief, for getting Danny interested.

“Mind telling me how you met Melly?” I prodded. Melly had said she wasn’t interested and that the two dates had been a dead end, but I’d had my fingers in her. I needed to know how he felt.

“She lives down the street from Gram.”

“Yes, I know that.”

“I was walking Earl and she was out front getting her mail. We hit it off.”

Shit. “Hit it off?” My fingers clenched around the phone. “Are you two dating or whatever it’s called these days?”

“Dating? We went out twice. Hooking up? No way.”

I frowned, confused. “Why no way? She seems... nice.”

And sexy. And uninhibited beneath that prim shell. And very, very naughty.

“Yeah. Nice. She’s cute and all that and I thought, why the hell not? So I took her for coffee. But I ended it because I can’t do candlelight and poetry and that’s what she’ll want.”

My eyebrows went up and I flung off my sunglasses to rub my eyes. Poetry? Not a chance. She wanted to hear filth in her ear while my fingers were buried inside her.

“You got that from those two dates?”

“I think she’s a virgin, Dad,” he said in a cautious way that someone used when describing a bomb that had to be handled very carefully. “You’ve seen her. Vanilla all the way. She’s a settle-down kind of girl and I’m not looking for that right now. A guy wants a little—”

While Danny and I had always been open when talking about sex, there was a line, especially when it came to fucking little Melly Harwood. “Gotcha. Text me when you’re on your way home. I’ll take care of Melly and the dog situation until then.”

I hung up and climbed from my truck. I couldn’t help the smile that was on my face.

Danny thought Melly was vanilla. Melly thought Danny was boring and too young.

Perfect.



MELLY

I FELT guilty about calling in sick when I really wasn't, so after talking with Arlo, I went into work. Besides, I had no idea what to do with myself outside of my set routine. What did someone do with a few free hours on a weekday? I had to think about what to do with Daniel and I did my best thinking when reshelving books. It was a one-person task so I didn't have to talk to anyone. I didn't have to think too much about what I was doing, only remember the alphabet and numbers. Fiction was simple and the Dewey Decimal System wasn't rocket science.

So after settling Fred on her dog bed in the office, I put all the return books on a cart and went into the non-fiction section.

What did I want to do with Daniel?

I felt like there were so many possibilities. Romance books offered endless variety of sexual options. A buffet of possibilities we could do together.

Based on how Daniel talked and handled me in the storeroom, I had to put him in the alpha, caveman, lumberjack, growly, bearded, dominant, possessive lover category. And I couldn't forget dirty talker. God, that had been hot.

I loved his kisses. I loved his fingers inside of me. I wanted his mouth on

me. His dick in me. Beard burn on my breasts and thighs. I wanted to be taken from behind. Against a wall. Over a table. Inside. Outside. Heck, I even wanted butt stuff.

Yes, me! *Little* Melly Harwood had a lot of naughty thoughts, and they were only stirred up by one *big* Daniel Pearson.

I realized I'd shelved three books and hadn't made it out of the Self-Help section. Maybe I needed some self-help.

The night before, pre-throw up, Mallory told me to jump him.

Arlo told me to go for it.

My pussy was telling me to get my shit together and call the man.

Pulling my cell from the back pocket of my pants, I took a deep breath and called him. I looked about. No one was in this section. Only one person was on the computers which were in the center of the non-fiction area and he had headphones on. It was after lunch so the kids' section was quiet. Toddlers were home for naps and bigger kids were at school.

"Melly."

Oh, that growl.

"Hi, Daniel, I... I—" I what? I knew what but I couldn't say it. "I'm sorry I threw up on you."

"Yes, you've already apologized." He waited. I waited. "Is there anything else?"

I shook my head, grabbed a book off the cart. *Florence In Summertime*.

"No. That's it."

"You're sure there isn't anything else I can do for you?"

I could see him standing beside a huge tree, ax in hand. He had on a red flannel and jeans. Flecks of chipped wood were on his clothing. He was a little sweaty from exertion from handling a big piece of wood.

Then my mind went filthy and him handling his own big piece of wood.

"No, I mean yes." I squeaked. "I'm... Goodbye."

I hung up. My heart was racing as if I'd been the one chopping down a tree. "Way to go, Melly," I whispered to myself. "Now he thinks you're—"

My cell vibrated in my hand—I kept the ringer turned off in the library—and I jumped a foot.

"Hello?" I murmured, keeping my voice low out of habit.

"Melly."

That growl. I remembered him saying it just that way the night before as I came all over his fingers.

“I’m thinking there’s something you want to say but are maybe a little too shy to do so. Like in the storeroom last night. You had something in mind but wanted a little coaxing. Am I right?”

Was he? If he called fingering me to orgasm coaxing, then yes. I whimpered and he heard it because he gave a growl in response. Every time I heard that deep rumble I felt like I was a lamb and he was a very hungry wolf ready to eat me up. Or do other naughty things to me.

“No.”

I hung up. Again.

I closed my eyes, squeezed the hell out of the travel book. Mentally, I screamed. AGGGGHHHHH! Was I being like this because I was stubborn? Because I was afraid? Because I was an idiot? It wasn’t because I was hot for him because I’d have admitted it from the start. He was giving me the chance to tell him the truth, but just like he guessed, I needed coaxing.

And he was coaxing.

I put the book down, lifted my chin and called him back.

“Yes.” I heard a little huff, which I assumed was him being amused. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“Oh sweet girl, the last thing I’m doing is laughing.”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Trying not to come in my pants imagining all the things *yes* means. What did you like best about being finger fucked, little Melly?”

I glanced around, afraid someone could hear him through the phone. Besides the guy on the computer, a woman was perusing the new release section, but not paying me any attention.

“I can’t answer that here.”

“Oh, where are you?”

“At work.”

Now he really did chuckle. “Couldn’t be the bad girl and call in sick, could you?”

“No.”

“But you can be a bad girl with me.”

I took a breath. I did want to be bad with him. The night before, in that storage room, it was me, but better. More. Free. *Very* bad. And I felt safe with Daniel. As if he would take care of me when I’d been completely out of control.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Good answer. So yes/no questions. Got it. You let slip you’re a virgin. Is that true?”

I pushed the cart further into the stacks. “Yes.”

“May I ask why you’re still one at twenty...”

“Four. I’m twenty-four. And well, I guess I never found the right guy,” I admitted. It was true. I definitely wasn’t having sex with anyone my mother recommended. Since I’d returned to Hunter Valley, I hadn’t been interested in anyone. Sure, a date or two, like with Danny Pearson, but not one got me interested. Or aroused. Or... wet. Until Daniel.

“But you’ve come before with a man?” he asked.

“No.”

“Only me.” Another growl.

“Yes.”

“You said you have vibrators. Big ones. You fuck yourself with them?”

Oh my God, this conversation! I grabbed another book from the cart and randomly shoved it in the stacks, then moved along. At the end of the stack, I turned and hid behind it.

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll take me so well. I won’t have to hold back too much. You’ll be sore, but you’ll always be a little achy when you take all my dick.”

He didn’t ask a question so I didn’t say anything. I wanted to push my hand down my pants and touch myself because he made me wet. And needy. And remembering how he’d made me come with ruthless precision and fast enough for him to feel cocky about it.

“Want it down your throat, in your pussy, or nice and snug in your ass?”

“Daniel,” I whispered, leaning against the side of the book stack. My eyes fell closed and I was lost. So lost.

“Oh, that wasn’t a yes/no question, was it? I guess you’ll have to come over after work and try all three. We can have a little fun.”

My eyes flew open. *Have a little fun.*

I’d heard that before. From my mother. From Creepy Carl.

Why are you so uptight? Have a little fun.

Carl wants to have a little fun with you.

He’ll show you how fun sex can be.

Fun. Everything they’d proposed had been the complete opposite of fun. That was when that word changed meaning for me, that maybe I wasn’t fun if I didn’t like it.

It was as if I'd shoved face first into a snowbank.

"No."

Daniel was silent for a moment, as if surprised by my answer.

I was on the verge of hanging up on him if the next thing he called me was uptight, too.

"No," he said, repeating my answer. "Okay. That answer is okay, Melly. We won't do anything you don't want to do."

I exhaled in relief that he wasn't pushing. That he respected my words. Me.

"I want to," I said, contradicting myself. I ran my fingers over my forehead because my brain was spinning. "Daniel, despite what I led you to believe by my actions last night, I can't do casual. I can't... have a little fun. It can't be without value. I won't sleep around."

"You're a virgin. You don't sleep around," he said, not as a reminder to me, but it seemed because he was lost and trying to keep up.

I pressed my head against the stack and stared up at the ceiling. The building was old, an original Carnegie library, and had a high, stucco ceiling. At one time, the paint had been white or cream but was now more of a gray from age.

"I'm not a free spirit," I explained, or perhaps warned. "I'm not an interchangeable receptacle of pleasure."

"Interchangeable what? I don't even know what the hell that means," he said, almost frustrated.

"My mother is... pretty much, a hippie. A free spirit. She gives *all* of herself to others. Openly. Too openly. She tried to push that concept, and men, on me."

"Your mother," he repeated, his tone not a surprise. Who mentioned their mother when talking about sex?

"Valerie Price."

"Valerie Price. *Valerie Price*. Oh. OH."

And he figured it all out as if I'd been hoarding the last piece of a puzzle and finally gave it to him.

"Yeah, oh," I muttered. Someone coughed and I lowered my voice. "I don't want to call her a slut because there's nothing wrong with a woman embracing and exploring her sexuality with many, *many* partners, but everyone in Hunter Valley probably thinks the name fits her."

"Um..." Now he was afraid to say something that might bother me.

“You know my mother,” I prodded.

“Of her,” he clarified. “The stories. The mayor and how she broke up their marriage and had him kicked out of office. She slept with the school superintendent too, right? I may have seen her last year at the grocery store in the produce section.”

He was probably right.

“Probably, she has a thing for penis-shaped vegetables. I don’t see her that often either. Maybe once or twice a year whenever she’s between men and needs a place to crash. That’s always *tons* of fun.”

“I hear sarcasm.”

“Oh yeah. She also calls occasionally when she’s got a guy but well, we aren’t close. Not since I was eighteen and decided to return to Hunter Valley and live with my grandmother.” We weren’t close. At all. Not since I turned down Creepy Carl and fled Idaho. I dreaded when she randomly showed up. “I won’t be like her,” I told him. “Not with sex.”

“I’m leaving town on Saturday, Melly. This isn’t going to turn into a relationship,” he reminded. Yes, he was headed to Scotland to wear a kilt and toss cabers. If there was something that made a woman’s panties wet—at least mine—was that visual. “It can only be casual.”

I nodded, but he couldn’t see me. “Yes, I know. I don’t want one. A relationship. That’s not what this is about.”

My grandmother had been married for twenty-five years when my grandfather died. That was before I was born and she never met anyone else who could ever compete with him, so I never saw her in a relationship. The only relationship role model I had was my mom and that was find a guy with some money who she could fuck and keep happy until he got tired of her. It sounded like a sugar daddy situation, but it wasn’t like that. It was casual, a mutual exchange, an easy trade of sex and companionship. No legalities like a marriage license or even a shared rental agreement.

It was... weird. And included no love. I didn’t think my mother knew what real love was.

“Then what do you want? Sex is fun, Melly. It shouldn’t be anything else and if something happened to make you not think that, then, well, I’ll kill the guy and then prove to you it can be fun... with the right person.”

“I want like last night.” That hadn’t been fun. That hadn’t been anything like what it would have been like with Creepy Carl. With Daniel, I’d felt safe and protected. Taken care of. I hadn’t had to think or be worried or do

anything but feel, even in a bar's storage room.

"It will *always* be like last night. Better."

Better than last night? How was that possible?

"I need to know I'm safe and while I feel that with you, what we're going to do is... unfamiliar. I'm not scared of you, I'm scared of the unknown. Unlike my mother, I need to know the rules."

"Rules?"

"Yes, guidelines. Agreed upon expectations even though you're leaving. I need walls. Boundaries." God, all that sounded awful. Boring. Right. Boring Melly Harwood. "See? That makes me uptight and not fun."

"You want a contract," he replied. He wasn't laughing, but he sounded amused. "Like my business has with Arlo for the deck extension. Agreed upon expectations so that when the contract is over, we're both happy. For him, minus the sex, of course."

A contract? Formally outlining what was to come, even if it was until Saturday?

"YES!" I shouted. Why had I shouted that? Because it felt like a relief, that he understood.

"A sex contract," he said, as if mulling over the concept. "That's not a new thing. For me, yes, but it sounds f—, I mean, I'm intrigued and very hard. Hmm."

Now I was confused. "Intrigued? Hard?" The idea of uptight boundaries and guidelines turned him on?

"This is a good idea," he said, sounding pleased. "Come over after work and I'll have one ready for your review."

"You... you will?" I asked, stunned by the turn this conversation took, but he'd already hung up.



MELLY

“I’M ABOUT to do something crazy,” I told Mallory when I was in my car. I’d turned it on but hadn’t pulled out of my parking spot at the library. Fred was on the passenger seat, staring at me, wondering why the car wasn’t moving.

This time of year, it was already dark out, but the lot was well lit.

“Something crazy I would do or something crazy you would do?”

Mallory didn’t jump out of airplanes, but she definitely had a wild streak. She was bold and silly and even a little goofy. Of course they were all personality traits for a good first grade teacher. So her kind of crazy and my kind of crazy were on two different levels.

Except–

“I’m not sure,” I replied, reaching to turn down the volume on the radio. “Would you go to a man’s house you’ve only known for a day and give him your virginity within the boundaries of a sex contract?”

“WHAT?”

I winced. Even Fred heard and cocked her head to the side. “That crazy, huh?”

“Are you talking about Daniel Pearson? The gorgeous lumberjack? The guy who showed up at the bar because you drunk dialed him?”

“And got me off in the storage room after you left,” I added on a big

exhale.

“WHAT?”

“And then I threw up on him.”

“WHAT?”

I had my answer. “So crazy for me then.”

“And crazy for me, too,” she added. “All that really happened?”

“Yes. I’m never drinking with you again.”

She ignored the drinking thing and plowed on. “And you’re going to go to his house? Now?”

“That’s the plan,” I said.

“Melly, what do you want to do? Deep down. Not what *people* think you should do or what *you* think you should do. What does your vagina want you to do?”

My eyes practically bugged out of my head. “My vagina?”

“Yes, since your vagina will be an active part of the evening.”

I pursed my lips and started to—

“Stop thinking.”

“Do you want me to pass the phone to my vagina?”

“Har har,” she replied. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to have sex with Daniel Pearson.” I did. I wanted it and so did my vagina.

“Then go have sex with Daniel Pearson.”

She made it sound so simple. “Just like that?”

“Hang on, I’ll give you a second and third opinion.” She must’ve put her hand over the phone because it was muffled. God, she was there with someone and now they were talking about me and my plans for my vagina meeting a dick for the first time. After about thirty seconds, she came back. “Bridget says go for it. Lindy says—”

“Lindy’s in town?” I asked, surprised.

Lindy was Bridget’s older sister and I hadn’t seen her since she moved to Denver to be with Dex James, her hot hockey playing husband.

“Yes. She’s here for a baby shower because it’s coming up on playoff season and she’s not sure when she’ll be—”

“Lindy’s having a baby?” I said on a gasp. How did I not know that?

“Yes, isn’t it amazing! In June. She has the same advice for you she gives Bridget. Stop thinking so much and feel. If it feels right, then go for it. If it feels wrong, it’s wrong. Wait—”

She covered the phone for a second.

“She also says that Daniel Pearson is hot. She had a crush on him when she was younger. What?” More muffling. “And he’s a decent guy.”

Lindy was in her late thirties and close to Daniel’s age. I could only imagine how hot he was when he was younger.

That made sense.

“She’s smart,” I said, about being hot for Daniel and for her advice.

“Hey! I told you to ask your vagina. Isn’t that smart?”

“Yes, you are very wise,” I offered. I was about to put the car into reverse when I realized something. “Problem.”

“What?”

“I don’t know where he lives.”



DANIEL

I WASN'T sure who was more excited to answer the knock. Earl, me, or my dick. Tugging the door open, I was greeted by Melly, but she was mostly hidden behind a plant. All I saw were jeans with brown leather ankle boots and the sleeves of a pink puffy coat.

“Hi,” she said.

I tipped my head to see her around the big leaves. “Um, hi? What’s with the plant?”

Earl nudged me to the side to push his way outside to greet Fred, who was circling around Melly’s feet.

“I—oh, hey!”

I took her arm and tugged her into the house before she got tripped up by the dogs or Earl sniffed her crotch again.

I wanted to do that.

They bounded in—at least Earl did—then spun in a playful circle waiting for Fred. At least he wasn’t trying to hump her. They bounded off into the great room, or as fast as a pregnant Toy Pom could.

I’d looked it up and she was a tiny Pomeranian and they didn’t get much taller than eleven inches and weighed less than seven pounds. Danny, when born, weighed almost nine.

“It’s a housewarming gift,” she explained.

I took the huge thing from her. While I was knowledgeable in all kinds of outdoor plants and shrubs, I knew nothing about indoor ones other than they were green.

She took in the house and I studied her. Tonight, she had on jeans that didn’t hide any bit of her curves. They weren’t painted on, but I had a good imagination and well, I was definitely an ass man. With her coat unzipped, I could see her pale pink turtleneck was made of some soft material that only accentuated how girly and fucking pretty she was. Her hair was down and had she straightened it? It hung long and sleek down her back. She wore glasses, just like at the vet’s office, but this pair was the same pink as her top. They fucking matched. She was conservative, sexy, and I itched to unwrap her and see what color panties and bra she wore beneath.

“Your house is amazing,” she said, reminding me I had to think with my head and not my dick. At least for a few minutes. I was holding a huge-ass plant, but I’d drop it and fuck her up against the front door if she gave me the green light.

What had she said? House. Amazing. Right.

It took me twenty years, but I’d slowly built and finished a huge-ass log cabin. The main floor was one large room—kitchen, great room, and dining area combined. A bathroom and mud room/laundry were just off the attached garage. Upstairs—and situated over the huge four-car garage—was the master bedroom. All walls and ceiling were hewn log. Since the land sloped, there was a walkout basement where Danny’s old bedroom was along with my office. Since I was big, the rooms were big. Since the yard faced the mountains, the entire back wall was windows.

“Thanks. Come on.” I carried the plant through the great room and into the kitchen, placing it on the center island. Turning, I faced her and it was obvious she was nervous.

“Good manners dictate I bring something when invited to someone’s house. Usually it’s wine for dinner, a plant, dish towels, or even a candle for a new house. I had no clue what the etiquette is for sex.”

I couldn’t help but smile at her cute and very ridiculous gesture.

“Condoms,” I said. Nothing said safe, sane, and consensual more than a box of prophylactics.

She reached into her purse and pulled out a brand-new box. Magnums. “Got those.” She handed them to me and reached in again—what kind of Mary

Poppins bag did she have?—and pulled out a bottle of whisky. Holy shit. She bought condoms and liquor, too?

I liked her kind of manners.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” I asked her, a repeat of what she’d asked me at the bar the night before. Whisky would do it, but I was keeping a clear head. Based on how she reacted in the storeroom, she liked me being in charge and I wasn’t doing shit—or drinking anything—that would make her lose that kind of trust in me.

She probably hadn’t realized it, but she’d trusted me with her body, and first man-made orgasm, and I wouldn’t devalue that.

She set the bottle on the counter beside the plant. “Um, well, I think I’m done with wine for a while and you’re going to Scotland and all so I thought you might like some whisky. Did you know spirits made in Scotland have no ‘e’ in the word but when made in the U.S. it has an ‘e’?”

She took a breath and pushed up her glasses, not looking at me.

“Is that so?” She didn’t respond so I took a step closer, lifted her chin with my fingers. “Thank you for the plant. And the whisky without the ‘e’ and the condoms.”

Her green eyes finally flicked to meet mine. “You’re welcome.”

“You don’t have to be nervous. Nothing’s going to happen.”

She frowned. “Um... nothing?”

I nodded.

Behind her glasses, she frowned. “I thought—”

“You want me, a real man to take that cherry. A guy who knows what he’s doing.” Sure, that was ego talking, but also the truth. She didn’t want a guy her age. They didn’t get her hot. She said as much. She wouldn’t be a virgin right now if any of them did it for her. Including Danny.

“I do.”

Whatever concerns she had on the phone earlier were gone now and my dick punched against my zipper at that admission. I wasn’t expecting her to say it, to be so bold. I should have with her because she was all contradictions. Conservative job, conservative clothes. She was a good girl... until I got into her panties.

“You’re safe with me. I’d never hurt you and I’d kill anyone who did.”

After the call, I’d thought more on what she’d said about her mother. That the woman had tried to push her ideas about sex on her. No, she’d added *men*. It had sounded like her mother had tried to get her to be with men she

suggested. I really hadn't thought about the woman for a long time. She was maybe ten years older, and we never really crossed paths in town. But I knew of her.

Hell, who didn't? About fifteen years ago, she and the mayor had an affair. His marriage ended over it and so did his time in office. If I remembered correctly, she also had a fling with someone working for the school district and that stirred things up once again. She was indiscriminate and her attitude toward sex was casual and indifferent to boundaries such as wedding vows or careers.

Ah... boundaries.

And Melly wouldn't do casual. She'd said she wouldn't be like her mom because who wanted to be remembered as the infamous marriage wrecker? That title was putting too much blame solely on Valerie Price because it took two to tango. As far as I knew, she never tripped and fell on the mayor's dick by mistake.

But prickles of something had crawled along the back of my neck since we hung up earlier. I'd thought Melly cautious the night before at the bar because she was inexperienced. Now I wondered if something had happened. Something with a man. If her mother had ever pushed not just her sexual attitudes onto Melly, but sex itself.

My statement about killing anyone who hurt her stood.

Her green eyes widened. Maybe saying those two things together crossed each other out—killing someone and keeping her safe—but no one would touch her if I had my way.

"I have a woodchipper and own a shit ton of forest."

Her mouth fell open and then she laughed. I couldn't help but grin.

"I feel safe with you," she admitted. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

"Then say it, Melly." I ran a finger down her cheek. Soft as fucking silk.

A little frown crinkled her brow. "Say what?"

"Say what you want. You're safe with me. Your body. Your thoughts. Everything."

She licked her lips as if she could taste the words on the tip of her tongue.

"Say it," I repeated.

"I want your dick. But—"

"But you need boundaries." Reaching down, I adjusted myself and her gaze dropped to watch. "You want it? Gotta sign that contract first."

She flushed as she realized she was ogling. Unless she had a shitty

prescription for her glasses, she couldn't miss the thick outline on my dick in my jeans. "Right."

I set the condoms down and grabbed the blank paper I grabbed from the printer in my home office earlier. Held it up. "Thought we could write it together."

She nibbled on her lip. "Good idea."

"I know you're good with toys, but what's your take on anal?"



MELLY

MY MOUTH DROPPED OPEN, but I didn't say anything. He cocked an eyebrow and with the corner of his mouth tipped up, he seemed bemused.

By me. I had a feeling-based on his far-from-vanilla attitude toward sex—that he was serious but brought it up now to get me to react. At least blush.

Which worked.

“Maybe we should start with our names and work out the particulars later,” I suggested. I wasn't going to admit first thing that I read a really hot anal scene in a recent book and wanted to try to enact it.

He snagged a pen which rested beside the paper. “Right. I think we know our names. It's not like we're sharing this with anyone else.” He paused and met my gaze with his dark one. “Unless you're into being shared.”

I immediately laughed and took off my coat, suddenly overly warm. He took it from me and tossed it on one of the breakfast bar stools. “Shared? As if. One guy at a time.”

“Good. I'm not sharing you.”

He wrote something down, then held the paper up. In neat, all capital letters, it said NO SHARING.

I eyed the whisky but shifted my gaze to Daniel. I drove here and was inside his house. I wanted this. My vagina was telling me to go for it. “How

about exclusivity?” I wondered, pushing on. This wasn’t a relationship, but I wasn’t thrilled about him hopping out of bed with me and into another with someone else.

He wrote some more. “No... one... else.”

That was reassuring. Even if it was only for a few days, it was exclusive. I wasn’t one of many.

“Good. How about length of contract?” I suggested. That was tame. Didn’t involve butt stuff or taking two guys at once.

He nodded. I just noticed his hair was slightly damp, as if he’d recently showered and it slid over his forehead. “Right. I leave Saturday.”

“So this will last until then.”

He kept his head down and continued to write. “Termination... plane leaving. Got it.” There were no sentences or fancy language in this contract, only bullet points.

“Okay.” There was that lip quirk again as he looked up. “On the phone, you said you were afraid of the unknown and that you didn’t know the rules. The rules are whatever we make them. Just you and me. No one else. Like... I don’t like to be tickled.”

My eyes widened and I couldn’t help but smile. This was a surprise. “You’re ticklish?”

He set a hand on his chest and had a look of mock shock. “What, a big guy like me can’t be?”

This I had to see. Daniel was actually ticklish? I approached. At first, his eyes hooded, then heated. Then he saw me raise my hands, fingers wiggling and caught on.

“Melllllly,” he warned, and took a step back.

I had no idea why I was bold. I had a feeling it was Daniel himself. He—Mr. Lumberjack—was on the retreat.

He had his hands up as if to ward me off. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You really are ticklish?” I asked.

He stopped, then tipped his chin down to look at me closely. “Maybe you are.”

“Me?”

He took a step toward me, turning the tables. Uh oh.

I didn’t like to be tickled either. What happened if I peed my pants? God, what if I farted?

Now it was my turn to retreat.

I couldn't miss the gleam in his eye. "You. If I catch you—"

And I was off, spinning on my heel and dashing around the center island with a laugh.

"Run, sweet girl, but when I catch you..."

He didn't finish and I didn't wait for him to do so and circled around the dining room table. I aimed to go around the leather couches in front of the fireplace. An expert with the layout of his furniture, he cut me off, caught me from behind. A thick arm banded about my waist and lifted me off my feet. One second I was airborne, the next I was on my back on a plush couch. Daniel had one knee on the cushion, the other foot on the floor and he hovered over me. His dark hair fell over his forehead. Little crinkles formed by his eyes.

We were breathing hard, and we were both smiling. I adjusted my glasses.

Earl gave a deep woof from the dog bed where he was curled up, Fred at his side, but neither moved.

"Please don't tickle me," I said, knowing he could do it now and there was no way to escape. I wasn't scared. Okay, maybe of farting. Perhaps my words were a subtle test to see if he respected my wishes.

"No tickling," he agreed. "It's now one of the rules."

His gaze dropped down my body and I realized my top had drifted up. His finger brushed over the bare sliver of exposed skin.

Just the softest of caresses had me sucking in a breath. Heat shot through me, and I waited for what he'd do next. If I'd like it. But what if I did it wrong?

"Touching, however—"

"What if I touch you in some other way you don't like?" I blurted, then bit my lip with worry, not even realizing that was a concern.

His finger stilled, but the contact remained. He glanced at me through long lashes. How did a man get such amazing eyelashes? Totally unfair.

The look he gave me wasn't cold. In fact, it was very, very hot. Scorching. "Any way you touch me I'll like, sweet girl. I promise."

I felt the words, the weight of them. The truth. "Okay."

"I'll never forget you mentioned toys."

Closing my eyes, I wanted to hide. NO MORE WINE!

"For our contract, yes or no to toys?" he asked.

With him? Would he feel threatened by them? "Do you want to play with

toys?” I asked in return.

“Do I want to watch you spread your gorgeous thighs and fuck yourself with a huge vibrator? Fuck, yes.”

Okay, totally hot. “Then yes.”

“Oral?”

“Do you want—”

“My answer is yes to everything.”

“Then yes.”

“Giving oral?”

“Yes.”

“Receiving?”

“Yes.”

“I know you like fingers.”

My pussy clenched remembering how much I really did like his. “Yes.”

The corner of his mouth tipped up. Those fingers were on the move, sliding back and forth across my lower stomach. “You’re saying yes to everything.”

“But I want to try everything,” I admitted.

He lifted his hand and moved away, dropping onto the end of the couch near my feet.

I pushed up onto my elbows. What was he—

“Have at me,” he said, using both hands to point at his chest. “Touch me how you want. Kiss. Suck. Lick. Fuck. I’m all yours.”

Those words had me sitting up all the way, my legs tucked underneath me. There had to be four feet of sofa between us. “What? Just go over to you and... kiss you and take your clothes off and then—”

He nodded. “Whatever you want.”

Yikes! “I can’t do that. I don’t know how and I would be lost and—”

“And you’d be worried and thinking too much.”

I sighed. He understood. “Exactly.”

“So you want me to be in charge.”

Did I? He’d dragged me into the storage room and then touched me. He’d talked me all the way through it but had *definitely* been in charge. Then... yes. I did. I wanted to be told what to do. I nodded. “Yes, please. Clear instructions. I follow them very well.”

“I like things a little dark. A little dirty. You learned that last night.”

Did his voice get deeper?

A shift came over him, as if he was already slipping into a mode where he was the boss. Like the night before. He asked for my consent more than once. Asked if I liked what he was doing. At the same time, he was whispering filthy things in my ear while touching me in the boldest and potent of ways.

That was what I'd craved all day. What had silently and subconsciously lured me here tonight.

"I... I liked it," I admitted.

"But?" he prodded.

But should I like that? I looked down at my hands in my lap, folded them together. Daniel hadn't gone running the night before. Or laughed at me letting out this passionate and uninhibited side of myself I never knew even existed. Reading steamy romance novels and imagining sexy things while using my vibrator was one thing. Actually doing the stuff in those books with Daniel? Hot, yes. But— No butts. Only butts.

I tipped up my chin. "No. I liked it."

"But you've been wondering all day if liking it was wrong. That going into a bar's storeroom with a man who finger fucks you isn't what good girls do."

I blushed, then nodded. I wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did.

"You want a contract to know that anything we do is okay. That you don't have to wonder if it's wrong or I won't like it or anything else. That you don't have to be a good girl with me."

Wow, he understood. "Yes, that's right."

He shook his head. "How about this? Skip the paper. Anything we do in this house is okay. You don't have to worry about doing anything right or wrong, if it's too naughty to share. You can scream. Whimper. Beg. Sweat. Cream. Hell, you can squirt. All good. Any hole. Any fantasy. Any naughty word that falls from those lips. All good."

I glanced around. "So this house is the contract."

"Yes. If you don't like something, you say so. I stop and we talk about it. Period."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah. Just like that. And I'm in charge."

I could climb on his lap and touch him and it was okay. I could tell him I wanted to be bent over the dining table and it was okay. Whatever I wanted and craved wasn't going to be shamed or laughed at. I was relieved and comforted and turned on with it.

“No relationship. It ends when I leave town. In this house, whatever gets you hot goes. It’ll be my job to give it to you.”

Was this actually happening? It seemed insane, but my vagina was telling me yes, yes, YES!

So I said, “Yes.”



DANIEL

SHE SAID YES. I was up and had her tossed over my shoulder before she stopped nodding her head. I took the stairs two at a time. Earl gave a woof, perhaps the canine version of the *go get 'em* slap on the back from one male to another.

“Daniel! What are you doing?” she shrieked. Her small hand was on my ass, but I didn’t think she even knew.

“Our dogs might be fine with others watching, but I mind.”

I entered my bedroom and used my foot to kick the door shut behind us. Carefully, and slowly, I lowered her to her feet, letting her brush down every hard inch of me.

“You always wear fuck-me red panties, sweet girl?”

She shook her head, adjusting her glasses.

“What color today? Show me.”

With deft fingers, she opened the front of her jeans and showed me a small sliver of what was beneath.

Pale pink.

I dropped to my knees before her, eyes right in line with that hint of blush. I helped her with her shoes and socks, tossing them to the side. Then I had the fun task of working her jeans down her legs, then off.

I cupped her calves and slid my hands up. And up as my eyes followed.

Those panties? I brushed a finger across them. I didn't know my fabrics, but this stuff was delicate. And shirred or gathered or whatever so it didn't lay smooth. Pink ribbons circled the top and the leg openings. Girly. Feminine and the perfect mixture of virginal and slutty. Why slutty? Because it was completely see-through. I could see her little thatch of red hair and pussy lips. She might as well be naked.

I moved to her turtleneck and pushed the bottom up. She took over for me and pulled it off. The bra matched and didn't hide how big her tits were. They weren't proportional to her small frame. In fact, they might be more than a handful for even my big hands.

She might hide how perfect they were beneath her prim clothes, but now? When the sheer fabric didn't hide her large nipples? When it only lifted them so the top swells were bare... fuck me. If she took a deep breath, her nipples would pop out. If she jumped even the slightest.

She didn't say a word as I looked her over. And over. I didn't know where to focus because every inch of her creamy skin was perfect.

"Melly..." I said on a slow growl. "Everyone thinks you're a good girl."

When I ran my fingers over her soft belly, she sucked in a breath and yup, those tits jiggled. I flicked my gaze up to hers. "But you're very, very bad, aren't you?" I pressed a kiss to the deep valley between her tits. Shit, I could smother and die happy. Her skin was warm, her scent soft and yet very potent.

"How am I bad? I like pretty underthings," she admitted, her hand settling on the top of my head and tangling in my hair.

"Bad girls wear things like this to tease a dick and then get fucked with it."

I pulled back enough to run that finger now up the inside of her thigh. Instinctively, she stepped wide.

"You want it."

"Daniel," she breathed when I circled her clit. I could see it hard and the prettiest pink through the panties.

"Ever had a man see you like this before?"

I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answer. If she shared her slutty little panties with another guy, I might have to kill him.

She shook her head.

"So no one's gotten his mouth on this pussy?"

“No.”

Hooking her leg, I tossed it over my shoulder.

“Good.” Then, through the panties, I devoured her. Yes, the sheer fabric was a barrier, but no matter how well she responded, she was a virgin and just confirmed she’d never been this intimate before.

It was the closest thing to gentle and a warm-up I could give her.

“Oh!” Her arms went to my shoulders to hang on, but she couldn’t keep her balance. Her knees crumpled and I lowered her to the carpeted floor, nudged her knees apart, then dove back between her thighs.

Her folds were plush and plump, her clit hard and very sensitive. I could have teased, let her learn quickly how I could *really* be in charge and make her scream and beg to be satisfied. But I needed her well pleased, her pussy dripping and begging to be filled.

So I sucked and flicked on her clit based on how her thighs clenched, her hands tugged on my hair and how she cried out.

If there was an Olympic sport for getting a woman to come from eating her pussy, I’d be champ. She was screaming my name and ripping my hair out within a minute.

And she still had her useless little panties on.

When I sat back on my heels and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, she was spent, sprawled, and very satisfied. Deftly, I hooked my finger around the gusset of her panties and slid them to the side, pink pussy revealed. Swollen as she was, the elastic caught and stayed.

It had been a good idea to keep my dick in my pants so I didn’t get in her too soon, but I needed relief so I lifted onto my knees. Opening my jeans, I pushed them and my boxers down my hips enough so I sprang free.

I was too far gone. Too worked up to fuck her properly for the first time.

It had been a long time for me. Too long.

Now I was looking down at this sweet, young thing who wanted to be defiled.

Gripping the base of my dick, I stroked from root to tip. I hissed at how good it felt. How close I was. My balls ached to be emptied and I couldn’t stop jerking off.

Her eyes opened and when she saw what I was doing, they flared wide. Then heat and interest built, and she pushed up to her elbows to watch.

She was perfection. Panting, sweaty, flushed. One bra strap had slipped, loosening one cup and her nipple—fuck me was it plump and big and pink and

ready to be sucked—revealed.

“See?” I said, stroking harder, muscles tense, hips thrusting. “I can’t wait. Get ready to be covered in my cum.”

Gritting my teeth, I came like a fucking freight train. “Fuck!” I shouted and watched as thick ropes of cum shot across her. Painted her virgin skin, thighs, belly, tits.

When she moved, I thought she was repulsed and trying to get away from the torrent that I was splattering all over her. But then she stunned the shit out of me by leaning forward and taking me into her mouth. Just the head around those tight lips and—

“FUCK!”

I thought I’d been done, but no. Her hot little mouth pulled more cum from my balls and I thrust involuntarily down her throat once. Eyes widening at the surprise action, she swallowed while I had enough brain function to pull from her mouth. I didn’t want to scare her. But the opposing motion made the suction nice and snug and so fucking intense.

One last little spurt landed on her chin, then dripped onto her nipple.

Holy shit. Holy. Fucking. Shit. The best orgasm of my life and it’d been from jerking off.

I was still hard. How could I not be with the way she looked. Pure filthy fantasy I didn’t even know I had. I’d been with women before. No one stuck, not even the mother of my child. Sure, I liked to fuck down and dirty, but never like this. I never wanted to push a woman, to test what she liked. What made her hot. Because they knew what they wanted and usually it was a quick, fun romp with the lumberjack. Not much talking. All fucking.

But Melly? She was pushing *my* lines and it was fucking insane.

She was so innocent in all this that it was pure. There was no faking her reactions. Her desires. How she liked it and was right there with me.

“Don’t move,” I said, my breathing ragged.

Reaching into my jeans pocket, I pulled out my cell.

“You’re my own little slut,” I said as I swiped for the camera setting.

I flicked my gaze to hers and she still wasn’t running scared. In fact, she was swirling a finger in a thick patch of cum, as if painting herself with it.

“You like being covered in my cum. You like knowing you bring me to my knees. I might be in charge, but you hold all the power, sweet girl.”

I held the camera vertically and caught her image. Kneeling, knees wide. Panties on, pussy exposed. Bra on, one tit falling free. Cum all over her. Hair

tangled. Eyes blurry with need. And those glasses.

Reaching forward, I smeared my palm through the cum on her belly, snapped another photo. In it, there was no question she was owned.

By me.

She stood, took a step back and undid the front clasp on her bra. Then teased me by keeping her hands over her tits provocatively. I got another photo.

Then she let it fall from her shoulders and to the floor.

She slipped her panties off next, then crooked a finger in her glorious, cum-covered nakedness.

“I can’t be your little slut unless you fuck me, Daniel.”

No, no she couldn’t.



MELLY

OH. My. God. I never knew it could be like that. Sure, the sex scenes in romance books were filthy. Oral. Anal. Threesomes. Heck, foursomes. From behind. On top. Toys. Exhibitionism. And more. I had used pretty much all of those possibilities when masturbating with my fingers and toys. It was good. Hot, even. Naughty, too.

But Daniel?

Nothing... NOTHING compared.

I had no idea I liked dirty talk so much. And it wasn't dirty. It was filthy. Technically degrading. Every shred of feminism in my body got knocked aside by my need to be dominated, claimed, and marked.

And we still hadn't had sex yet.

In fact, Daniel still had all his clothes on. His huge dick was jutting out from his jeans had me remembering what he'd said, that *it'd be a real snug fit*. No kidding.

I climbed on top of his huge bed and he followed, loomed over me as he stood at the side. His eyes raked over me in the most heated, carnal way. As if he could barely restrain himself from jumping me. I wasn't sure why he was even trying.

Watching him unbutton his shirt was like watching a male revue strip

tease. Then he took the soft material and used it to clean me off. Then... THEN... he stripped bare.

I couldn't lay there when I had six plus feet of hot, naked man to ogle. My hand went up to touch him, but I pulled it back.

He took my fingers and brought them to his lips in a kiss so gentle it confused me. "Touch me all you want, sweet girl."

He settled onto the bed, adjusted the pillows so he was propped up, but sprawled.

I moved out of the way but hovered on my knees beside him.

Every inch of him was solid and sturdy. Broad shoulders, barrel chest with a smattering of chest hair the same color as his beard. Mallory had asked me if he was hairy and the answer was yes. In *all* the right places and in *exactly* the right amount. He wasn't one to man scape, or trim and wax his body bare. No. He was rugged and manly. Maybe not handsome per se, but perfect for me.

I couldn't resist touching him, feeling the hot skin, the hard play of muscles beneath. The crisp hair springy soft. The flat nipples. The abs. Then lower. The V thing that *every* romance hero had. It was true. It was hot. Swoonworthy. Sexy. And it pointed to a perfect dick. I wouldn't call a dick and the heavy balls beneath attractive. But something in me, something primitive... oh yeah, my vagina, wanted it. My pussy clenched thinking about taking all those inches inside me. And not just long but thick, too.

My mouth watered for another taste of him, his spicy tang still on my tongue. But would he want that? How did I touch him?

"What if I tickle you by accident?"

He sighed, reached out and grabbed me by the waist. Lifted me so I straddled him. I gasped when he moved me so easily.

"If you're thinking about tickling, you're not ready."

"I'm ready," I countered. I wanted to have sex. With Daniel. There was an end date to our contract. Days. I needed—

He lifted me again, this time up as he slid down the bed. Now I was on my knees over his face. I could see his eyes looking down through the valley of my breasts.

He shook his head and his hair tickled my inner thighs. So did his beard, which was still damp from just a few minutes ago.

"Not ready."

Then he pulled me down onto his face. Grabbing for the headboard, I held

on for dear life.

“Again?” Was I complaining about too much oral?

“Again,” he growled, as if there was no other option.

“Shouldn’t we do sixty-nine so you can get pleasure, too?” I asked, still worrying but his mouth was making it very hard to think.

With his big hands, he moved me back so he could look up at me. His mouth and chin were glistening. *Me*. I knew I was aroused, but that was *really* wet.

“The next time I come it’s going to be buried deep in that virgin pussy.”

“But—”

“That first orgasm was a freebie,” he said. “This one’s all you. Maybe a little work will stop you from thinking so much.”

With his big hands cupping my butt, he shifted me back over him but didn’t lower me down. His warm breath fanned over my already-sensitive flesh.

“Ride my face, sweet girl.”

I looked down at him, his eyes right there, directly below my trimmed pussy hair.

Gripping the headboard, I gave my hips a tentative circle and my clit nudged him.

“That’s it.”

I did it again. God, yes.

And again.

“Good girl.”

With his praise, I started to move. He seemed to like being between my thighs. He didn’t think my pussy lips were too big or my clit stood out or I had red hair down there. He didn’t comment on my scent or what I tasted like or anything. In fact, he acted like a ravenous man at an all-you-can eat Vegas buffet. Hungry. Potentially sloppy and eager for seconds.

I was used to seeking my pleasure with my toys, but never with a man’s face. The concept was the same, but oh so much better. Daniel wasn’t passive like a toy, but right there with me. His tongue and mouth moved with each dip or roll I made. His fingers clenched and squeezed my flesh. He growled with continued praise and satisfaction.

“So good,” I breathed, tipping my chin back and letting my eyes fall closed. I didn’t think it was my talent at face riding that got me close to coming, but more that he’d gotten my clit so sensitive and accustomed to his

abilities.

“Yes. I’m close,” I called out.

“Let’s see if this will get you there.”

I wasn’t sure if I heard him right because he had a face full of pussy, but the *this* he was talking about was him shifting his hand so it pulled on one side of my bottom and his thumb settled—

“DANIEL!” I screamed.

Wow. WOW. Ass play was a thing. I mean, a *thing*. And just the press right there had me coming. I had no idea that area was that sensitive or that it was like a button that had Orgasm in large letters right on it.

When I finally stopped coming, I was toast. Daniel easily maneuvered us so that he was leaning against his pillows and I was sprawled across his chest. My head rested there and I heard his beating heart, felt him breathing. Inhaled his clean, woodsy scent.

“I never went there with my toys before,” I admitted.

His hand stroked my hair in another gentle caress. With his dick hard and thick nudging between my thighs, I expected him to be rough and eager to fuck.

“I can’t wait to see this toy collection of yours. And use them on you.”

I sat up, looked down at him. This was the first time I could do that. My hands stroked over his chest.

His dark eyes roved over my face, dropped to my breasts, then met mine. “First, let’s see if you think my dick’s bigger than that vibrator of yours.”

It was time. He was patiently waiting for me to say yes. While we’d just done *all* kinds of sexy things, he wanted my consent for what was to happen next. I got to make the call. Go/No Go.

He wasn’t Creepy Carl. This was nothing like what it would have been like. I highly, highly doubted Creepy Carl ever went down on a woman. Especially not twice. I had to wonder if he even knew where a clit was.

Daniel had a sexy knack for debasing me in the right way to make it hot. And sexy. Just a look from Creepy Carl and I felt dirty. As in gross.

I wanted this with Daniel. My vagina was saying Go. My mind was saying Go. My heart? It wasn’t part of the contract.

“Condom?” I asked.

He reached out, grabbed the box I brought and had a foil packet ripped open in seconds. I shifted back until his dick was between us and I watched him expertly roll it on.

His feet slid up the bed, bending his knees. Then he hooked me behind the neck and pulled me in for a kiss. It was heated, but sweet. All tongue, but gentle. Yet so naughty because I could taste myself. He was pressed hard and thick between us.

“This is all you, sweet girl,” he breathed when our lips finally parted. I met his dark eyes. The heat, while still there, was banked. So was his gruff tone, his rough touch. Now, he was... dare I say tender? “I got you nice and ready so climb on and take me in.”

I sat up but didn’t look away. Gripping him in my hand—wow, he was *really* big—I pushed up onto my knees so I hovered over him.

And just like that, I slid down. And down. And... “Big.” I stilled, wiggled my hips. Clenched inside. Slid down some more because he’d gotten me so wet. “So big.” And some more. While there was some adjustment, it wasn’t painful. I’d taken care of that problem a long time ago with one of my toys. I stretched and opened and opened and spread wide for him until I was finally, eventually sitting on his thighs.

His hands were on my hips, anchoring me, although the big dick inside me was definitely keeping me in place.

While he seemed patient, letting me lower at my own pace, his clenched jaw indicated it was costing him.

I smiled, so happy. “I did it,” I breathed, then clenched around him again.

“Such a good girl. You’re taking all of me so fucking well.”

I nodded.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “Oh yeah.”

“Good.” He jackknifed up, then flipped us. From one breath to the next, I was on my back and Daniel was over me, pressing me into the bed, still sunk deep in me.

My eyes widened as I stared up at him. He grinned, pushed my knee wide and back so I was open even more.

“Time to fuck, sweet girl.”

He pulled back, then slammed deep.

Oh my.



DANIEL

MELLY WAS naked and soap covered. I've seen her up close and *very* bare in bed, but this? In my shower? Fucking insane.

"Again?" she asked on a breathy giggle as I opened the glass door and stepped in with her.

My dick was ready to go again and she didn't miss it. The thought of pressing her against the tile and fucking her hard and deep or hell, bending her over the bench and taking her from behind was so powerful I had to grip the base and give it a hard squeeze.

Because watching her take a dick—*my* dick—for the first time was monumental. Etched in my brain. The way she bit her lip, her eyes got heavy lidded, her tits rose and fell with her little pants and FUCK... that hot, tight pussy.

Heaven.

Yeah, it'd been a little embarrassing coming so fast the first time, but it turned out to be a good thing because I'd have shot my load before she got all the way on me otherwise.

I'd been able to fuck her long and hard and got her to come a few more times before I finally emptied into her.

I'd take her every way I could imagine, but not yet. She had to be sore.

Really sore. Sure, that dick-sized vibrator she kept mentioning had truly popped that cherry at some point and eased my way, but she was so fucking tight and once her pussy molded to my dick, I'd take her hard over and over.

Her pussy needed a rest, regardless of what my dick thought.

And her, because she didn't seem to want a break either. She came to me, kissed the center of my chest and yeah, gripped the girthy base of my dick with one hand and cupped my balls with the other.

I growled and gently separated her from me.

She frowned. "What—"

"That pussy's getting a rest. You want my dick, it's going in that sweet mouth or eager ass."

She bit her lip, eyed my dick as if contemplating the possibilities I just gave her. "How about both?"

BOTH?

I groaned because... fuck. The least innocent virgin in the fucking world was in my shower and wanted me to fuck her in the ass. Reaching out, I grabbed the shampoo bottle and passed it to her because, well... I couldn't keep up. No, I could, but *little Melly Harwood* was a little of a mind fuck. Absolutely nothing like what I expected, nor what anyone else did either. She wasn't crazy so it wasn't like she had two personalities or something, but she *hid* herself. Sure, no one was going to flaunt that they liked their sex down and dirty, but she had the entire town drinking her good girl Kool-Aid.

"We need lube. Lots of lube. I don't have any."

"We should get some."

I closed my eyes and hoped my balls could handle such a cock tease. I felt more than heard my front door slam. I'd lived here long enough to know my house, the creaks and groans, when a teenager was sneaking out the front door or even a window. I stilled and eyed Melly, who was now lathering up her hair. Fuck me, her breasts were upturned and those nipples I'd had my mouth on were plump and just waiting to be sucked on some more.

But someone was here. No blow job or taking that other cherry.

"Pizza!" I heard the muffled shout.

Melly did, too.

Her hands dropped and her eyes widened, suds slipping down her temples.

"Deek. With dinner," I said. The only meal I wanted was more of Melly's pussy.

“Hey, asshole!” Deek called. “We brought food. Thought you might be... yes, he’s here. The shower’s running.”

He was talking to someone so shit, that meant he wasn’t alone. Had to be another brother. As usual. Why did they have to come NOW? They’d wanted me to get back out there and now they were cock blocking. I was literally naked in the shower with a woman and shutting me down.

“Let’s go, fucker! Game’s on!” Sea Bass called.

“Want pizza with my brothers?” I asked solely out of courtesy because the last thing I wanted was that.

She shook her head nervously and the relaxed, secret side of Melly Harwood she only let me see was gone. Her bent arm covered her breasts even though my brothers couldn’t see her. “No.”

“I’ll get rid of them,” I assured. “Kick them out and keep the pizza for us?” Now that was a smart idea.

Before I could climb from the shower, the bathroom door opened.

“Yo, get your hairy ass downstairs.” Deek’s voice boomed off the tile work. “Pizza’s—”

“Get the fuck out!” I snarled, stepping in front of Melly and shielding her body with mine. The glass was thick and frosted so only rough shapes were visible through it. But there was no way he could miss *two* rough shapes.

“Whoa, sorry. Didn’t know you had company.”

Wham. He pulled the door shut.

SHIT.

“He’s got a woman!”

I rolled my eyes and tipped Melly’s chin up so her green ones met mine. Without makeup, her hair slicked back and soaking wet... hell, all over soaking wet, she looked young and so fucking pretty. And embarrassed.

“I don’t know who.” Deek’s deep voice carried as he went down the steps. “Yeah, the dude’s dick is back in action.”

Through the closed door, I heard a whistle and clapping from the great room. Shit. It was more than Deek and Sea Bass.

I growled, reached out and shut off the water. “I’m going to kill my brothers. Remember that woodchipper?”

“Daniel, this was—”

“I know. Sorry. They didn’t see you. If anything, he saw my ass, which as you’re well aware, isn’t hairy.”

She pursed her lips, unsure. It was one thing to come here and get fucked

nice and hard for the first time, it was another to have everyone know. Since she'd never done it before, she wasn't used to others knowing about her sex life. And she was an only child. She had no idea about the constant ribbing and joking only a family could dish out.

"I have four brothers," I explained, hoping it might help. "This isn't about you. They're fucking with me."

Yet because of that, they were unintentionally disrespectful of Melly. That was not okay.

I pushed open the door and stepped onto the bathmat.

Grabbing a towel, I handed it to her, then cupped her cheek. "Get dried off. Grab one of my shirts from my closet. You know where they are."

I took another and wrapped it around my waist.

"I'll get rid of them." Turning, I looked at her over my shoulder. Naked, wet, and her pussy swollen from *my* dick. Yeah, I was going to kill them and the woodchipper was too kind.

I spun around and stormed out, snagged some boxers from the dresser and pulled them on. Let the towel drop to the floor. I left the bedroom, looking back to ensure the bathroom door was closed, then pulled the master door shut behind me.

I found them in the kitchen. Three pizza boxes had been tossed in the center of the kitchen table. Deek, Sea Bass, Saint, and Seth sat around it. Beers had been opened, plates passed out.

"What the fuck?" I snapped.

All four of them stopped eating and took in my appearance.

My hair was wet. So was my body since I didn't take the time to dry off. And they couldn't miss that my dick was still hard, although it was flagging fast.

"Retirement looks good on you, brother," Saint said. "Who's the lucky lady? And what's the deal with the little dog? Is it Wendy from dispatch that Mac's been trying to fix you up with?"

Mac had been trying to fix me up with the woman, but I hadn't been interested. Now I knew why. I was into young, no-longer virginal librarians who had a very dirty side.

"Maybe it's Nancy from the bank," Deek added, although he knew Melly had a tiny dog because he was the one who'd fucked with me about the dog paternity test. "She gave you an extra lollipop when we dropped off those deposits last week. Have her come down. We've got plenty. She like beer?"

“If you needed time off to fuck, you should’ve taken vacation days,” Seth added.

Saint and Seth didn’t work at Pearsons. They’d never been interested in landscaping or chainsaws so they went their own way, running the only mechanic shop in town. They could fix anything from a tractor to a Bentley to... a chainsaw.

They laughed and even high-fived.

“How old are you two? Jesus, even Danny’s not that much of an asshole.”

“What?” Deek prodded, then shoved a bite of pizza in his mouth. He continued to talk, this time with his mouth full. “It’s about time you got some.”

Maybe he didn’t put it together seeing Fred because he wouldn’t be this annoying if he knew it was Melly.

I pointed up the steps. “She is upstairs right now listening to you talk about her. Like she’s interchangeable. Or cheap.”

Now I understood what she said about being interchangeable.

Their smiles slipped and Sea Bass set his pizza down.

“If Mom heard you talking about a woman like this, she’d kick your ass to Helena and back,” I added.

When they divorced, Mom kept the big house and Dad had moved across town. While technically only me and Deek were hers, the five of us were super close and Mom was always there for Saint, Seth, and Sea Bass. Especially when it came to keeping us in line and scaring us straight. She was a force and didn’t stand for any of our shit.

Now, Mom spent the winters with her sister in San Diego and would return to Hunter Valley in May. Dad and Sheila sold their place and permanently relocated to Alabama. Deek and I haven’t seen them since and Sea Bass, Saint, and Seth met them in Cabo every January for a week.

“Shit, dude,” Seth added, sounding contrite. He probably was, but I knew they all still wanted to know the mystery woman’s identity. When they found out who it was and her age... they’d be giving me the *just like Dad* looks.

I wasn’t like Dad. I didn’t cheat on my wife, and I didn’t start a second family when I was forty-two.

I pointed toward the front door. “Get the fuck out.”

They stood, their chairs scraping across the wood floor. Saint snagged a pizza box and Deek slapped his hand. “Leave it.”

They marched to the front door like schoolboys off to the principal’s

office. I followed and stood in the open doorway as they left, making sure they were good and gone.

Sea Bass turned around. "Tell her we're sorry. We're nice dumbasses."

"Yeah," Saint said, tucking his hands into his pockets.

"At least tell us who she is," Deek added, and the other three's faces lit up. They were sorry, but still as nosy as a bunch of old ladies.

I slammed the door in their faces and ran a hand over the back of my neck. I took a deep breath.

"They gone?" Melly's soft, cautious voice had me turning around.

She stood at the bottom of the steps in just my flannel. The same one she put on this morning.

I nodded. "Yeah. Sorry. They're usually not assholes like that, but well, it's been a while for me."

"Having a woman here?"

I stepped toward her. "I've never brought a woman here."

Her mouth dropped open. Yeah, that was a shocker. "You haven't?"

Shaking my head, I explained. "No. I had Danny. No way would I do sleepovers with a woman with a kid in the house. Still now that he's an adult. Remember those boundaries you like?"

She nodded.

"That was mine."

"He's twenty-one and doesn't live here," she said, not to remind me of what I already knew, but most likely because she was surprised I admitted *it'd been a while*.

I nodded again. "Yeah, he's staying at my mom's. House sitting while she's gone for the winter. But I haven't... in the past few years, well, been with anyone."

"Oh."

"Yeah. My brothers never expected me to have company in the shower because I've never, not once, actually had company in the shower."

"You've never—"

I shook my head. "Not in my house."

Understanding crossed her delicate features. I wasn't a virgin. I fucked elsewhere.

Until now.

I reached out, stroked her wet hair back, then leaned down to kiss her forehead. She smelled like my soap and that was sexy as hell. "It wasn't

about you. Obviously, I kicked them out and we've got pizza."

"Can we order the lube online while we eat?"

I grinned at her exuberance and went rock hard at the reason. She was desperate to have her ass taken.

"My bad girl," I said, completely and totally as praise. Leaning down, I kissed her so she knew I was pleased. "As for my brothers, they won't bother us any—"

I stopped talking when I noticed her green eyes weren't on mine any longer, but around my arm and looking behind me. Then she pointed. "Um, those brothers?"

I spun around and there in my big front window, lined up in a row, were Deek, Sea Bass, Saint, and Seth. They had their hands cupped around their eyes and pressed against the glass and staring in.

At me in my boxers.

At Melly in my flannel and based on the way her nipples pebbled against the soft fabric, nothing else.

At us.

I shoved her behind me. It was time to get the woodchipper.



DANIEL

I PULLED up to Melly's house at eight-fifteen the next morning. The crew from Pearsons was already at work and I saw Melly's car on the street. She was home. Maybe she was in bed sleeping, although doubtful with the noise being made. Maybe she was in the shower. I shifted in my seat because I knew exactly what she looked like there.

No, she had work, although the library didn't open until ten. Yes, I knew that not because I checked out a lot of books, but because I looked it up. Earlier this morning. After my own shower where I rubbed one out and came all over the tile. Fuck, my dick was always going to be hard in that bathroom from this point on.

And now, too, just thinking about her.

No matter how much I wanted, I wouldn't barge in her house and fuck her up against the wall. Not only because our sex contract was for my house, but because every single guy on the crew would know what was up. Beyond my four stupid-ass brothers.

We hadn't kept our... fling a secret. Her friends Mallory and Bridget knew there was something up between us since they practically bolted from the bar for us to be alone together. I had no idea if Melly told her friends about what happened *after* they left or not. The storeroom. Last night.

I was forty years old. I didn't really care what people thought of me or what I did with Melly, who was a consenting adult. But she was a discreet woman. Respected, demure—at least in public—and pretty much a good girl. If word about me having sex with someone got out, people wouldn't think twice. But if Melly having sex spread through Hunter Valley, tongues would wag. I'd be seen as the old lech who corrupted her.

Little did people know that *she* was the one doing the corrupting.

After my brothers *really* left the night before—because I'd pulled the blinds on them—Melly hadn't lingered. It was sex, inside a loosey-goosey contract of sorts. She wanted boundaries, I'd respect them.

This wasn't a relationship.

The plane left on Saturday. I'd even started to pack.

I climbed from my truck and Earl hopped down after me. My breath came out in big white puffs because the temperature was barely above freezing. Ice crystals sparkled on the grass where it hadn't yet melted away from the sun creeping across the lawn.

Two guys were putting in the new edging, the strip that would hold the pavers in place and define the driveway's shape. Like Mom's place, the house was large, on a large lot, and set back a ways from the street. I'd grown up just down the road and never paid much attention to this particular house when I was a kid, but studying it now, it was well tended. I would've remembered a For Sale sign out front so I guessed Mrs. Vigaro had lived in the place for decades. The driveway went alongside the house to a separate garage at the back. Hers also curved in a semicircle in front of the house. There were a lot of pavers to lay. And that didn't even account for the walk which would be done to match. If the weather held, the crew could have it done within a week.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Sea Bass came around one of the company pickups. In sturdy boots, worn jeans, a thick vest, and beanie, he was dressed for work.

So was I. I could've picked up a prescription at the pharmacy I needed for the trip, put my mail on hold, or many of the other things on my going away to-do list, but that wasn't happening. I could've gone to a movie. Or played pickleball or eaten breakfast at the diner like all the retired people around here.

None of that was happening. Melly's yard was a Pearson job site, and I would see it done right.

I tipped my chin toward the bobcat, the earth mover we used for everything from digging holes in the ground to planting a tree to hauling heavy loads—like stone pavers—around a job. It had been backed off the trailer, ready to be used. “Someone needs to drive that thing. Kevin and PeeWee over there aren’t certified.”

The guys doing the edging were in their early twenties and friends with Danny. Their strong—and young—backs did a shit ton of the heavy work. Earl had gone over to them and they were giving him pets.

“Jorge is going to run it. We got this, D. You’re retired, remember?”

“That can change,” I said. “You’re an asshole and that can’t.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re still salty about last night?”

“You had your noses pressed up to the glass like the Seven Dwarfs looking at Snow White.”

An instant grin crossed his face. “If Snow White looked like that, I might have been—”

I punched him.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” he said, leaning forward with his hand over his nose. I didn’t hit him all that hard because it wasn’t broken and he was still conscious.

I pointed at him. It wasn’t the first time I clocked him or any of my brothers and it wouldn’t be the last. But I was pissed because of Melly and I wasn’t fucking having it. “Don’t you fucking finish that sentence.”

Another Pearson pickup slowed and parked on the street. Deek got out holding a to-go cup of coffee, Steaming Hotties written on the side. “Jesus, you’re shit at retirement.” He approached and looked at Sea Bass. “What happened to you? If you have to put in another workman’s comp claim for hitting your head again, I’ll—”

Sea Bass pointed at me.

Deek set his free hand on his hips. “Seriously? Why are you even here?” he asked, then added when he glanced briefly at the house. “Oh.”

Kevin and PeeWee had stopped working and stood watching us. Deek passed Sea Bass the coffee, took hold of my bicep and pulled me across the yard. He finally stopped in front of a large blue spruce tree. From the height of it, I estimated it to be thirty years old.

“You’re here to work,” he said, not as a question.

“Yes.”

“You can’t handle retirement, fine. But go help on the golf course job.

We're moving the big boulders for the retaining wall over there today."

I pointed at the ground between us. "No. This job."

He took a step closer. "You and Melly Harwood? Seriously, D?"

We hadn't talked after I pulled the window shade down, blocking them out, but they saw her. In my flannel. *Only* my flannel.

"Yeah."

"You're leaving in a few days," he reminded. "She's a forever girl."

I shook my head. "No."

"Hell, yes she is," he countered. *Now* he was protecting her.

I shook my head, swiped my hand through the air. "No. We have an understanding."

His eyebrows winged up. "An understanding."

I nodded. "It's only until I leave."

"Yeah, it's pretty hard to get your dick in her if it's in Scotland and she's here."

Now I pointed at him. "Watch it," I hissed. "That shit's what got Sea Bass a bloody nose."

"Out of every woman in town, you choose her? She's *Danny's* ex," he reminded.

I shifted my feet, moving into slightly uncomfortable territory. "They went out twice. Coffee and lunch," I explained, easily countering that excuse.

He knew what *coffee and lunch* meant when it came to a woman. *Not serious.*

"Still, D. You're dating the same woman *as your son.*"

"Not at the same time. And we're not *dating.*"

"Well, that makes it different then," he said, the words loaded with sarcasm.

"She's not interested in him. She told me she doesn't like guys her age. I talked to Danny. He's not interested in her. Says she's—" I cleared my throat, not wanting to share how he thought Melly was too vanilla. I'd never been with a woman who was less vanilla than Melly. "Anyway, he's not interested and he's wrong about her. So fucking wrong." I couldn't help the smile that pulled at my lips.

"She's like... twenty-four or something." He wouldn't let this go.

"So?" Yeah, that was a little bit of a problem, but she didn't want a guy her age and I wasn't a guy her age. She got wet and came beautifully for me. And looked beautiful with my cum all over her.

“She’s going to want to settle down. Have kids. She’s got a dog and puppies coming, for fuck’s sake. You’re forty and just got done with all that. You really want to start over like Dad?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He could yell at me all he wanted, but comparing me to *Dad*? Low fucking blow. “This is *nothing* like Dad. I didn’t leave a woman with two little kids for my secretary. This is sex, Deek. For a few days. Nothing more.” He looked contrite, but not completely satisfied. “She doesn’t want a relationship.”

His eyes widened. “She said that?”

“Yes.”

“So she wants you, and with complete respect when I say this, for your dick.”

Now he was catching on. “Yes.”

“Little Melly Harwood going after you, YOU, for your dick and nothing more.”

I ran a hand over my face. “Why is that so hard to imagine?”

“Because this is Melly Harwood and you’re more ornery than a bear that sat on a cactus,” he said, shifting his feet on the crunchy grass. “She’s a librarian who wears glasses!”

I tipped my chin down and eyed him. He meant that to be a deterrent, but it wasn’t.

“Oh.” Yeah, the naughty virgin librarian thing finally came to him. “Look, we’re all for you getting back out there. But her?”

“Why do you and everyone else keep calling her *little* Melly Harwood?” I pushed. “Yeah, she’s petite or whatever, but no one ever calls me *huge* Daniel Pearson.”

“Because she’s quiet.”

She wasn’t quiet when she came all over my dick.

“Shy,” he continued.

She boldly sat on my face so I could eat her out. Oh, and wanted to pick out lube so I could fuck her ass. So desperately shy.

“Innocent. Like a nun.”

Not any longer.

“That means she can’t have sex? She’s a librarian, not a nun,” I reminded. “You think she’s so delicate, physically and emotionally, that I would hurt her?”

“No, of course not.” He set his hand on my shoulder and looked me

squarely in the eye. “You sold your business. You’re leaving the country. You’re finally, after raising a kid for all these years, moving away from home. It’s what you’ve wanted since you had to quit college. Why her? Why the fuck NOW? You’re. Leaving. In. A. Few. Days.” The last words he enunciated clearly and slowly as if I wasn’t right in the head.

“We have an agreement,” I said, as if that explained it all. Which it did. We were having sex until I left for Scotland. Wild, dirty, naughty, and not vanilla.

He rolled his eyes. “For sex.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Then you’re here to go inside and have sex with her?”

I shook my head. “No. I want to see her project done. She doesn’t need this mess and all you assholes staring at her even more.” I waved my arm to indicate the missing driveway and walk. The mound of sand ready to be spread. The stacks of pavers to lay on top.

“You’re protecting her.”

“Yes.”

“From us.”

“Yes.”

“Because you care about her.”

“Yes!”

He smirked. “D, you came here this morning to fix her driveway, not fuck her. Think about that.”



MELLY

I DIDN'T WORK TODAY. Usually I did, but I said I'd fill in for Ethan, the part-time librarian, so he could go to San Diego with his girlfriend for spring break. He was swapping with me, one of the days being today, so I didn't go into overtime while he was away. There was no library budget to pay anyone time and a half.

When we'd worked out the change of schedule, I didn't know I'd be having sex with a burly lumberjack the night before. Or get caught by his four snooping brothers. Or stay up all night tossing and turning because I couldn't stop thinking about what we did.

How I behaved.

How had I behaved? Completely anti-Melly Harwood. I'd suggested picking out lube from an online store. My cheeks heated remembering, although Daniel had been bemused and game. What man wouldn't be up for a little butt stuff?

I wasn't sure if it was Daniel himself that brought out the naughtiness in me or the fact that he'd given me the space I needed to let go. By space, I meant his house. I loved, *loved*, LOVED the idea of being able to do, be, act, feel, move, scream—whatever verb I wanted—with him there.

It had been freeing.

Exhilarating.

Wild.

Naughty.

And I hadn't been a good girl.

I'd been a bad, bad girl and he'd told me so.

I was no longer a virgin and my sore pussy was proof. I couldn't help but smile.

Because I wasn't working—and an odd day off was outside of my routine—I did my meal prep first thing, then climbed back in bed and read the latest paperback that I'd yet to put into circulation. A perk of being the town librarian was first dibs on books.

I had my pillows stacked and I was propped up, glasses on, book in hand. Fred was on her dog bed by the window. This time of day, the sun streamed over her and she was on her back, little legs sticking up in the air. The noise outside from the landscaping crew didn't faze her. I'd peeked out when I got my coffee earlier, saw them unloading a mini-bulldozer, and went back upstairs. With my bedroom at the back of the house, I'd pretty much ignored them and settled into my book.

Today's story was a hockey romance. The hero was a professional hockey player and she rescued him in a snowstorm. The sex scenes were scorching and between my own sexy times from the night before with Daniel and this book, I was horny.

I couldn't help but giggle. I had sex! Actual sex. Not in the dark, beneath-the-covers stuff, but like a romance book. With my own lumberjack. I could still feel him, my pussy a little sore. Mallory would say that my vagina was reminding me it wanted more of Daniel's dick.

Right now.

He wasn't here, but my toys were. I had a solid relationship with all of my sex toys. I used them with such frequency I invested in rechargeable batteries. Once Daniel left for Scotland, I would probably have to order more.

I bit my lip, eyed my bedside table. Masturbating was usually a nighttime thing. After my shower and right before I went to sleep. An orgasm sleeping pill. But nothing was routine about today, or how I felt. I set my book down, reached across the bed and fished through the drawer. I saw the big dildo that I'd told Daniel about. Now that I saw—and felt—his dick, the toy wasn't that impressive any longer. My pussy clenched at the possibility of being fucked by it, especially since I loved the pulsing vibration feature, but I wanted

Daniel inside me, not silicone.

In its place, I grabbed my favorite in-a-rush vibrator, the one I called a clit sucker. Rubbing my thighs together, I was all about coming and this one had a powerful, delicious tug that got me there ridiculously fast.

Working my sheets and comforter down, I came up onto my knees, spread them wide, lifted my nightie with one hand and got to work, positioning the circular opening over my clit. I pushed a button on top three times and felt the device turn on and at just the setting and pulling action I liked.

Closing my eyes, I adjusted the little sucker tip until I felt it tug exactly right.

Suck. Pause. Suck. Suck. Pause. Suck. Pause. And so on.

“Oh, yes,” I whispered, imagining Daniel’s head between my thighs again. He wasn’t as precise as the toy, but he was so much better. Beard. Fingers. Lips. Growls.

The pull from the vibrator was doing its job. It was strong and powerful and getting me to orgasm fast.

I was right at the edge and arched my back, tilting my hips into the toy for even more contact. I cupped my breast with my free hand.

The doorbell rang.

My eyes popped open. Who? What...?

Suck. Pause. Suck. Suck. Pause. Suck.

Oh that felt good, so I ignored the door. Come on, orgasm!

The doorbell rang again.

I groaned because I was *right there*.

They’d go away, whoever it was. I needed to finish and then I’d answer it.

Suck. Pause. Suck. Suck. Pause. Suck.

Yes. “Yes!” I cried, thinking of Daniel and wishing he would fuck me, that the clit suction was really just a tease. My pussy was so lonely now that I knew what it felt like for him to claim it.

A growl cut through my orgasm focus.

I whipped my head toward the voice. There in my bedroom doorway was Daniel.

Body tense, eyes heated, hands undoing his jeans, then reaching in and stroking himself, as if he couldn’t make it a second longer.

“Such a bad girl,” he murmured. “Don’t stop.”



DANIEL

SADLY, she did. She pulled her hand and a little purple toy away from her clit. The prissy—and so fucking sexy—little nightgown she wore dropped back into place, which was only to mid-thigh. It was white, had ruffles and bows and made me want to stalk over to her and conquer. Plunder. Claim.

I got my hand on my dick and stroked it from root to tip.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, still kneeling on her bed.

Fred stirred but did nothing more than sniff in my direction before going back to sleep.

Still grasping my dick, I took a step closer, gaze affixed on her tits. The frilly cotton that covered them was snug and low cut. The straps weren’t designed by any engineer. No way could they support so much lush flesh without it bouncing with her ragged breaths. Did her tits seem to be always ready to fall out of her lingerie?

One hard pull on my dick and pre-cum seeped from the slit. “I was working on your driveway with the others.”

I thought of what Deek had said earlier, that I’d come here to fix her driveway. I was a fixer. That was what I did. I took care of things. It pretty much started when my dad left. Even though he moved across town, I became the man of the house. The one who saw that everyone was okay. That

only increased ten-fold—hell a million-fold—when I became a dad.

I might want to make sure Melly’s landscape project was done right, but I didn’t feel the least bit fatherly toward her. Unless she had a Daddy kink, but that was totally fucking different.

She glanced out the window, then back at me, then down and saw that pearly drop. She licked her lip and I groaned.

“But I wanted to see what you were up to.” I watched as the toy fell from her fingers to her white down comforter. “I’m glad I did.”

“How did you get in?” she asked, still watching me work myself.

“Deek gave me the back door code. You shared it so the crew can use your powder room by the garage,” I reminded.

“Oh.”

“Your pussy ache some more, sweet girl?”

I could see her mind working. She could lie, but I’d caught her playing with herself. She could tell the truth, but then she’d have to admit she really was a naughty little thing. I couldn’t wait for her to decide.

Eventually, she nodded.

“Show me.”

Instead of grabbing that little toy and getting back to work, she dropped onto the bed with a little frown between her brows.

I was right. Those straps weren’t good for anything because her right nipple popped out of the top of the nightgown.

She didn’t notice.

I wasn’t going to tell.

“What’s the matter?” If she didn’t get back to playing with herself, I was the one who was going to come by wondering how that nipple would feel against my tongue. If it was sensitive. If it liked to be nipped or tugged. Or both. Fuuuuccckk.

She shook her head, then blurted, “I thought... I thought this was just at your house.”

“We need a contract addendum.”

“What?”

“An addendum adding your house to the contract. Same rules, my house *and* here.”

She considered the change.

“I agree.” She nodded so formally even though she looked like a wet dream. “Condom,” she demanded.

Reaching back, I pulled one from my pocket and held it up. I put one there when I got dressed this morning because I always liked to be prepared. I was fucking brilliant.

She looked gleeful climbing from the bed and taking it from me, as if I was offering her a diamond tennis bracelet instead of birth control.

This time, she rolled it on me herself, although I gave her a few pointers on how to do it right. Once we were both protected, I kissed her, then walked toward the bed until the backs of her legs bumped into it. With my hands on her hips, I turned her away from me, then bent her over her bed. The little nightgown rode up her thighs, but not enough, so I flipped the thing up over her ass.

“You always go without panties?” I asked, cupping and kneading those fleshy globes.

“At home.”

“That toy get you all ready for me?” Cupping her with my hand, I felt how ready she was. Hot, swollen, soaked.

She nodded and her hands took hold of her bedding.

“Sore?”

“A little, but... but it's my reminder that you've been there.”

“I should let that pussy rest. Take that mouth of yours instead.”

“I'm bent over the bed, Daniel. Fuck me.”

She twitched her hips and I was only a man.

Pushing my jeans down a little further, I set a hand on the bed beside her shoulder, lined myself up and thrust deep.

“Fuck!” I yelled.

She cried out.

Fred yipped once from her dog bed.

“So tight. So fucking perfect.” I pulled back, filled her again.

“Harder.”

If she wanted harder, I'd give her harder. Rolling my hips, I took her so deep she slid up, her feet no longer touching the floor. Her hips lifted with each thrust to take me deeper, her ass rolling up in invitation. I took it. Swiping my thumb through all that dripping cream, I coated the tip and painted her little asshole.

“Daniel!”

Leaning down, I whispered in her ear.

“You want my dick here, gotta get you ready.” Then I carefully pressed

in, waiting for her to relax and open. I breached her there just a little bit. Enough for her to get the idea of what I could do to her before I left town.

I felt her gush all over my dick, loving this.

“You like taking me in both holes, sweet girl?”

“Please, Daniel,” she moaned, her muscles clenching, eager to come. “Harder.”

Harder. After one thrust of *harder*, her cell rang from the bedside table. Filled as she was, no way she could get to it. Turning my head, I glanced at the screen. Saw the name.

Snagging it as it rang again, I dropped it on the bed beside her without stopping from giving her the hard fucking she wanted.

“Answer it,” I said, nudging my thumb a little deeper into her ass.

“Wha—at?”

“Answer it.” Another ring, another hard thrust. I was going to come buried deep inside her and I was going to do it while she was on a fucking phone call. Because at this moment, I’d never felt so possessive. So like a caveman in the need to dominate her and make her remember I was the man inside her.

“Who... who is it?”

“The guy who didn’t get you hot,” I growled and came. “My son.”



MELLY

“HE... HELLO?” I asked, my voice breathy.

Daniel was still deep inside me, his thumb pressed into my bottom.

“Hey, Melly! This is Danny Pearson.”

“Hi, Danny.”

I couldn’t believe Daniel gave me my cell and told me to answer his son’s call while we were having sex. It had to be the naughtiest thing ever.

And so hot. I was so close to coming. I was *right* there. If I could wiggle my hips or rub my clit into the bed I might be able to do it. Danny was a nice guy. Attractive. Sweet. But I wasn’t all that attracted to him. He didn’t arouse me.

Why?

Because I had the fucking hots for his father. *He* blew my mind. He made me say and do and feel things I never imagined. He pushed me, both of us discovering the depths of how much of a bad girl I could be.

So, so bad. Because while I was talking to the coffee-date son, his father just came inside me.

“I’m still in California but my dad called and told me about Fred and Earl. I know how grouchy and bossy he can sound, but don’t worry. I’ll give you money for the vet bills when I get home, all right?”

Daniel pulled out and slipped his thumb from my ass. “Don’t move,” he whispered and gave me a pointed look. *Grouchy and bossy?*

I nodded in reply and said to Danny, “Sure.”

Daniel still had all of his clothes on as he made his way to my ensuite bathroom, sliding the used condom off as he went. The water ran in the sink.

“I didn’t mean to stick you with my dad,” Danny admitted. “I hope he hasn’t been too much of a pain in the ass.”

I bit my lip trying not to smile as I clenched my bottom where his thumb had just been. “No, not a pain.”

“Good. I’m planning to get back before my dad leaves town. I’ll catch up with you then, okay?”

Daniel came out of the bathroom, his dick still out. And it was hard.

“Okay. Bye.” I ended the call, threw the phone onto the bed. “Round two, already?”

Daniel came up behind me. I hadn’t moved like he’d wanted, but I’d also been distracted by Danny’s call.

“Your turn to come. Knees up on the bed.” He flicked his fingers indicating I should move.

I did as he wanted—because he said *your turn to come*, and I was all for that.

“Ass up.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I slowly did as he wanted. This? He stood at the side of my bed, fully dressed while I was in my little nightie, the hem of it shifting up and under my armpits as I raised my butt. I was pretty much naked. And my pussy was *right there*.

My heart was pounding and my pussy ached from being fucked so hard, but I was eager to come. So, so needy.

Daniel’s hand pressed into the bed and I felt a kiss to my bottom as he grabbed my clit sucker toy from between the folds of the sheets. He fiddled with it.

“Press the button three times,” I advised, because I *wanted* that setting.

I heard the familiar buzz and then Daniel set it over my clit. Perhaps because it was so swollen, the suction pulled it right in.

He laughed when I gasped. “Right there?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“How about right here?” His fingers slipped into me.

“Oh my God.”

“Come, sweet girl. Think about how Danny or any other guy your age can’t make you come like this.”

I orgasmed powerfully. The clit sucker was really intense and I’d never come from it and had fingers fucking me at the same time.

I screamed from the intense pleasure, clenched, tried to pull away from both the toy and his fingers, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Only me.”

Finally, he pulled away and I dropped to the bed. But he wasn’t done. I should have known because he grasped my legs and rolled me over, spread my knees nice and wide and ate me out until I came not once, but twice more, all the while saying, “Only me.”



MELLY

ALL OF THE James brothers fell for women in Hunter Valley. Three of them settled into the town and got together frequently. I had never been included before, but the text invitation I received earlier—after Daniel left me sweaty and sated in bed to get back to work post-lunch with the driveway crew—I figured was because Mallory and Bridget were nosy and wanted an update on my love life.

I had a lot to share. Holy shit did I have a lot to share.

At six, I stood on the front stoop of Bridget’s big house she shared with Maverick.

A dog barked and seconds later, the door opened.

“I knew it was you,” Bridget said, giving me a hug. “You’re always prompt. That’s why I like you so much. Mallory’s not—”

“I’m not what?” Mallory asked as she nudged Bridget aside. A black and white dog with short legs sniffed me and looked at Fred who I held tucked under my arm.

Mallory wore a black skirt and black tights with a red and white striped shirt as if she was part of a *Where’s Waldo?* book.

I thrust a bottle of wine at Bridget and Fred at Mallory. “Here.”

“It was dress as your favorite book character today at school,” Mallory

explained without me asking, as if I wasn't the first person to eye and question her wardrobe choice. So I had been right. "I like pajama day better."

"Thanks," Bridget said about the wine, but glanced around behind me. "Where's Daniel?"

I frowned. Heat from inside hit my face and I could hear voices within.

"Um... I don't know," I replied, adjusting my purse on my shoulder. "His house?"

"He's not with you?" Mallory asked, practically pouting, but sweetly petting Fred.

"Is he a requirement of being allowed in?"

"No," Bridget said.

"Yes," Mallory countered, giving her a look.

Bridget gave Mallory a look right back.

"No, but you should invite him. The guys are all here and I'm sure they want to meet him."

I narrowed my eyes. "You mean you want to see him with me. See how he acts and all that."

"That, too," Mallory added.

"Will you let me inside at least to text him?"

Those were the magic words because they stepped back and I was allowed into the warmth.



DANIEL

I'm at Bridget and Mav's place for dinner. They want to meet you.

Now?

I have a feeling they aren't going to give me any food until you show up.

I FROWNED AT HER TEXT.

"What's up?" Sea Bass asked, coming over and slapping me on the shoulder. He'd gotten over the fact that I punched him this morning. We beat the shit out of each other over the years often enough that it was forgotten as soon as the swelling went down.

We—all five Pearson brothers—were in my backyard having beers and tossing logs. They—the logs, not my brothers—were close to the same weight and heft as what I'd be tossing during the Highland Games.

While it was dark out, I had my exterior lights on and enough of the back field was lit. We'd been at it for about an hour. We were all sweating, not bothered by the dropping temperatures.

"I'm invited to dinner," I told him.

"You two lazy asses done already?" Saint called. He had the end of a log

cupped in his hands by his hip and the length resting on his shoulder, Seth right by him ready to adjust it if needed.

Sea Bass grabbed his beer from the edge of the deck, ignoring him.

“Yeah? Now?” Sea Bass asked me.

He looked me over. I wasn’t in any shape to go to dinner without a shower first.

“I guess. Melly’s invited me to eat at Bridget and Mav’s place.”

The *thump, thump* of the tossed log cut through the air.

“Too far to the left,” Saint muttered, disappointed in his toss.

The caber had to be tossed so the top hit the ground, then toppled over as close to perfectly straight as possible. It wasn’t about distance, but direction.

“Mav? The James Inn, right?” Sea Bass knew him from that project. The inn’s construction finished over the winter and the place had been open for about two months, although the landscaping was on hold until spring. We’d already edged all the flower beds and dumped the good soil, but plants were on standby. Currently, we took care of their snow plowing and starting in the summer, we’d handle the mowing and all groundskeeping. It was a big contract.

“That’s him.”

I thumbed a response to Melly.

I’m tossing logs with my brothers.

She wrote back a few seconds later.

Mal wants to know if you’re wearing a kilt.

I grinned. Sounded like Mallory was there, too.

If I come to Bridget’s place, it’s outside of the contract.

I’d have sex with Melly anytime, anywhere, but she was pretty adamant about our agreement. When I came upon her in her bedroom this morning, she’d been *masturbating*. Even at gunpoint, I couldn’t have walked away from that because of location issues, so obviously I’d had to make immediate modifications to the contract.

But this was dinner.

You’d be coming for dinner. Not sex.

We were thinking the same thing. Still... if our arrangement was just sex, because why could it be anything else since I wasn't sticking? Getting to know each other and meeting her friends was meant for relationships.

I wrote back.

You're the one who would be coming, sweet girl.

I imagined her blushing as she read that. I couldn't help typing out those teasing words and grinned as I did.

"Why does D have that weird fucking smile on his face?" Deek called to Sea Bass. "Did he just fart or something?"

I ignored him and continued to stare at my phone wondering if Melly being a dirty girl extended to texting.

"He's texting with little Melly Harwood," Sea Bass yelled back.

"Stop calling her that," I muttered, waiting for the little dots to appear indicating Melly was typing back.

"You going to punch me in the nose over that, too?" Sea Bass asked.

Saint and Seth came over, grabbed their beers. Now I had an audience.

"Are we all standing around watching him text a girl?" Deek asked.

"Yes," the others said at once.

"Not just a *girl*, it's Melly Harwood," Saint added as if we were in fourth grade.

"Fine," Deek grumbled. "Does little Melly Harwood want more dick?"

I looked up, glared at Deek and secretly wished it was true. I only met Melly yesterday morning and I'd had more sex since then than... fuck, I didn't even want to say.

My dick and I were insatiable now. Especially after what we did earlier and I couldn't tell the guys about it. Sure, we talked about women we'd fucked in the past and technically, this thing with Melly was as casual as any of the others.

But I never watched any other woman kneel on her bed and masturbate. Or watched her lower herself down on a dick for the first time. Or... every other filthy thing we'd already done.

"I need to rethink my ladies strategy. If D here's got his dick all hard for the little librarian, maybe there's something to be said for the quiet types," Sea Bass considered.

"The librarian's taken," Saint muttered. "What about a schoolteacher? There are a bunch of those."

“Kindergarten, maybe,” Seth clarified. “You’ve got to be slightly crazy to teach middle school.”

“So fucking true. Remember we stole Mr. Mongaroy’s toupee in sixth grade?” Saint asked. Seth laughed at the shared memory.

“The only person sweeter than little Melly Harwood are the nuns at the Our Lady of the Highway out by the interstate,” Deek prompted, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Melly is *not* sweet, and she is *far* from a nun,” I clarified, trying to fix the perception they had about Melly. I thought Deek and I went over this already.

“You saying the little librarian’s a freak in the sheets?” Sea Bass asked, then reached up and covered his nose.

I glared and my cell chimed at the same time. Broken nose averted.

“She’s gotta be for him to be into her like this,” Saint said.

“He’s old and hard up. Sometimes you’ve gotta take what you can get,” Seth countered. “And he’s not staying, so he’ll be in Scotland before he gets bored of a dull lay.”

“Watch it or you’re going to unleash the kraken with those words,” Sea Bass warned. “I agree though, a dull lay’s better than your hand. A *crazy* lay, now that’s worse than getting chlamydia. You can take antibiotics to make it go away, but crazy? That can stick around for a while.”

“That shit burns,” Seth told him.

“Crazy is a Stage Five Clinger and burns a fuck of a lot longer,” Sea Bass countered.

I really didn’t want to know why the two of them knew so much about chlamydia. I sighed, ran a hand over my hair. What the fuck were they even talking about?

“We went from talking about D’s dick getting hard for the hot librarian and now you’re talking about STDs?” Deek wondered.

“He’s not saying a word,” Saint countered, waving his arm in my direction. “He can’t be sexting if he’s just standing there. This is boring as hell.”

Mal says don’t move. We’re all coming there.

For a second, I processed that she was coming over to fuck. Then I reread it and frowned at my bright screen.

What?

I needed to make sure I understood what was happening. My dick couldn't read, and he was doing the thinking for me. Bad combination when it came to texting with *little Melly Harwood*. My brother's stupid-ass chatter was also brain numbing.

Mal just told them about you going to the Highland Games. The guys want to toss cabers with a pro. Um... they're packing up the food to bring over.

My brothers stared at me. "Well?" Seth asked.
"Melly and others are coming here."

You're coming here? You, Bridget, Mav, & Mal?

And Lindy, Dex, Theo, Silas, Eve, & Mac.

Excellent. She was coming here.

My house is within the contract. Now it's dinner AND sex.

I've never seen them organize so fast. Be there soon.

I looked up, my brothers staring at me. "Guess we're having some visitors. The guys want to learn how to caber toss. They're bringing food."

"Sweet! Food," Saint said.

"Who all's coming?" Sea Bass asked, a sly smile sliding across his face.
"If it's just Melly we don't need to watch her *tossing your caber*."

I rolled my eyes. I named everyone from the text.

Deek laughed, then held up a finger. "Wait. There's a Melly... Mel, Mav, Mal, and Mac?"

I didn't care about anyone else. The only one I wanted to see was Melly. Coming all over my dick later.



MELLY

“IF I WASN’T ALREADY pregnant, I would be watching this,” Lindy said, her eyes squarely affixed to... I thought, was her husband’s ass. Maybe a few of the others.

We were on Daniel’s deck, kitchen chairs brought outside for us to sit on while we watched the men. They’d brought tons of food which was spread out on the table inside. We’d eaten some, but like little boys, the guys had been more interested in playing outside.

There was something ridiculously elemental and caveman about males throwing heavy things. Getting sweaty. Showing their strength.

And when ten of them were doing it as a group? They only needed two more for a sexy man calendar.

Wow.

It was potent. I squirmed in my chair and not because it was a little hard and uncomfortable.

“Did you hear that?” Mallory asked. “That was my ovary exploding.”

Bridget pushed her glasses up her nose. “Someone’s getting lucky tonight,” she said seemingly to herself. But all the ladies piped up.

From Eve: “Hell, yeah.”

Mallory: “Uh huh.”

Lindy: “Absolutely.”

I agreed and smiled. For once, I was going to get lucky, too.

“Way to go with Daniel,” Lindy added. Fred was on her lap leaning in to the ear scratch she was giving. Two pregnant ladies together. “He can’t stop looking at you.”

I doubted that because he was busy teaching—and demonstrating with potent virility—how to toss a huge log. Mac had done it before, but none of the James brothers.

Still, I liked the praise, liked feeling like I was part of a girl club who were all going to get lucky tonight.

The five Pearson brothers, who—when not staring at me through a window—were rugged and gorgeous. I knew Deek and Sebastian, although the guys kept calling him Sea Bass for some strange reason, since they were working on my driveway. I was introduced to the other two brothers when I arrived. The identical ones. Fortunately, they didn’t say a peep about catching me in their brother’s house in only his shirt.

“What more could a woman want in that lineup? CEO, doctor, pro hockey player, oh, another CEO, firefighter, lumberjack #1, lumberjack #2, lumberjack #3, and identical twins, who are mechanics?” Mallory fanned herself.

“I know. I’m writing them *all* into books,” Lindy added. I didn’t know until recently that she wrote romance books. I’d stocked the three she had published at the library, but it was our secret what her pen name was.

“Be right back. Bathroom,” I said, ducking inside.

I peed, washed my hands, swiped on some lip gloss I had in my pocket.

Coming out of the powder room, which was down a short hall near the garage, I heard men’s voices carry through the home’s open plan layout.

“You make it seem easy.” That was Mav’s deep voice. “Just lift and toss. It’s a hell of a lot harder than it looks.”

I set my hand on the log wall and listened.

“Practice,” Daniel replied, as if anyone could pick up a log and fling it. “Helps I chop down trees for a living.”

“Did,” Deek reminded, slapping him on the back. “Now you toss wood for fun. And prize money.”

“We should add it to the fire workout.” Mac. The town fire chief wasn’t nearly as big as Daniel or Mav, but he could hold his own when it came to muscle and strength. “I bet you’re eager to get the hell out of Hunter Valley.”

“Can’t wait,” Daniel replied, his voice full of eagerness. Maybe relief. “I’ve been ready for years. Hell, I’ve always wanted to go.”

“A kid can derail your plans. You quit college for Danny and stayed here instead of roaming the world like you wanted,” Mac said.

“Sure did.”

“Time wasn’t wasted. You made an impressive business,” Mav praised.

“And Danny’s a good kid,” Mac added. “Smart. Even took up being a wildland firefighter like me.”

Daniel laughed. “Yeah, that conversation you had with him about playing with matches really went sideways.”

“He’s grown,” Mac told him. “A man. It’s cool you can go start your life.”

“Hell yeah.”

“Scotland for a few months, then what?” Mav wondered.

There was a pause. “Not sure. Like you said, I raised my kid. I grew my business. Sure, family’s everything, but it’s time I did my thing. All I know is my life here’s done. Want another beer?”

I heard the fridge open.

“What about—” Mav asked.

The slider opened. “Hey, this baby’s sitting on my bladder. Bathroom?” Lindy asked.

“Just around there,” Daniel told her and I assumed he was pointing in my direction, although it was clear the guys didn’t know I was overhearing.

“Better get these beers out to the others,” Mav said.

Heavy footsteps cut across the house to the sliding doors.

Maverick barely knew me. Hadn’t grown up here. Didn’t know the years of image work I’d done to seem shy and meek and sweet. To hide myself. Obviously, Mac bought into the whole *little Melly Harwood* thing.

It was what I wanted. No men. No relationships. Especially with an older man who only wanted a little fun. Daniel was older and while he hadn’t said those words, that was all that was between us. *A good time*. He was having a good time with me, just like Creepy Carl wanted to all those years ago.

Have sex, have fun, then toss me aside for someone else. In Daniel’s case, to finally start his life. My mom never taught me to keep a man or create a relationship or a life with one, only to spread my legs for a little pleasure. Then find another who could give me a little more.

What I had with Daniel wasn’t a Creepy Carl situation. Daniel gave me

more orgasms than he'd had himself. He saw to my needs, listened. Watched. Gave. He respected my boundaries, even reminded me of them.

Yet hearing him say his life here in Hunter Valley was done, hurt. It only reinforced what I already knew and perhaps ignored in my two days of sexual bliss. He wasn't staying. His *life* wasn't here which meant I wasn't part of it. We were having sex as we agreed. Really good, insane sex, but that was it. He and his talented hands, skilled mouth, and incredible dick were going to Scotland.

No matter how I felt for him, which that little kitchen conversation made me realize, was more than just attraction. I *liked* him.

And I shouldn't. It was dangerous. Because everyone left. My dad. My mom. Sure, my grandmother was the only solid and true family I had, but she wasn't around most of the time either. With Daniel, I'd known he was leaving and jumped him anyway. Did that make me stupid? I thought not, but that was when I didn't feel something for him.

Shit.

Lindy came around the corner, rubbing her big belly. She was one of those women who looked adorable pregnant. She glowed. A smile was always on her face, and I doubted her ankles swelled even a little bit. Plus, she had the nicest, most gorgeous, ridiculously attentive husband. Who was sticking. Who was making a life with her together. A baby.

I was jealous. I was falling for a man who'd already done the baby thing and certainly didn't want to do that again. Wasn't staying in town. Was only interested in me for sex.

That. That was it. His conversation with Mav and Mac proved that. He was holding up his end of the contract. I couldn't be mad, and I shouldn't be hurt.

But I was.

Lindy cocked her head and grinned. "There you are, I thought you fell in or something. You're going to come to my shower on Sunday, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I told her.

"You done in there?"

I pasted on a smile and nodded. "Yeah, I'm done." Or I would be when Daniel's plane left. Because while he was gorgeous, and nice—but I wouldn't tell him that because I had a feeling he liked being thought of as gruff and growly—and ridiculously attentive, especially in bed, I was nothing more than someone else he was leaving behind.



DANIEL

WHEN IT CAME to Melly Harwood, I was insatiable. She—and admittedly all the women—had lusty gleams in their eyes as they watched the caber tossing. I never really considered it an aphrodisiac until after we finished. The women practically pulled the guys out of the house. If I didn't see the need in Melly's gaze I'd feel a little snubbed, but I was thankful. All I had to do was kick out my brothers—and ensure they didn't come back.

Then I had her to myself.

And I had her.

On the stairs.

In the bed the first time.

And the second.

And the third.

Now, with the morning sun, I wanted her again. Of course, she was nestled up in front of me, my hand cupping her lush tit, so how could I not?

She stirred, rubbing her face against the pillow, shifting her body so her ass pushed back and her chest out right into my palm.

“Morning,” I said, giving her tit a gentle grope and her nipple a thumb swipe.

She smiled. “Hi.”

“Sex or coffee first?” I asked. When Danny was little, someone wise told me to offer him two choices, but both ones I liked. I was implementing that now because if it was coffee then sex, or sex then coffee, we both would win.

“Mmm,” she murmured, reaching up to swipe her hair back from her face. She was so put-together all the time, but like this? Her hair was wild, her makeup was gone. She was bare.

This, right in my arms, was the real Melly Harwood. Not the one Ang thought I should be careful around. Not the one Deek kept telling me I needed to leave alone. Not even the one her friends knew.

I had a feeling I was the only person to see her this way. I was the only one she trusted her body and all her secret fantasies with. Sure, she set up boundaries, but what we accomplished within them was insane.

When Mav and Mac asked me the night before about my leaving town, I lied.

Partly.

I was so fucking eager to get the hell out of town. To caber toss and see Scotland and wherever else I wanted. When I wanted. How I wanted. No work or school schedule. No groceries or... life.

But this? The woman in my arms? How had two days with her changed my thoughts on our contract? That being with her until my plane left wasn't going to be enough. How was I going to stop wanting her because for a virgin, she was my match. What made her hot got me off.

Helping her explore her sexuality was like watching a little kid ride a bike for the first time.

But she only wanted this time, this little window of sex before I left. Was she using my dick?

Absolutely.

I was enjoying every minute of it. She could use my dick for as long as she wanted.

“Can we have both?” she asked, and I had to remember what I asked.

“We can have whatever the fuck you want.” I kissed the top of her head and slipped out of bed. Pulling boxers from my dresser, I slipped them on.

I grinned when she rolled over and faced me, the sheets and blankets wrapped around her.

Fuck me.

“Wait.” I said, holding up my hand and grabbing my phone again. I took a photo of her just like this. Completely covered but sexy as fuck in my bed.

The fact that she was naked beneath the bedding was obvious. It was also clear she'd been fucked good and hard all night long.

By me.

“You're not sharing those, right?” she asked.

“It's in the contract. No sharing.” No, these would be for me in Scotland, or wherever I roamed. If I stayed in the room a second longer, there would be no coffee. So I grabbed the flannel she wore before from the back of my reading chair and tossed it onto the bed. “Put this on and come downstairs for coffee and dick.”

Ten minutes later, the coffee was brewing, the dark scent of it filling the air and my girl was sitting on the counter.

In just my flannel.

Standing between her parted knees, we kissed and I already got most of the buttons on the shirt undone. “You like cream in your coffee?” I asked as I nibbled along her jaw.

“Mmmhmm,” she replied, angling her head to the side.

“Sugar?” Pushing the soft cotton aside, I kissed along her collarbone and then lower to her nipple.

The perfect morning now included a big tit in my mouth.

“No.”

I pulled back, suddenly worried.

She looked down at me through her glasses, then pulled my head back into her lush softness.

“No, I don't put sugar in my coffee. Yes, I like your mouth on my nipple.”

I grinned against the hard tip, then gave it a little nip.

She yelped and squirmed.

“Dad!”

Danny's shout was followed by the front door slamming.

Shit. FUCK. Danny? NOW?

I pushed off the counter, yanked the flannel on Melly closed, then spun around to block her. Earl barked and he and Fred bounded over to Danny, their nails clacking on the wood floor.

“I got back last night and—”

I loved my kid. Loved to see him especially since he'd been gone for over a week. He was whole and safe and I wanted to hear all about the fire. His stories. But not now.

Yeah, he knew what was up.

I was in my boxers, my dick hard, and I had a woman's legs around my hips.



MELLY

NOTHING, *nothing* could be more embarrassing than this moment.

We were caught.

I thought having Daniel's four brothers peering in the front window had been mortifying, but this was Danny.

The guy I was sleeping with's son.

The one I dated.

"*Melly?*" Danny asked.

All I saw was the broad span of Daniel's back—which was spectacular—and hadn't known Danny had moved. But him shifting out of the kitchen and into the great room had him getting a side view.

Of me.

Damn Daniel's open concept log cabin!

I turned my face, held the flannel closed, and gave Danny a smile.

"Hey."

I was wrong. I was now even more embarrassed.



DANIEL

“YOU TWO ARE—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” I said.

I shifted, pushed Melly’s knees together, grabbed her by the waist and set her on the floor, keeping her once again behind me.

“Are you serious? You’re fucking *little Melly Harwood*?”

I loved him, but I was going to kill him.

“OUT!” I boomed. Earl barked once.

Melly startled and her hand touched my back. “I’m just gonna... yeah.”

With her head down and shoulders tucked, she dashed for the stairs.

Danny watched her retreat.

Her walk of shame.

I stormed over and pointed in his face. “You will not disrespect her like that! You know better than to treat a woman that way.”

“I’m not the one making out with her on the counter,” he snapped.

“My kitchen. My house.”

“My date,” he countered.

I wasn’t going to remind him he didn’t want her. That he wasn’t interested in her. But that would make me sound like I was twenty-one. Like him.

“I love you, but you need to go. I respect your boundaries in your relationships and you will respect mine.”

“You’re fucking my ex!”

“Two dates, Danny. Two. She’s not your ex.” I pointed to the front door. “Go. We’ll talk later.”

He gave me a disgusted look, called for Earl and stormed out, the door slamming behind the two of them. Fred stared at the closed door, as if waiting for them to return.

Boundaries. Sounded familiar. Danny’d walked in on the little contract Melly and I had. Reminded me that we were in our own little bubble. This thing we were doing, this non-relationship fucking? It wasn’t the real world. Danny’d just burst that, and it was a reminder that every touch, every breathy pant, every secret we discovered about each other wasn’t real.

I was leaving Saturday and it would all be over.

Fuck. FUCK!



MELLY

“YOU’RE LEAVING?” he asked, coming into his bedroom. Fred scurried over to him and he picked her up. The sight of him holding my tiny dog tucked into the crook of his elbow was cute as hell.

Shit.

“Uh... yeah. Your *son* caught us.”

“So?” he asked, his voice all growly in the way I really liked. “He’ll get over it.”

I rolled my eyes, pulled my sweater on. “I won’t,” I replied, pulling my hair out from the collar. “Look, this was amazing. Insane.” I thought of the past two days. “Wow, adjectives I can’t even think of. But you’re leaving on Saturday and—”

“We don’t need to stop before then, just like the contract.” He said that then frowned, as if he couldn’t believe he was begging. Or he was really horny and I was willing and right in front of him.

I shook my head. I heard what he told Mav and Mac the night before. We hadn’t spent much of the past two days talking or getting to know each other, but we made it clear this was temporary, that we didn’t want a relationship. I was catching feelings for Daniel and that was bad. Contracts and boundaries and addendums didn’t work for the heart.

Gah. I was falling for the big lumberjack even though I put every safeguard in place.

I should have learned from my father, my mother, and even my grandmother that I wasn't worth sticking around for.

No. That thinking was unfair to Daniel. I knew he was leaving when we went into this. I knew it was only going to last a few days. That made me more of an idiot than ever because I walked right into this sadness.

I shook my head. I needed a shower. Styling products. Clean panties since mine from yesterday were tucked in my purse. I took Fred from him, went up on my tiptoes and kissed him.

Met his dark, stunned eyes. "Thank you."

"For what? Orgasms?" he asked, sounding cranky.

I cut around him and down the stairs. I couldn't linger. This was hard.

HARD.

Swallowing, I made it to the bottom of the steps then pasted on a smile as he followed me. He was still in only his boxers.

"Definitely. Orgasms. I guess letting me do things I never would with, well, anyone else."

Shit. That was too true. I did all kinds of things—and I didn't mean sexually—with Daniel. I opened up to him. I trusted him. I... let him in.

"Sweet girl, don't you know?" he asked, cupping my cheek. His growl was gone and now he was all sweet and deep voiced.

I blinked, took in those dark eyes. The beard. Tousled hair. Lips that—

"What?"

"It's all inside you. Who you are. You just had to let the real Melly Harwood out to be seen."

Fuck.

He knew. Of course he did because he was right.

Going up on my tiptoes, I kissed him. Once. Hard. Quick. Then I pulled away from his soft lips. Let them, let him go.

Spinning on my heel, I picked up Fred who still stood by the front door and glanced over my shoulder at him. "I'm not Dorothy and this isn't *The Wizard of Oz*."

In that movie, Dorothy traveled all the way to Oz to be told—spoiler!—by Glinda the Good Witch that she had the power inside her all along to return to Kansas.

I knew what was in me, the *real* Melly as he put it. This wasn't Kansas

and well, it didn't make a difference if he knew the truth or not. He was leaving.

“Goodbye, Daniel. I hope you find the life you want.”



DANIEL

I COULD GO to the job site and help finish up Melly's driveway. I wanted to, but it was a dumb move. Danny'd be there. We had to work some things out but doing it in the front yard of the woman I supposedly stole from him wasn't a good idea.

I wouldn't stick with staying outside her house either. I'd go in and fuck her.

My dick was hard with wanting her. With wanting to do all the things we had yet to cover. The lube never got delivered. I hadn't seen all her bra and panty sets. Or her nightgowns. And other than that quick, single suck, she hadn't gotten her mouth on my dick. I hadn't watched her try to take all of me down her throat.

"Fuck!" I shouted at my empty house.

So I was staying home and packing. I hadn't gone anywhere in so long I forgot how much weird shit I needed to take. Toothbrush. Socks. Power cords. Passport. Medicines.

Why was I not eager to go? My flight left tomorrow and Sunday morning, I'd be in fucking Scotland debating whether to have the haggis or meat pie with my whisky. Without the "e."

"Shit. That's why."

Melly.

The naughty nerd.

I'd had to look up the *Wizard of Oz* reference she mentioned because I hadn't seen the movie since Danny was little and hid behind the couch seeing the vividly green Wicked Witch of the West with her flying monkeys and I sure as hell hadn't read the book. Who had besides Melly?

There was a side to her she kept hidden and there hadn't been enough time to find out why. But I'd seen it and I'd liked the hell out of what I saw.

I had a feeling she had, too.

My cell rang and my heart kicked up a notch. Melly?

I frowned. Deek.

"Hey."

"Packing?"

I stared at my things laid out on my bed. "Packing."

"Checking to see if we're still on for tonight. Kincaids."

The going away dinner.

"The James guys want in too, so Arlo's reserving a bunch of tables for us."

"I'm in." *Where else would I be?* I thought. "How's the job coming?"

"You're not asking because you're going to come over and help, are you?"

"No." Melly had made it clear she was done, and I respected her boundaries, even though my dick didn't understand.

"By help I meant pretend to care about the driveway and sneak inside and fuck Melly."

I sighed. It was no point telling him off for being disrespectful with his wording, but really, I would sneak inside and fuck her.

"No."

"Good because you have worse cockblockers over here than your brothers."

I frowned, grabbing a new deodorant from the drawer in my bathroom. "Danny?"

"Well, okay, worse than him." So he was still butt hurt about me and Melly. Great.

"What can be worse than your son being pissed you fucked his ex?" I asked.

Deek laughed. "D, I told you so. I fucking told you so about that shit."

“He’s not mad because he didn’t get the girl. He never wanted her.”

“Dude, he’s never going to live down that his father got his girl.”

“She’s not his girl!” *She was mine. FUCK!* No, she wasn’t.

“You kinda pulled a Dad. Worse because you scammed on your son’s dating pool. Dad only fucked his secretary, not one of our dates.”

“We were five and eight,” I reminded. “By the way, you’re a dick.” I tossed the deodorant on top of the pile of t-shirts. “Wait. Who can be a worse cockblocker than even Danny?”

I got off track and missed the original point.

“Melly’s mom. She’s back.”



MELLY

MY MOTHER WAS HERE.

Just great.

“Honey, I can’t believe what’s going on outside! Have you seen all those men?”

Fred was tucked under my arm as I stood in the entry.

Mom came in, then went to the window and peeked out.

Deek, Sea Bass, Danny, and the other guys from Pearsons were laying the pavers for the driveway. They were a handsome bunch, but I didn’t stand at the window and ogle.

Or in front of my boyfriend—if I had one.

“I’m Roger,” Mom’s boyfriend said, shaking my hand.

He had to be sixty with thinning hair, a tan that indicated he wasn’t from any cold weather state, and a friendly smile.

The fact that Mom was pretty much eye fucking the landscaping guys and Roger didn’t seem to care said it all.

This wasn’t her first guy-watching rodeo.

And this wasn’t my first rodeo with my mom.

“Yes. I’ve seen them. They’ve been here for days.”

She spun around, her long earrings swinging. Her eyes were bright with

lascivious glee. “Oh, you lucky girl.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I can’t come visit my only daughter?”

Mentally, I rolled my eyes at her passive aggressive, spin the answer to point out my upset like a sociopath.

Yay!

“It’s cold out and you’ve got” –my gaze flicked to Roger– “company.”

She always came alone and between men.

With a careless shrug and a wave of her hand, she replied, “It’s been a long drive and I’m hungry.”

Her showing up randomly and unannounced wasn’t surprising. She never let me know when she was coming, but I didn’t remember her ever coming at this time of year. The only good thing winter was for, she said, was making the winter holidays look festive with the snow and a good reason to stay in bed.

While we shared DNA, I didn’t get her personality. I did get my red hair from her. Same with my green eyes. Where I was petite and well, buxom, she was tall and willowy. Her hair was fairer now, with threads of gray mixed in. I wore soft black leggings with a crisscross style gray sweatshirt. My hair was pulled back in a loose bun at the nape of my neck and I had on my chunkiest glasses. Underneath, I chose gray satin panties and bra.

I wore tinted lip gloss and mascara. And I wasn’t leaving the house.

Mom only wore natural fibers and avoided anything tight or restricting, including underwear. Or at least she used to. I didn’t ask for updates on that and fortunately, the sweater over her long cotton dress with the jagged edging hid the answer.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, Mom already had her head in the fridge. “You still cook your meals in advance each week.” She laughed as if I was a silly child, pulling out one of the five matching containers of chicken alfredo and holding it up. “Look, Roger. All her lunches and dinners are stacked up and ready to eat.”

“Mom,” I said, feeling the shame she always brought out.

“Honey, don’t hoard them like this,” she scolded. “There are fine, hardworking men outside right now just waiting for you to call them in and share a meal.”

She meant the Pearson crew.

She waggled her eyebrows and gave me a sly smile.

I tipped my chin down and eyed her through my glasses. “By share a meal you don’t mean *share a meal*. Because if you did, you wouldn’t be teasing me about my meals, you’d be telling me I could offer some to four of them at once.”

She moved to the window to peek out at the crew as I spoke but stopped. Her eyes widened, probably because I never talked about the possibility of multiple men, even in jest. “If that’s how you like it.”

“It all depends on what a man likes to eat,” Roger said, his gaze raking down my body, continuing on with the original point, that I had a *meal* to offer and I should give it out.

I got the innuendo and didn’t miss the creepy leer that went with it. Or the fact that while the man hanging with my mom was new, my mother herself and her fucked up life wasn’t. She was back, in my house, eating my meal plan dinner with and making me feel unsafe.

She was a hippie and had hippie-dippie ideals and values. Someone who shared partners for a night or even a few hours. That was fine and good for her, but pulling in her daughter who had zero experience or baseline on this lifestyle to make an informed decision?

Not okay.

In her mind, it was me. I was the one who thought guy-swapping was too casual. I was the one who had to flex and bend for her otherwise she’d keep shaming me as she was. And I still had to tolerate Roger’s uncomfortable looks.

“I might have to see if the dark haired one might want a side project,” she said, practically licking her lips as she peered out the glass.

“I’m not interested in Deek, or any other dark haired guy out there,” I countered. Obviously, me ditching her in Idaho six years ago because she tried to play sexual matchmaker hadn’t gotten my point across.

She laughed and came back to stand by the island. “Oh honey, not for you. Me.”

I glanced at Roger, then back. Yeah, yuck. “Shouldn’t you stick with one *meal* at a time?” I wondered.

Taking the lid off the alfredo container, she put it in the microwave and pushed a few buttons to set the timer. So much for my meal planning. “Melly, I like chicken alfredo. I’m not just going to have it from one restaurant. I should try all the places in town that serve it. Enjoy all possibilities. I don’t limit myself.”

I looked to Roger, who seemed... bored. He didn't care that his woman, girlfriend, significant other or whatever, was spelling out that she planned to sleep her way through the men of Hunter Valley. "You're okay with her trying every alfredo dish in town?" I asked him.

His shrewd gaze studied me, and not in a good way. "You are quaint, aren't you? Your mother likes my cream sauce just fine."

I flinched because... so gross. He didn't stop but kept right on going with the perv.

"But every once in a while, I like something a little spicier." He looked me over. "I bet underneath that... Amish look you have going you're pretty hot."

I stepped back, trying to give as much space from him as possible.

Ew.

I couldn't stay in the house while they were here. Fred wasn't a guard dog and my bedroom door had only a flimsy lock in the knob. If Roger tried to climb in my bed, which it sounded like he wanted to do, I wasn't sure how to stop him.

Of course, when I fended him off, I would be at fault for being too... Amish.

Right now, the Pearson guys were outside. Mom was harmless with her warped parenting and Roger was gross but no threat when I was awake. And dressed.

The doorbell rang right before the ding of the microwave.

Mom ignored Roger's very blatant interest in her daughter. Different man, same creepy focus. Where did she pick these guys? Again and again, year after year, she found one casual fuck buddy after another. This was the first time she brought one to Hunter Valley though. Why? What was she up to? She'd never been conniving, only had the devious knack for leading a man around by his dick.

She opened the microwave door and pulled out her heated food, poked it with a fork she pulled from the drawer. Roger eyed me a little too keenly.

I practically ran to find out who was here—probably Deek or Sebastian—but didn't make it down the hall before my name was yelled. From inside.

"MELLY!"

The walls practically shook with his bellow and the front door smacking the wall. I froze when he stepped into my path. "Daniel," I breathed.

He'd let himself in, obviously with no intention of waiting. Just like at the

vet. Just like at the bar.

There he was, big and brawny. Looming. Blocking out the light from the front windows with his size. And not creepy at all. He saw me. Listened. Heard. Understood.

I left the night before because of Danny, because I didn't want to come between them. I was temporary. They were father and son. There was nothing between me and Danny, not at all, but I could see why he was hurt. Or at least angry. But now, with this shit show that was my mother and Roger? I had to push Danny and his concerns to the side.

I had no one. I stood up, as best I could, to my mother. But she brought Roger into my home with intentions she knew I didn't like. She never listened. Never understood me no matter how many times I told her no.

But Daniel was here. He barged right in because he was worried. For me.

I didn't realize how much I needed him, specifically, right now. He was safety and protection and... and—I flung myself at him and hugged him tight.



DANIEL

FOR A HALF pint that she was, Melly had a serious hold. I picked her up and she automatically wrapped her legs around my waist, at least as far as they could go.

She wasn't shaking, however she felt like she was vibrating. Something wasn't right.

Sure, she was always eager to see me—when she wasn't handing me a plant—but this was different.

I *knew* I needed to be here. It didn't matter whether this was in the contract or out or... what the fuck ever.

Maybe I shouldn't have stormed in, but I wasn't changing my ways now.

When Deek said Melly's mom was in town, my first thought was *fuuuuuccckkk*. I remembered what Melly had told me about the woman. That her mom pushed a man on her. The woman who slept with the married mayor didn't need to be giving Melly sex advice.

Melly had been a virgin at twenty-four. Until me, she hadn't been interested in changing that. Why? How had she made it this long untouched? It couldn't be because men weren't interested. The entire male population of Hunter Valley would have to be blind to not desire her.

Then it was Melly's choice to steer clear of sex. I was going to find out

why.

I kissed the top of her head and held her to me, in no rush to put her down. “You okay?” I murmured.

She nodded and her soft breath fanned my neck, then she tipped her head up and kissed me.

I sure as hell kissed her back.

“Well, this is interesting.”

I pulled back but didn’t put Melly down. Tipping my head, there was Valerie Price. She looked so much like Melly, except where Melly was precise and neat and organized and liked consistency, Valerie liked... well, I had no idea what she was like.

I did know they had opposite personalities.

“You didn’t say you had a man, Melly. I’m impressed.”

Valerie was eyeing how I was holding her daughter. Clearly, we knew each other and since my hands were cupping her ass and I’d just had my tongue in her mouth, Melly and I were more than just friends.

“Daniel Pearson,” I said.

“I’m heating up some chicken alfredo if you want some.” Her gaze dropped to my hands on Melly’s butt before turning and going back to the kitchen. “However, it seems as if you’ve already gotten a taste.”

I didn’t know what that even meant, but Melly stiffened and wiggled to be let down. Taking my hand, she led me into the kitchen.

“This is my mother, Valerie,” Melly said, making introductions. “And this is Roger. My mother’s... person.”

Valerie was eyeing me as if she wanted to eat me instead of the container of alfredo. Roger was eyeing me as if I was competition. His jaw clenched in a way that indicated his dislike of me and Melly holding hands.

Melly was fucking mine. I pulled her back so she was pressed against me, my forearm wrapped around in front of her.

“Glad to know you two can entertain yourselves while you’re here,” I said. “No need to get anyone in town involved.”

Meaning don’t fuck the new mayor or anyone else.

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend,” Valerie said to Melly. “Or one who’s so... experienced. Well done.”

Melly cleared her throat.

“Roger, it seems your skills aren’t needed with Melly after all.”

Oh, fuck no. When Melly first came to my house the other day with the

plant and condoms, I'd thought perhaps something had happened to her, that she might have been a virgin at twenty-four for a bad reason. She'd been into sex and every single dirty thing we'd done, but right now? Her mom and Roger were upsetting her.

Had this Roger fucker done something already or only planning it?

Melly gasped.

I growled. "Roger's not getting his *skills* anywhere near Melly. In fact" –I looked to Roger and glared– "he shouldn't even be looking in her direction."

"Aren't you big and brawny," Valerie cooed, then shook her head. "Honey, if you liked older men, why did you run away from Carl? He could have given you that Daddy attention."

"I just turned eighteen, Mom, and Carl was a predator."

Valerie laughed. "Predator? You're such a prude when it comes to men." She poked her fork into the pasta and twirled it around.

Predator? Just eighteen? What the actual fuck?

"How long are you staying, Valerie and Roger?" I asked.

Roger deferred to Valerie, who shrugged. "A few days. I was going to have a fun girl visit with Melly and then we would see Nathan Mazurski."

"I'm not giving you money," Melly told her. "Seeing the bank manager's not going to change that."

"You're having work done on the driveway and there's this big house. I'm not sure why you two keep such a place."

"It's not my house, it's Nana's. Same with the driveway work. Her driveway. Did you email her for money?"

I saw the way Valerie's eyes flickered away and her mouth pinched with her answer.

"That's what I thought," Melly said.

"Nice meeting you two," I said, not letting this conversation continue.

"Leaving already, Daniel? Well then, Melly, the three of us can share your chicken alfredo after all."

I didn't want my girl sharing anything with these two and there was no way in hell I was leaving her here with them. Melly could hate my fucking guts, but I could see that Roger had plans for Melly and every single one of them were creepy as fuck. The fact that Valerie was cool with it was just wrong.

Melly needed my protection.

"Not happening," I snapped. "Melly's staying with me."



MELLY

HE CAME AND GOT ME. Got me out of that house.

Grabbed Fred and the little dog bed she'd been laying in and put us in his big truck. Anger pumped off him in waves. So was all that male testosterone.

Big hands clenched the steering wheel, making manly forearm muscles and veins bulge.

"Daniel—"

"Don't be pissed I pulled you out of there. There was no fucking way I was leaving you with those two. They're swingers and they have zero boundar—" He sucked in a breath, then ran a hand down his face. "Boundaries."

"Swingers. Like in swapping partners?" I never really thought of it that way. That they were in a relationship but not committed to having sex with only each other.

"Yeah. I might need a bath for the way your mother eye fucked me. And may have to pull out that woodchipper for Roger and his wandering dick if he kept drooling at you."

I nodded. "You're right. They absolutely are swingers."

"Rule number one in the contract: No sharing." His jaw clenched. "You may have said we're done, but I haven't left town yet. No fucking sharing."

I turned in my seat, bent my left knee so I could face Daniel. He was serious. And furious. And protective. And... hot.

“I don’t want Roger.” To prove that I shifted some more so I could reach over the center console and work on his belt buckle.

He looked down at my hands. “What are you—”

“I don’t want Roger. Or his dick.”

I got the zipper down and my hand in his jeans.

“Melly,” he said.

“I want this dick.”

He practically swerved off the road, then slammed on the brakes, the tires sliding in the dirt.

Looking out the window, I saw that we were almost to Daniel’s house, but he’d pulled off onto one of the farm access roads. Cars could come by, but a hundred feet down the dirt lane, we had privacy.

Good.

He lifted his hips for me and pushed his jeans and boxers down just enough for his dick to spring free. “This isn’t part of the contract,” he reminded, completely in contradiction to his actions.

I took hold of him again, stroked him from root to tip. In all of the times we’d had sex, I hadn’t really gotten my hands on Daniel’s dick. It wasn’t as if he’d pushed me away from it or that I hadn’t wanted it. We’d only been too busy doing other things. Yes, I said goodbye to him the night before. Told him to have a nice life. But he’d saved me and well, we had one more night. I wanted him to have a nice life. I meant it, but he could start it tomorrow.

“Add it,” I said, then leaned down and took the flared crown into my mouth.



DANIEL

HOLY FUCK.

Lick. Flick. Suck.

Little Melly Harwood was sucking my dick.

In my truck.

On the side of the road.

And it was fucking amazing.

A ridiculously and embarrassingly short time later, Melly finished sucking my dick.

In my truck.

On the side of the road.

And licking the few drops of cum off her lips because she'd drained my balls fucking dry.

Holy fuck.



MELLY

I HAD TO ADMIT, I liked giving a blow job much more than I expected. The idea of a man's dick in my mouth and then swallowing thick cum had never been arousing. Could I take it all? Would I gag or even throw up because it was too much for me to handle? Would it taste funny?

When I reached across the truck and opened Daniel's jeans, I hadn't thought of any of that. Not when I licked that broad head like a lollipop or sucked on him or even swallowed as spurts of his cum hit my tongue.

No. It had been hot because Daniel had lost control. The big, growly guy had been reduced to involuntary hip shifts, hand clenched in my hair and a profuse amount of swearing.

Deeper, bad girl.

Fuck, that's your throat.

Such a good little cock sucker.

HOLY FUCKING SHIT, THAT'S AMAZING.

Take it all.

Swallow.

Fuuuuuuccckkk.

Melly.

I did that to Daniel. The lumberjack. Me.

ME!

I felt powerful and aroused and so pleased with myself.

Daniel's head was tipped back on the headrest. Eyes closed. If the corner of his mouth wasn't tipped up, I wasn't even sure he was awake. His chest heaved still, sweat dotted his brow and his dick was still out. While it was softening, it was still impressive.

Rolling his head, he looked to me. "All right, sweet girl. What was that all about?"

I bit my lip, suddenly unsure. "Um, a blow job. Did I do it wrong?"

He huffed. "If you did it any more right, I'd be dead. But what a way to go."

I sighed, relieved.

"You didn't just have a hankering to suck dick. I think it's time we talk."

"Talk?"

He studied me and shifted to tuck himself back in his jeans and zip up. "I see you squirming which means your pussy aches. I'll take care of you when we get to my place, but I want to know about your mom."

I looked at my hands folded in my lap. "Okay."

He reached out, took one.

"The other day, you said your mom pushed a man on you."

I nodded.

"Did he touch you? Did he—"

I shook my head and looked up at him. His gaze had been softened by his orgasm, but his voice and body were tense.

"No. Nothing happened." I sighed again. "I lived here in Hunter Valley with my mom until I was sixteen. You know her history with the men in town."

He nodded.

"She met a man, Carl, and we moved to be with him in Idaho. Carl had an... interest in me right from the start and Mom was okay with it."

His hands went to the steering wheel and strangled it. His knuckles were white.

"When I turned eighteen, they pretty much offered me the opportunity to lose my virginity. To have some fun."

"With this Carl guy," he growled. Realizing he was murdering his truck, he loosened his hold and took my hand again.

I nodded. "Yes. I didn't want that so I left. Came back here to live with

my grandmother.”

He kissed my fingertips. “You’re right. Carl was a predator and your mom couldn’t see it. I’m proud of you for getting out of there. Is that why you never had sex?”

I shrugged. “I guess. At first, but then I never found a guy that interested me.”

“Until me.”

“Until you,” I confirmed.

“And the boundaries are because your mother clearly has none.”

“Right.”

“And you freaked when I said sex was fun because that’s what your mom taught you sex was. Only fun. I think you said something about it being interchangeable.”

“Yes. And that relationships aren’t something I want.”

He cocked his head, as if surprised by that even though I told him I didn’t want one. “Because you don’t want the kind your mom has.”

“Exactly. What about you?” I countered, licking my bottom lip. I had the taste of him on my tongue still. “You obviously had a relationship with Danny’s mom. Any others?”

“I was nineteen when I was with Haven. Danny’s mom. It was a teenage relationship which was pretty much hanging out and having sex. We had zero intention of having a child, but birth control isn’t foolproof. She bailed. Danny’s the best thing in my life and I wouldn’t change having him for anything.”

“But no relationships.”

He shook his head and frowned. “I got derailed by that one. I wasn’t letting it happen again.”

And he still wasn’t. Especially now that he sold his business and Danny was all grown up. “Because your life plans got changed when you had him and now, finally, you get to live them.”

“Exactly.” He huffed out a breath. “College isn’t happening now, but the other things on my bucket list are.”

I knew he didn’t mean for those words to hurt, but I felt them. I wasn’t a life plan. I wasn’t on his bucket list. I was temporary.

Temporary was what I wanted. How could I want more from a man who wasn’t going to be here? I wasn’t going to Scotland or wherever else he roamed. I couldn’t feel things for someone else who walked away. My father

left. Mom left. Sure, she came back, but didn't see me for who I was. She didn't understand that the meals and the job and living still in my grandmother's house was all because she pretty much messed with my head? I craved consistency, constancy, and permanence.

If I wasn't getting it from those who were supposed to care for me, then I had to provide it for myself.

The orgasms with Daniel were amazing, but it would be back to me and my drawer of sex toys soon enough. I'd given myself pleasure before, I could do it again.

Daniel didn't need to get stuck in Hunter Valley like he had over twenty years ago. He'd soon resent me.

"Like your parents, mine aren't great role models either," he added. "My dad divorced my mom when I was eight because he fell for his secretary. They got married and had Sea Bass, Saint, and Seth."

I had to smile. "Why do you call Sebastian, Sea Bass?"

He smirked. "Saint and Seth couldn't say his full name. They only got half of it and it stuck."

"So Sebas to Sea Bass? Does he even like to fish?"

"He does."

Huh.

We were perfectly defective together. I had no idea what a real relationship looked like and well, neither did he. Not if his dad dumped his mom with Daniel and Deek to start a second family. It wasn't swinging, but his dad certainly made relationships seem interchangeable.

"I meant it when I said you're staying with me. I don't want you in that house with those two."

"Yes."

He nodded once, probably expecting me to argue. "Good. Then let's get to my place so I can see to that needy pussy of yours."

"What about Danny?"

Danny was really upset and that confrontation the day before had been really embarrassing. Caught by his brothers was one thing, but Danny? Gah.

"We didn't do anything wrong. He needs to realize—"

"That his dad might have sex with his woman?" I winced. "Kinda sounds familiar."

He frowned. "You said you went on two dates. Daytime ones."

"We didn't even kiss," I said, making sure he knew how not-serious it

had been.

“Then there’s no comparison between us and the swinging your mom does. Rule number one, remember. I don’t share.”

“But Danny—”

“Had no chance with you,” he finished. “Right?”

Did I want Danny now? No. Had I ever wanted him? No.

“Right.”

“You’re not your mom.” Reaching out, he stroked my cheek. “I choose you and only you. Now let me take you home and fuck you to remind you who you belong to.”

He chose me. Only me.

For now, and only now.



DANIEL

I WAS FUCKED.

Little Melly Harwood was *nothing* like what everyone in town thought.

Ang thought I needed to tread carefully.

Deek thought I'd fuck her and toss her aside like a candy wrapper.

She wasn't shy. Or meek. She was cautious.

Who could blame her with her psycho mother?

I remembered when my dad left and moved across town. A few nights a week, Deek and I had to eat dinner with Sheila in their new house. I understood that he'd been in a new relationship, but at eight, it was just weird.

Sure, I had friends back then whose parents were divorced, but none had broken up because of an affair that turned into a marriage and kids.

I always carried a tinge of disrespect for my dad and how he treated my mom. Dumping her as he had. So when Deek insinuated I'd do the same with Melly, it cut deep.

But I was leaving today. It was still dark out, my bedside clock reading just before six.

Melly was in my arms, and she was using my chest for a pillow. Her hair was everywhere, like a silky curtain over my skin. She was warm and soft

and it felt fucking amazing to hold her.

There were only hours to go. And I didn't want to leave her.

I sighed, but tried to hold still so I didn't wake her. I had shit to sort out in my head and I kept her awake—and screaming my name—until after one.

I wanted to go. Fuck, did I want to get on that plane and get the hell out of Hunter Valley. I could practically taste the freedom. The ability to do whatever the fuck I wanted. Wherever, whenever. No school lunches. No payroll. No PeeWee football practice or pizza and beer with my brothers.

It also meant no more Melly. No more of her curiosity when it came to my dick and what could be done with it. No more side-of-the-road BJs. No more tiny Fred. No more... this.

I squeezed her because I had her now. In my arms. Naked. Sated.

Three days wasn't enough. I didn't know enough about her. How could I in such a short time? But I knew there was chemistry here. Need. Desire. Possessiveness, too. She flared protective instincts that were off the charts. I stormed into Kincaids to get to her when she drunk dialed me. I pretty much broke into her house the night before when I found out her mom was there, ditching the guys and my going away beers at Kincaids.

Her pussy was mine. Her orgasms. Her cries of pleasure. Her sly smiles that were just for me. Her curious nature. Her... She was mine.

But she wasn't.

I was leaving and she was going to find some other guy who would see the real woman she tried so fucking hard to protect.

I growled.

She stirred. Sniffed. Lifted her head to look at me. It was dark, but I hadn't closed the blinds when I carried her to bed and the moon was bright. She was cast in a white glow, but I could see her clearly.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Come with me."

Shit. I hadn't meant to say that. No, I had.

"What?"

"Come with me. To Scotland."

She pushed up to sitting and now her bare body glowed.

Fuck, she was so pretty. Those full tits were heavy and just begging to be cupped and sucked. I hadn't put my dick between those lush globes yet and fucked them.

Now I was hard. Shit.

“You want me to go to Scotland with you?”

I nodded against the pillow. “Yeah. Why not?”

Her eyes widened. “My life is here. I have a job. Fred’s having puppies next week.”

Fred was asleep, making whiffling sounds from her dog bed Melly had placed by the window.

“Danny can raise the puppies.” Now I was asking her to be Haven, abandoning puppies to go live her life elsewhere. Ditching them with the dad. “Look, all I know is this isn’t done. Us. I want more.”

“You’re leaving the country. There can’t be more.”

“Come with me,” I repeated. “It’ll be fun.”

She shook her head. “No. I want more, too, but this is it. The contract’s almost over. I can’t just leave.”

“Why not?”

“The puppies—”

“Won’t be puppies for long. We can change the contract if you want. My house. Your house. The world.”

Leaning down, she kissed me, her tits pressing into my chest. “I can’t.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” I said, stroking her silky hair back as it fell around us in a curtain.

“Both.” She kissed me again with much more enthusiasm, then rose so she straddled my waist. “One last time.”

When she sank down onto me, one last time sounded fucking awful.



DANIEL

“STILL NOTHING?” Saint asked, pulling into the drop-off lane at the Billings airport. Deek and Sea Bass were already on the driveway job at Melly’s place and Seth was manning the mechanic shop. I wasn’t sure if Saint volunteered for the airport run or if he got the short straw in taking me.

Staring at my phone screen, I shook my head. Danny hadn’t responded to my phone calls or texts.

“I hate leaving like this,” I said.

“He’ll come around,” he offered, putting his truck into park.

“I fucked his ex,” I said, using the words he said the other night when he caught me and Melly together.

He shook his head. “Nah. She was never his.”

The recorded message about leaving a car unattended came through hidden speakers reminding me what I was doing.

Leaving.

Twenty-one years after returning home because I’d knocked up Haven and made my own little family of me and Danny, I was moving away from home.

I’d been excited for months since I bought the one-way ticket. Eager.

Now? Did I feel like shit about leaving because of Danny or because of

Melly? The time was up on the contract but why did it feel like things weren't done? I didn't expect her to drive me to the airport, wave to me as I got into the security line, wishing me a great trip and then heading back to Hunter Valley and the library. Returning to her quiet routine and remembering me as a fun few days of dick riding.

I climbed out, frowning.

We met at the back of his truck where he pulled down the tailgate so I could grab my bag. "Deek warned me off Melly because of Danny."

He shrugged. "He did, but I saw the way you look at her. Danny never even mentioned Melly when they met for coffee. Not to any of us."

That said a lot. He was close with all his uncles, especially Saint and Seth who were only eight years older.

"If he was into her," he continued, "he'd have locked her down back in January. He would have acted like you have the past few days. Fucking crazy."

I frowned at his accusation, but I had stormed into a vet's exam room, stormed into a bar, stormed into Melly's house, stormed... pretty much barreled my way into Melly's life and her bed.

Danny would have been giddy and had little hearts for eyeballs if he'd seriously been into her. Hell, he'd have taken her out to dinner. A movie. Had sex. I knew for absolute fact he hadn't done the last.

"He's surprised, that's all. Not often a girl you took for coffee ends up with your dad."

"You're surprised, too."

He huffed and grinned. "Hell, yes. Not because of the age thing, or that you're so different. It's the way you look at her, dude. Who would have thought you and Melly would be so good together?"

Oh, we'd been amazing together. Insane chemistry. Off the charts sex. I'd never felt so connected to a woman. Hell, she'd gone from shy and prim as that nun Deek was obsessed with to uninhibited and wild. With me.

Only me.

I looked around the airport. The people waiting to be picked up standing at the curb, others hugging by cars before they caught their flight.

"It was only a few days and it's over. This morning, I took her back to her house to get her car to go to work." I tipped my head toward the airport. "We had a contract. Ends when I get on the plane."

"A contract?" he asked, bug eyed.

“If you met her mother, you’d understand,” I said grimly. Melly had promised she wouldn’t stay at her house until her mom left. I offered my house since it would be vacant, but she declined. Said she’d stay with Mallory but didn’t think her mom would linger in Hunter Valley without any chance of the money she wanted.

“Then don’t get on the plane.”

I shook my head. “Deek’s right. She’s picket fences and babies. Her dreams are in Hunter Valley.” I hitched my thumb. “My dreams are out there.”

He pulled me in for a man hug, then let me go. “Have fun. Go... do shit. Send pics and keep us updated.”

“Will do. If you hear of anyone fucking with Melly—” I began, wanting to make sure she was taken care of. Protected.

He held up a hand. “On it. But don’t worry, all of Hunter Valley watches out for little Melly Harwood.”

As I made my way into the terminal, I had to wonder. Did they? How could they watch out for her if they didn’t really know her?



MELLY

LINDY'S BABY shower had been amazing. Bridget and Mallory put it on together, decorating Lindy's house—the one she'd grown up in with Bridget—in green and yellow since Lindy and Dex decided to be surprised about the sex.

I heard the men were taking bets and since the James brothers were billionaires, new Baby James would probably have college paid for from the winnings alone.

There had been close to twenty women celebrating and showering Lindy with gifts, playing games like guessing Lindy's baby belly girth and speed diapering. For gift opening, everyone wedged into the living room and wrapping paper was strewn everywhere like Christmas morning.

I knew most of the ladies, although a few were wives of Silvermines hockey players that had come to Hunter Valley for the party. The last had just said their goodbyes and the house was finally quiet.

I was helping Eve and Mallory collect trash and pick up while Bridget was in the kitchen washing cake plates and glasses from the offered appetizers, cake, and non-alcoholic champagne.

"I'm so glad you and Fred came!" Lindy said, waddling up to me and offering me a hug as best she could with her huge belly. Her blonde hair was

beautifully styled long. Her makeup was perfect, and she had on an adorable maternity dress in a soft blue.

I hugged her back.

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” I replied. While I’d offered her a quick hello when I arrived, she’d been so busy with all the other women that we hadn’t had a chance to talk until now. I knew I’d been an add-on to the guest list because of the dinner at Daniel’s the other night so I wanted to ensure she had time to spend with her closest friends at this special event.

I’d brought Fred, not wanting to leave her alone with her being pregnant with Earl’s big-ass babies. She’d happily settled on her little dog bed in the kitchen, content to sleep even with laughing and shouting women filling the house.

Bridget and Lindy’s parents died when Bridget was young. I was a year older than Bridget and I remembered being in middle school and hearing about their accident. I was sure Lindy wished her mom could be here for this occasion.

I cringed at the thought of my mom being at mine. Then I shut that thought down because I wasn’t going to have a baby. No man, no baby. I wasn’t sure if I really wanted one anyway. A baby. Hmm. Yeah, probably not.

A man, though? I thought the answer was no, but a few days with Daniel and I started thinking dangerous thoughts. Something permanent, like what Lindy had with Dex, was something I would never know.

People left me. Those who loved me didn’t stick. All I knew was that relationships were fleeting. Or casual. Or had unhealthy requirements. Or expectations. Love was conditional.

I’ll love you if you do what I think is best.

I love you but my life doesn’t include you.

I’ll love you while I’m in town, but once I go...

“Thank you for the books,” she said, breaking me from my depressing thoughts. “You’re the only one to think of them. A perfect gift.”

Instead of onesies or a tiered cake made of cloth diapers, I gave the new baby some board books. Little ones made of thick cardboard pages with animals and shapes and places to touch that felt soft or rough.

“You’re welcome.”

Based on the stack of new baby things in the other room, it was a good thing the James brothers had a private jet. I couldn’t imagine getting all these

presents back to Denver on a commercial flight.

She cocked her head and studied me. “You okay?”

I had a smile on my face. Makeup on. Clothes pressed and presentable. I was... the same. But Lindy was shrewd and observant.

Good thing only I could feel how my pussy was still a little sore from all the sex with Daniel. Or see the little hickey on the inside of my thigh he’d left right before he growled *mine*.

“Yes. Or I will be.”

She gave me a sad look. “He left?”

She didn’t have to say his name. After the caber tossing dinner we had the other night, she knew all about my interest in Daniel. And his dick. And the fact that being with him and his talented dick was short lived. He was casual. He wasn’t permanent. Our three-day relationship was conditional. That was what a contract did. Made it conditional based on agreed upon bullet points, one of which was an end date.

I nodded, swallowing hard. I’d felt empty knowing his plane had left, like a *Star Wars* movie where the Force went missing. It was the first time I really wasn’t okay with someone leaving me. That I cared more than I should for someone who walked out of my life.

She eyed me closely. Bridget and Mallory had given me hugs and not said a word. But Lindy? She might be pregnant with her first child, but she’d raised Bridget. And pretty much Mallory, too. Since I was their age, she lumped me in with her big-kid crew. She was a pseudo-mom for all of us.

“Yes,” I added. “He’s probably driven on the wrong side of the road and eaten a filled sheep’s stomach by now.”

“It’s okay to have a fling,” she said after she was done grimacing.

“So says my mother,” I replied.

Lindy pulled me into the kitchen and practically pushed me into a chair. Bridget turned at the sink to see what was up, pushing her glasses up with a soapy finger.

“I heard she’s in town,” she said. My mom was fifteen years older than Lindy, but I was sure they knew each other, at least in passing. Everyone over the age of thirty had to know about the mayor fiasco.

“News travels,” I said, then panicked. “Wait, she didn’t sleep with someone this trip she wasn’t supposed to and have them fired, did she?”

Lindy grinned, then bit her lip to stifle it. “Not that I heard. I’m guessing your mom has *very* different relationship views than you do.”

I laughed dryly. "I think this is the perfect time to say *duh*."

"You like Daniel," she said, taking my hand.

"Again, *duh*. I wouldn't have... you know, if I didn't." I blushed and couldn't say *sex* even after everything Daniel and I did together.

"That's the difference between you and your mother," she said. "You need to care for someone for there to be any kind of relationship. She doesn't."

"Yes, that's true, but with Daniel, it wasn't a relationship."

"A relationship can be short," she clarified. "You connected and you grew to like him."

I sighed, feeling ashamed that I couldn't even do a short relationship right. I was supposed to have sex and just... let him go. "I did. He's ridiculously bossy and he doesn't enter a room, he invades. I didn't know it was possible for a man to growl as much as he does."

A smile spread across her face, seemingly pleased to hear about how unique Daniel was. "Yet he's sweet to you."

Bridget turned off the faucet and wiped her hands on a dish towel. "Not that sweet based on that blush."

"When he comes back, you can pick up where you left off," Lindy said.

I shook my head. "He's not coming back."

"He can't move away forever. His life's here," Lindy countered.

"Maybe he'll come back to visit, but he made it very, *very* clear his life here is done," I said to Lindy, but also as a verbal reminder to myself that it was over.

Lindy waved her hand. "He has a son and brothers here. A business."

"He sold it," Bridget added, coming over and dropping into a chair. I'd never seen her in a dress before, but she was wearing one now. It was green to match her eyes.

"The last thing a man wants is a clinging woman," I reminded. "Me pining after him and then showing up on his doorstep when he comes back to town is the epitome of clingy."

They looked at each other, then me.

I leaned forward, set my forearms on their kitchen table. It was very eighties and I imagined it had been the same one from when their parents were alive.

"Look, we made a deal," I told them, laying out what he and I had agreed on. "An arrangement. He did everything I wanted to feel safe with him. Fine,

it was a fling, if that's the definition you want to give it, but remember, a fling is temporary. If it was anything else, it wouldn't be called a fling."

I had them there and they knew it. It didn't matter. A relationship was impossible with an ocean between us. It wasn't like we got to know each other much. I barely knew anything about him other than how he liked to dirty talk and what his cum tasted like. Sure, there was something between us. An amazing connection. A foundation, perhaps, but all we had right now was the same thing my mom had with her flings.

Sex. Not much conversation. A goodbye.

What I had on my own was sadness and a little heartache that he was gone.

I *liked* Daniel Pearson and I wanted to like him even more.

I stood to leave because we could analyze my thing with Daniel for hours and nothing would change. I turned to the corner of the kitchen where I put Fred's dog bed and where I left her at the beginning of the shower. "Where's Fred?"

Eve and Mallory joined us in searching the lower floor, even searching in the bushes out front in case she slipped out at the end of the party. It was Bridget who found her in the pantry where she had pulled an apron off a hook and was using her paws to make a bed. "Nesting. I think she might be having babies at a baby shower," Bridget said.



DANIEL

I WAS in my rental car in the parking lot—or car park as it was called in the UK—staring at the sign through the heavy Scottish rain: MCGAVERNAL WHISKEY.

I'd been in the country for three days.

I walked the Royal Mile in Edinburgh.

I looked for Nessie at Loch Ness.

Now I was ready to sample some good whisky. But all I could think of was Melly. How she'd tell me some piece of trivia about Scottish history or the origins of the Nessie legend. She'd ensure I drove on the right side—or wrong side for me—of the road so I didn't kill myself, which had been a close possibility a few times.

But it was the sign on the distillery that said WHISKY with no "E" that made me frown.

That made me want her.

I wanted Melly to be here, to see this with me. To try the "e"-less whisky with me. What was the point of doing it alone?

My dick would agree with that question. Not drinking whisky, but my dick had gotten used to Melly's incredible pussy. Now all he was getting was my hand.

I was cranky.

I was alone.

For years, I wanted some alone time. Every parent equally craved and missed carpool and football practice and science fair projects and catching kids sneaking out. I was no exception. With family, they always seemed to butt in, to annoy the shit out of me. I had four brothers who—fuck, I thought of their faces as they stared in my front window at me and Melly.

They meddled.

Showed up unannounced at the house. Ate my food.

We even worked together.

I dealt with employees, a kid, family.

There was no alone.

I thought of Melly.

She was alone. Her dad, well, he wasn't in the picture. Her grandmother was teaching in Europe and was rarely in Hunter Valley. Melly had said she'd moved in with her when she was eighteen, but I had to wonder if she was more of a permanent house sitter than anything else.

Then there was her mom.

What a piece of work!

And that douchebag who was with her.

She flitted into town, this time for money, and then left.

Melly had friends. Mallory. Bridget. Everyone in Hunter Valley knew her and cared about her. Ang had warned me. So had Deek. Even Arlo at the bar when I went in to pay the drinks tab. But I had friends, too. Acquaintances.

Everyone important, everyone close and crucial to Melly, left her.

Her dad. Her grandmother. Her mom.

Me.

She'd been so intent on setting boundaries with me. Rules for sex. It was no wonder.

As I sat in Scotland and watched a tour bus pull into the lot I realized something important about her.

They weren't parameters she put in place so I didn't overstep sexually.

No, that woman didn't seem to have any sexual boundaries other than being shared. Or have it with anyone her mother suggested.

Those boundaries were to protect her fucking heart when she knew a person wasn't sticking.

I wasn't going to stick. I told her upfront I was leaving. She knew. She

was fine with it. Why wouldn't she be? It was what she expected.

Everyone left her.

So she put the rules in place to guard her feelings especially since our fling was all sex.

She was attracted to me and finally wanted to have it. To have it like we had, she had to drop every fucking wall she put up to protect herself, otherwise she would have laid there like that nun Deek talked about.

She wanted me. ME. Even with her issues, she'd let me in knowing she was going to feel. To get hurt. And to let me go.

"I asked her to come with me!" I said to the car.

Why would she? We didn't spend too much time talking and getting to know each other. I knew exactly how much to tug on her nipples to get her to squirm and get her pussy to drip.

I didn't know if she was allergic to peanuts or what kind of music she liked. I only knew... the important things. She felt safe with me. Trusted me. Clung to me for protection.

Me, the asshole who growled and shoved myself into her life.

I had no idea if Melly and I would be good together for the long haul. What the hell did I know about relationships? I wasn't going to find out being here and she wasn't going to trust that I'd stick if I didn't do just that.

Stick. Stay. Be there for her. Be *with* her.

Share this whisky tour *with* her.

The car windows were starting to fog up, but I still didn't go inside.

She'd said to me *I hope you find the life you want.*

As I watched the group of tourists enter the distillery, I wondered... was this the life I wanted? Alone in a strange place? Having no one to share it with? Me, my dick, and my hand?

Had I been so eager to leave Hunter Valley because I hated the life I had or because it was missing something?

Did I have what I'd been missing in my arms for three days, beneath me in my bed, and I didn't even realize?

Why was I here? Was I searching for the life I wanted or was I running away from the amazing one I already had?



MELLY

FRED HAD THREE PUPPIES. Two girls and a boy. All three were tiny and orange, just like Fred. After the vet said the best thing was a c-section, I took her—and Lindy’s apron she nested with—to the vet’s office for the surgery.

The last person I wanted to connect with was Danny, but he had a right to know about the puppies, especially since the vet told me there was no way Earl could be the dad because of the size difference. When he said that, I’d been stunned. This whole thing with Daniel had been because I was sure Earl was the father.

Turned out, Daniel had been right to question and Danny needed to know he was off the hook.

So I swallowed my mortification and let him know the puppies were born. The puppies that weren’t his.

Now, two days later, Fred was home. I was home.

Mallory was visiting.

We were sitting on the kitchen floor beside Fred’s bed. She was snuggled on top of an old towel, the puppies little lumps beside her. The vet had given important tips to watch for, like post-surgery complications, puppy rejection, or nursing problems, so I was watching all four of them closely.

I leaned against the kitchen cabinets and Mal was across from me

propped against the wall.

“I can’t believe your mom and Roger left without saying goodbye.”

I shrugged because I wasn’t surprised or disappointed. “They left a messy guest bedroom and an empty fridge. They ate all my prepped meals.”

“What’s the deal with the blank spot on the wall?”

I turned my head toward the hallway where she pointed.

“Mom took two framed decorative fans Nana got somewhere in Europe. I’m not sure if she snagged them for sentimental purposes or to sell, but that’s for Nana to hash out with her.”

There was a knock on the backdoor and Danny stuck his head in.

“Hey,” I said, pushing to my feet. “Come on in.”

He spent the day working on the driveway with the rest of the Pearson team. Snow was coming again so they hustled to get the last of it done. Earl was with him and for a big bumbling oaf of a dog, he seemed to sense he needed to be gentle and settled near Fred, but not too close to jostle her or their new babies. Mallory reached out and pet him.

Danny stepped inside. He wore jeans, a lined canvas coat with a sweatshirt hood over the collar. He tugged a beanie from his head and stuffed it in the jacket pocket. His eyes were the same brown as his father’s and his cheeks were ruddy from the cold.

There were five dogs and one huge elephant in the room: the fact that he found me wrapped around his father in only a flannel. I was the recent virgin and even I would have known what that sight meant.

This was *awkward*.

I gave Mallory a look. She gave me one right back. One that said I had to talk with Danny about having sex with his father and she wasn’t missing it.

He ran a hand through his hair and looked down at the brown balls of fur. “So this is what happens when dogs don’t use birth control.”

I bit my lip and tried not to smile. “I’m really sorry I accused Earl of being the father.”

He squatted down to get a closer look but didn’t touch. Shrugged. “The way Earl has been behaving, humping everything in sight, it made sense.”

“I should have considered the neighbor’s little Shih Tzu, which the vet thinks is an actual possibility, especially since he got into our yard that one time. Although, unless I do a dog paternity test” —like Daniel had wanted— “we’ll never know who the dad really is.”

“I know, right? It’s like a doggie soap opera,” Mallory said. “How’s it

going, Danny?”

He flicked his gaze her way. “Hey, Mal.”

Obviously, they knew each other.

“Look, Danny. I’m sorry,” I blurted.

He stood, set his hands on his hips. “You? For what? The dog thing? No big deal.”

I pushed my glasses up. “Not that. No one wants to see what you did with me and your dad.”

He gave a small smile. “Yeah, well, I’ve wanted my dad to find a woman for a long time.”

“But...” I prodded.

“But I didn’t expect it to be you.”

My cheeks flared with heat, and I spun on my heel and headed for the fridge. I got that a lot. From more than just him because... me? I was just *little* Melly Harwood. No one expected anything from me except, well, nothing. “I’m getting a drink. Want one?”

“Sure.”

He followed and I pulled open the door. “Root beer, apple juice, iced tea, and um... water. Or milk, sorry. I never remember to offer it because I don’t drink it, only put it in my cereal.”

“Root beer’s good,” he replied.

I pulled a bottle from the shelf and passed it to him.

“Mal?” I called.

“No thanks,” she said. She hadn’t moved from her spot on the floor.

“Did you talk with him before he left?” I asked. The idea of them fighting and being mad at each other made me sad. I’d gotten between them. “Your dad?”

He took a pull of the root beer. “Nah. Aren’t you mad at him, too?”

I frowned. “For what?”

“For leaving.”

I shook my head. “I knew he was leaving, that it was short lived, so it’s not like he surprised me with it.”

“You wanted a fling?” he asked, as if the idea was too crazy to comprehend.

Grabbing a root beer of my own, I shut the fridge.

“Despite what you might think, little Melly Harwood’s not that much of a good girl,” Mallory told Danny.

He grimaced. “You just seemed—”

I nodded. “I know. I know what I seem to be.”

“She fools everyone.”

I looked down at Mallory and glared.

“Then why didn’t you want a fling with me?” Danny asked. “I mean, my *dad*?”

I gave him a small smile. “You know for a fact that there is nothing here.” I wagged my finger back and forth between us, ignoring the part about Daniel.

“I thought you were a—” He cleared his throat because he thought I had been a virgin and clearly hadn’t wanted to be with one.

“And you wanted someone who wasn’t?”

It was his turn to blush. His gaze shifted to Mallory for a second, then glanced away. Looking at him, I could see the similarities between him and his father. Not in size, but in looks and mannerisms.

But Danny didn’t growl. Or storm into my house. He had a soft voice and knocked.

It seemed I wanted a guy who did neither.

“If you were really interested in me, it wouldn’t have mattered,” I told him gently. “And if I was really interested in you, I’d have let you change that status.”

A slow smile crept over his face and looked me in the eye and probably, for the first time, actually saw me. “I think you’re right.”

“But your dad,” I said. I couldn’t ignore it any longer. We had to talk it out and get past it because we now shared puppies together. For the next few weeks, we were stuck with each other until they were ready to go to homes of their own.

“Yeah, my dad.”

“I like him, Danny.”

Mallory piped up. “She *really* likes him.”

“Mal!”

He scratched the side of his head, uncomfortable.

“Before anything happened, I told him I wasn’t interested in you, and he told me that you two talked and you said you weren’t into me. Did he?” God, did Daniel lie?

Fred shifted in her sleep and Danny glanced down. “Yeah, while I was still away. He asked what was up with us and I told him the truth.”

“That there was nothing between us,” I clarified.

He nodded. “So it’s over then? You and my dad?”

I shrugged.

“You like him though.”

“She really does,” Mallory offered.

I glared at her again. She grinned back, so I turned to Danny and ignored her. Or tried. “Yeah. I really do.”

“Why him, if you don’t mind my asking.”

I shrugged. Daniel had stormed into the vet’s office, accusing me of trapping him with a baby. I should hate his guts. But there was something about him in that moment, right from the very start, that drew me to him.

He wasn’t gentle. He was gruff. Bossy. Dominant. Cranky. He snarled first, asked questions later.

He was also sweet and filthy and safe. And for a few days... mine.

“It was never meant to be permanent,” I said, sadly. I’d been kidding myself that I wouldn’t get attached. That it wouldn’t be hard when he left.

“You’re okay with that? I mean, you seem like a permanent relationship kind of person, although I might have gotten that wrong, too.”

“I don’t want permanent,” I said at the same time Mallory said, “She wants permanent.”

I set my hands on my hips. “I do not!”

“You do, too. Your mom stole more than those fans off the wall.” She pointed again to where the bare spot was. “She stole your chance at finding real happiness with a guy. Not all men are like the creeps she brings around.”

Danny frowned. “Creeps?” Now the look he had on his face matched his father’s. Angry. Glaring. “What creeps?”

“Don’t fire up the woodchipper just yet,” I said, holding my hand out to slow his roll. “They’re gone.”

“For now,” Mallory clarified. “Until the next time she rolls into town wanting something and trying to get you to fuck her man.”

“WHAT?” Danny shouted. Yup, just like his dad.

“You are not helping,” I said, pointing at Mallory.

She pushed off the floor, wiped her hands on the front of her pants.

“I’ve never seen you the way you were with Daniel.” Mallory looked at Danny. “Sorry, but you’re going to either have to cover your ears or deal.” Then she came over and set her hand on my shoulder. “You let Daniel leave as a reason to bail on him before your relationship got a chance to succeed.

You slept with him because he's hot as hell—”

“GAH!” Danny shouted, then covered his ears as if a fire truck with a siren blaring cut through the kitchen.

Mallory rolled her eyes at him but pushed on.

“—but is it also because you knew he wasn't going to stick? You said yes to a guy who wouldn't stay, which is totally ironic because that's all you want.”

I glared, then, realizing she was absolutely right, crumbled. Mallory pulled me into a hug as I cried.

“No crying!” Danny said. “Shit. Don't cry. My dad's a catch, I guess.”

I laughed into Mallory's shoulder. When I lifted my head, I asked, “Did you say that to get me to stop crying or because it's true.”

“Both,” he admitted grudgingly.

“He's gone and I made it clear I don't want a relationship. I think he wants more because he asked me to go with him and—”

Mallory pushed me away so fast I got whiplash. “HE ASKED YOU TO GO?”

It was my turn to cover my ears. “God, Mal, not so loud!”

Danny moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with Mallory and the two of them stared at me.

“He asked you to go,” Mallory repeated, quieter. “Why are you standing here?”

“Yeah, my dad wouldn't have asked if he didn't mean it,” Danny added.

“I have puppies now and it was temporary and he said we'd have fun.”

“Of course you'll have fun, it's Scotland with a man who tosses cabers in a kilt. How much sexier can that be?”

Danny gave Mallory a look like he might want to hurl. “Can you stop calling my dad sexy?”

“My mom's boyfriend asked me to go off with him,” I said. “Told me it'd be fun.”

Mallory's nose scrunched up in disgust. “This week?”

I shook my head. “When I was eighteen. That's why I came home.”

“That's why you came home to live with your grandma? Because your mom was okay with her boyfriend fucking her daughter?”

“Wouldn't you catch a bus out of state, too?” I countered.

“This guy from when you were eighteen. What's his name?” Danny asked. “I've got four uncles to help hunt him down and a woodchipper.”

I burst out laughing. “Your dad said the same thing. I have to wonder who might be missing in town because of the Pearson personal justice woodchipper.”

Mallory pouted and took my hand. “That guy was a predator. And a creep.”

“Yeah, I called him Creepy Carl.”

“Creepy Carl is not my dad,” Danny said. “If he invited you to go to Scotland, it’s not because he—okay, maybe he does want to do that with you, but God, I can’t believe I’m saying any of this, but he’s respectful.”

When I wanted him to be. I liked him when he wasn’t. The way Danny was grossed out by talking about me having sex with his father, I wasn’t going to tell him I’d been on the phone with him while his father fucked me from behind.

Not a smart move.

“We had three days. Three days!” I said, tossing up my hands. “That’s not long enough for anyone to say the “L” word and besides, we barely talked.”

Danny grimaced.

“Sorry. My point is that I don’t really know him. I can’t go off to Scotland for a guy I’ve known for three days! Say I get there and he doesn’t want me.”

“He *asked* you to go with him. You’re not stalking him to another country,” Mallory reminded.

“I have a job. A life.”

“Sweetie, a life made up of planned meals, volunteering, and living in your grandmother’s house.”

“Hey!” I said, not liking Mallory’s words. All of it was true, but she made it out to sound like my life was miserable.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad life, but GO TO SCOTLAND WITH A HOT MAN. Have some fun. Not creepy fun, but actual fun.”

“I have newborn puppies to take care of.”

“I’ll take care of them. And Fred,” Danny offered, even though he had no responsibility with them.

I looked to Danny, confused as to why he was going to help me go off to be with this dad.

“He’s not coming back,” I reminded.

Mallory was slowly making me reconsider and the two of them were

chiseling away at every excuse I threw their way. I had tons of vacation time available and if Fred was taken care of, then I *could* go. But—

“I’m not saying move to Scotland or get married, I’m saying take a vacation. Make the fling longer and in another country. See what can happen between you two.”

I looked to Danny. I knew how upset he was with his dad being with me. I wouldn’t get between them, no matter how I felt for Daniel.

“Yeah. I agree,” Danny said. “See what can happen.” Then he tipped his chin down and gave me a serious look. “But if it works out, I am definitely not calling you Mom.”



DANIEL

IN THE MIDDLE of the night, I got a text. Like a loser, I thought it might be Melly, so I snagged it off the bedside table faster than a teenager waiting for his crush to call.

In the dark room, the bright screen blinded me.

I blinked, then saw who it was from.

Danny.

I shouldn't be disappointed to get a text from my son, but it only showed how far I sunk. I wanted to hear from Melly. Maybe have her send me a sexy photo, like the shot I took of her on my floor, pussy and tits out and covered in my cum I had pulled up and jerked off to earlier.

So no, not Melly and her upturned ass either.

Danny sent a photo of him sitting on the floor beside Earl, with Fred and three furry little lumps on a very familiar dog bed.

The puppies were born. I couldn't help but smile. Those puppies were what started the whole thing with Melly. If Earl hadn't been a literal horndog, I may have never met her.

And I'd be right here in this bed, just as alone as I was now. Except I would have been content in being solo. Excited about this new life I was living.

Another text from Danny came through.

We're cool.

We're cool. *We're cool?* What did that mean? I sat up in bed and stared at my cell. Did it mean he and Earl were cool because they were dog dads? Did it mean he and Melly were cool being dog parents together? Did it mean he was cool with me about having been with Melly?

I had no idea.

The dog parent thing lasted what? Eight weeks or so? After they could leave Fred, the puppies would go to new homes and that would be it. I had to wonder if the vet had spayed Fred as part of the c-section surgery. If Earl planned to keep humping Fred, no one wanted a puppy repeat.

Sooooo...

So what the hell was I doing in Scotland?

The photo was an image of my life. Puppies. My kid—even though he was grown and on another continent, he was still a huge part of it. I didn't need to drive him to the dentist or control his screen time any longer, but I was his dad, and I would *always* be there for him.

I also had meddling siblings. For a short time, I even had a woman, too. I didn't have to take my business back, but why did I have to leave Hunter Valley? I longed for the life I'd had to abandon when I had Danny. I'd wanted to go to college, play football. Backpack across Europe. Drive a semi-truck across the desert in Australia. Ski in Chile. Play in the Highland Games. Besides having some fun tossing a few cabers in a kilt, did I really want those other dreams anymore? And I could toss cabers at home, just like I did with my brothers and even the Jameses.

I definitely didn't want to drive a semi-truck. I was too old to be happy sleeping in a hostel bunk bed and living out of a backpack. I could ski in Montana. I didn't have to go to South America to do it.

My dreams had changed. How had I not noticed it until now?

I was alone in this bed. Alone in the country.

Melly was in Hunter Valley. I could have her. I could be with her and that bottle of lube that had probably been delivered. I could get to know her and make her mine. Extend our sex contract to forever if we wanted.

But nothing... *nothing* was going to happen with me here.



MELLY

I COULD READ A BOOK ANYWHERE. Maybe it was because of my job or because I just loved to read. I didn't get carsick, and I could read through any kind of noise.

But I couldn't get through the chapter during my layover. I was too nervous. My anxiety kept me from sitting still and so I paced the gate area. My continuing flight to Glasgow was on time, but I was debating if I should get on it.

Danny had said he'd text his dad and find out where he was. What if he got the wrong information or if Daniel had moved on? Would I end up spending the week wandering Scotland alone searching for a traveling lumberjack? And worse, what if I did find him and he wondered why I showed up? Or if he was with a woman.

I dropped into an empty boarding area seat.

Oh God. I hadn't thought of that until right now. He hadn't wanted a relationship with me, which was fine because that was our arrangement. But that meant he was open to being with someone else. We may not have shared for those few days we were together, but we weren't exclusive now.

I had no doubt Scottish women were lovely and couldn't resist Daniel's brawniness and charms.

I was just the nerdy librarian he slept with for a few days.

No. He invited me! He wanted me to go with him!

I turned him down, so now he could be with anyone!

“Daniel Pearson, please return to gate twelve for a left item.”

My head whipped up at hearing Daniel’s name on an airport announcement. What?

My heart thumped hard.

“Did you hear that?” I asked the businessman beside me who was working on his laptop, some complicated spreadsheet on the small screen.

He blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Did you hear that? For Daniel Pearson?”

“That’s not my name,” he replied, then turned his attention back to his work.

“Daniel Pearson, please return to gate twelve for a left item.”

I popped to my feet as if I got bingo and wanted to snag the cash prize.

They had said his name. I wasn’t hearing things. I wasn’t going insane. I was at gate thirty-two.

Tugging my wheeled carry-on, I hurried toward the moving walkway to get to gate twelve.

“There can’t be more than one Daniel Pearson,” I muttered to myself, weaving around a family with a double-wide stroller and two screaming kids.

Then I thought about it, how I first actually met Daniel. There *were* two Daniel Pearsons. Could this be Danny? Why would Danny be at the Chicago airport?

I hopped off at the end of the moving walkway and onto the next one, making my way down the longest concourse that had to be in existence and made it to gate twelve.

I went up to the gate agent, a pretty Black woman with a dazzling smile. “Can I help you?”

“Daniel Pearson,” I said, trying to catch my breath. “You called for him. I need Daniel Pearson.”

“Melly?”

“Daniel!”



DANIEL

“MELLY?” I asked again, completely stunned. I’d been thinking about her non-stop, ever since that text from Danny. Once I decided to go back to Hunter Valley, she was all I could see.

The red hair. The fucking glasses. Her pert ass bent over my bed. Those rosy nipples. Her pussy-clenching screams. Her moans. Her—

Every fucking thing about her and she was right here. At the gate in Chicago. WHAT THE HELL?

She was casually and comfortably dressed in black leggings, a white t-shirt, and a long green cardigan with a striped scarf loose around her neck. Her hair was down and her lips were glossy and stained pink.

A young man in a military uniform stood behind us. He was trained to be courteous and patient and we blocked his way to get assistance. I took Melly’s suitcase with one hand and her elbow with the other and pulled her to the side. I didn’t let go. I couldn’t.

I just got off a seven-hour flight from London and a commuter hop from Edinburgh before that. Somehow, my boarding pass to Missoula had slipped from my belongings getting off the international flight and they’d called me back to the gate. I’d already made it all the way to gate four when I heard my name and had to return. I cursed the whole way back, but now? Fucking

thrilled. And tired because I was questioning whether she was real.

“I heard your name and oh my God, Daniel. *What are you doing here?*” she asked, clearly stunned. Her eyes were wide behind her black rimmed glasses.

“Me? What are you doing here?” I looked around. “Why are you in Chicago?”

A gate agent’s voice announced the final boarding call for a plane to Milwaukee at gate fourteen and passengers flooded past us.

“You’re supposed to be in Scotland.”

“You’re supposed to be in Hunter Valley.”

“I was coming to see you,” we said at the same time.

Bomb. Dropped.

WHAT?

I let go of her elbow and stepped close, cupped her face in my hands. “You were coming to see me? In Scotland?”

She nodded. “But I didn’t know where you were and then there was probably a pretty Scottish woman with you and I—”

“Who?” She wasn’t making any sense.

“You were returning to Hunter Valley?” she asked instead of explaining.

“To see you.”

“To see me?” She frowned. “Why? I... I let you leave, and the contract was over and well, I—”

There was only one thing to say to shut her up. To stop talking nonsense. For her to understand.

“I want to amend the contract.”



MELLY

HE WAS HERE! His beard and hair were unruly, and his jeans and plaid shirt were wrinkled. But to me, he never looked better. Felt better. Those calluses on his palms were rough against my cheeks, but it was another sign that it really was him. Gruff. Hardworking. Now travel worn.

“Change the contract?” I wondered.

He nodded.

“No end date.” *No end date.* “Not just your house or my house or my truck.” He looked up and glanced around. “For starters, I want to add the Chicago airport.”

I frowned. “You want us to be able to... to *have sex* in the Chicago airport?” I whispered part of that because we couldn’t be in any more of a public place.

His eyes narrowed, heated and that dark intensity was back.

“I want you, Melly Harwood, any way I can have you,” he admitted.

I glanced around, suddenly very, *very* eager for him to have me.

“Okay.”

His eyebrows went up. “Okay?” he said back.

I nodded.

Determination lit his features. He had my suitcase and my hand and was

leading me further from my gate to... to—

A family bathroom.

He pushed the door open, tugged me in, locked it behind us.

Then he kissed me.



DANIEL

IF MELLY WASN'T SO fucking, insanely hot, I might think I had premature ejaculation issues. One kiss, one feel of her soft body pressed into mine and I was ready to come.

She had her hands around the back of my head, pulling me down, holding me in place as she kissed the hell out of me. I scented that cherry lip gloss, felt her tits pressing against my stomach.

I let my hands roam to her ass, cupped it. Squeezed it.

Yeah, that was the perfect ass I remembered.

I pulled back. "I need inside you. Now."

My words weren't gentle. My tone was harsh. My breathing was ragged and if she didn't know me, she might be afraid.

But this was Melly. Three days together and she knew me as well as my brothers. She might not know I was allergic to blueberries, but she got me.

"Hurry," she breathed, her hands going to my belt buckle.

I parried her hands away so I could get my dick out faster.

"Turn around," I said.

While the space seemed fairly clean, this was an airport bathroom. I wasn't bending her over anything.

As soon as she took a good peek at my dick, how I gripped the base and

gave it one good pump, she spun within the limited confines I gave her.

Pushing her long sweater to the side, I tugged down her leggings and panties at one go to mid-thigh.

The sweater swung back in place, covering her. I grabbed it again and pressed it against her hand. "Here."

She took it, held the bottom up as she pressed her palms against the steel door. Just to the right of her face was the plastic holder with the initialed cleaning schedule.

"Shit. I don't have a condom," I said as I cupped her perfect ass, then pulled it back toward me.

"IUD." She wiggled and gave me a little glimpse of her pussy. "I'm clean. Hurry."

"Me, too. But the contract."

"Fuck the contract, Daniel. And me." She reached back, took hold of my dick and I hissed.

"Now."

I couldn't help but grin. I had at least a hundred pounds on her. More than a foot of height. But she was telling me and my dick what to do.

"Yes, ma'am."

I had to bend my knees and discovered it wasn't going to work. Wrapping an arm about her waist, I hoisted her up and positioned her just right. Then I lowered her down onto me.

"FUCK!" I growled, my head in the crook of her neck. This, right here, was what I'd been looking for. I had a huge house. A successful business. An independent grown son. A family. But I never felt like I had a home. A person that I could get lost in.

How the fuck was it little Melly Harwood? I had no idea. But she was it. She was home. Being with her, being *in* her, was where I belonged.

"Daniel!" she cried, squirming. Her feet were off the ground and she had no purchase. All she could do was put her hands on the door and be fucked.

"Take it, sweet girl. I told you it might be a little much, but you can do it."

I pulled back, thrust deep.

Fuck. FUCK! She felt so good. Bare, I could feel her heat. How wet she was. I could feel every little clench and squeeze.

"Harder," she begged. Or demanded.

I pulled back, slammed into her.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw motion. It was us in the mirror over the sink. I could see my dick pulling out of her, all shiny and wet from her.

“Reach down. Play with your clit. You’re going to milk the cum from my balls like a good girl.”

Her little fingers were frantic as she worked herself. I was sweating and breathing hard, trying not to come yet.

Her muscles gave little squeezes, her thighs clenched, and I knew she was about to come. I took her hard, slamming us against the door, my torso bumping into her hand.

“Daniel,” she whimpered, her head thrown back, glasses askew. Her inner walls clenched and milked me so damned good.

I came with a roar, a slap of my hand on the door and one last deep thrust into her.

I came and came and fuck me, came some more.

When I was no longer blind, I lowered Melly to her feet, then pulled out.

My cum slipped from her in a gush, sliding down her thighs and a few thick drops fell to the tile floor. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

I’d never once, not ever, taken a woman bare.

There was no going back. Not with condoms, not with Melly.

I marked her.

She was mine.



MELLY

WE CLEANED OURSELVES UP, and then the floor in the family bathroom. I would never look at public facilities the same way again. Daniel held my hand as he led me to an unused gate, weaving us around passengers eager to get home or to their flight. Instead of letting me sit beside him, he pulled me onto his lap. I glanced around to see who was looking. No one was nearby and everyone was focused on where they were going.

“I just fucked you bare,” he murmured. “You’re sitting here with my cum in your panties and you’re worried about people seeing you on my lap?” he asked, pushing my hair back.

When he put it that way...

“You were going to Scotland to be with me?” he asked, picking up the conversation we dropped to have sex.

I nodded, suddenly shy, even after how we defiled a public restroom.

“You changed your mind?” he asked.

“I did.” I bit my lip, then lifted my eyes to meet his. “Danny and Mallory helped.”

“Helped you change your mind?”

“Helped me see that I like you.”

A sly smile spread across his face. “You like me?”

I nodded. “Do you like me?”

“Sweet girl, I liked you the first second I saw you in the vet office.”

I couldn't help but stare at him wide eyed. “You hated me!”

“All I could think of was how nerdy and sexy you were. I—”

“That isn't helping,” I said with a frown.

He tipped my chin up.

“I thought you accused me of getting you pregnant. All I could think of was that I should've had a taste and hard fuck of that pussy for an accusation like that.”

“Now that you have...” I began, wanting him to finish.

“I don't think I'll be able to get enough. I want more with you, sweet girl.”

“More sex?”

“More everything.”

“I was wrong. About Earl. It wasn't Earl after all. You were right to want the paternity test.”

His eyes widened. “It wasn't Earl?”

I shook my head. “Turns out, it really can't work.”

It was his turn to shake his head. “Forget the dogs. It can totally work, and we've proved it. I want to know you. In bed... and airport bathroom... and out. Three days wasn't enough.”

“I do, too. I'm sorry I turned down your offer to go with you. You asked me to have fun and I was triggered. When I was eighteen, my mom's boyfriend wanted me to go with him for the night. To have sex. For fun. No relationship. We'd have sex and he'd go back to my mom. I... I—”

“Those assholes, this fucker you're talking about and that little shit, Roger, won't bother you again, I can promise you that. We can have any kind of boundaries or contract you want to make you feel safe. I—”

I covered his mouth with a finger. “No. A real relationship doesn't need anything like that. We trust each other. We take care of each other.”

He nodded and I ran my fingers through his beard. “I haven't let a woman in before. Not really,” he admitted. “My dad was a shitty example of bailing on a relationship. I remember Mom crying and it destroyed our family and then he made a new one and...” He closed his eyes for a second. “Then I was burned by Haven, Danny's mom. I think we both have pretty skewed ideas about what a relationship really is.”

“Then we figure it out together?” I asked, my words laced with hope.

He nodded. “We figure it out together. Which means we have to be in the same place.”

“Not Scotland?” I wondered.

Suddenly, he looked weary, as if the idea of returning there was exhausting.

“I’ll go back for the Highland Games in May, and I want you to come with me.”

“I do want to see you in a kilt,” I admitted.

He grinned.

“My life’s in Hunter Valley, Daniel.” I needed him to know I wasn’t running off into the sunset with him. If he wanted to be with me, he had to be in Montana. I knew he wanted to travel, and we could do it together, but he had to stick.

He nodded, gravely. “Mine is, too.”

“You said your life wasn’t there any longer.”

“I was wrong.”

Hope flared in my chest along with newer, deeper feelings I had for him, “Do we go back then?” I asked.

He shifted and looked to the bank of monitors where it showed the list of departures. The flight numbers, the cities, and the flight times.

“How much time off do you have?”

So he hadn’t expected me to roam the world at his side.

“A week, for now.” I had plenty of time accrued, but there was only Ethan to fill in for me.

“A week’s good. I thought my life was waiting for me out in the world, that I gave up everything when I was twenty. It took me a solo trip to Scotland to realize my life, the one I pivoted to make, is pretty fucking amazing. I owe Danny an apology, but he will have to get over you and me.”

“He’s okay with it. With us. He... wants you happy.”

Daniel kissed me, soft and sweet. “I’m happy. With you.”

It felt like I was glowing from the inside out. Daniel was what a man should be. Devoted. Trustworthy. Sexy. Dirty talker.

“So where should we go?” I asked.

Daniel looked at the departures. “Anywhere you want, sweet girl, as long as we’re together.”

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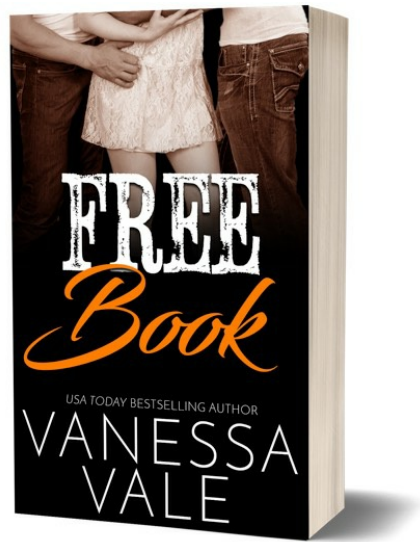
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ABOUT VANESSA VALE

A USA Today bestseller, Vanessa Vale writes tempting romance with unapologetic bad boys who don't just fall in love, they fall hard. Her books have sold over one million copies. She lives in the American West where she's always finding inspiration for her next story. While she's not as skilled at social media as her kids, she loves to interact with readers.

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