



SelfMade
SERIES #3

MS.

Temptation

AMELIA SIMONE

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I'm so excited to bring you Andi's story! She's been waiting (not patiently) oh, so long. Andi and Ty are trivia rivals turned jury duty peers when things heat up between them. Please give me grace on the trial details, (disclaimer: not one an attorney, not part of the court system) some things needed to happen for ROMANCE REASONS. Happy reading!

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 2 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 3 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 4 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 5 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 6 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 7 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 8 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 9 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 10 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 11 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 12 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 13 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 14 – Ty](#)

[Chapter 15 – Andi](#)

[Chapter 16 – Ty](#)

[Epilogue – Andi](#)

[Author’s Note](#)

[Follow Amelia!](#)

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CHAPTER 1 – ANDI

If you preferred jury duty to going to work, there was something seriously wrong. Maybe with you, but definitely with work. I was no exception. I'd accepted this hellish alternative to my job as an HR manager for Emerald Candies in a last-ditch attempt to avoid burnout. Too many hours and too many days had flown past since my last real break. Vegging out, listening to evidence sounded like a treat.

Sitting in the jury selection room on my first day, waiting to be called, I had no one to blame except myself for my predicament. It was just my luck Ty Sheldon joined me in purgatory. Tyler Sheldon, former captain of my brother Jimmy's high school soccer team and current bane of my existence at trivia night. What were the odds he'd be pulled into my jury pool? Out of almost a million county residents, he'd made the cut. Remembered embarrassment washed through me.

I wouldn't be surprised if the sexy 911 dispatcher ignored my presence in the bland jury selection room, much like he ignored my existence at trivia night. I'd blame his disdain for me on our team's winning record—if we had one.

Tall, with longish dark hair and penetrating brown eyes, the broody former goalkeeper still had the proportions of a soccer player. His powerful calves and thighs were topped by a lean upper body, filling out the simple collared shirt and slacks he wore. The bright blue shirt only served to highlight his sun-darkened skin and white grin. He and Jimmy may have hung up their cleats more than a decade ago, but Ty still looked like he could swagger out on the field.

I ignored my watering mouth, focusing on my phone instead.

Tamra: You get called yet?

For a labor and delivery nurse, my friend Tamra had no chill. She'd texted every hour. It was her day off, and she'd been pushing me to join her

in her next dance class.

Andi: Not yet. Do you think it's lucky that I'm juror 69?

Tamra: Well it's certainly MY lucky number. LOL

I smirked. Too much information, but since she'd become one of my closest friends, I'd grown used to Tamra's radical honesty, verging on constant overshare.

Andi: I suppose it's better than 666.

Andi: Guess who's here?

Tamra: ????

Andi: Ty

Tamra: Ty the Trivia Terror? No way!

I smirked at the nickname. Not exactly flattering, but not wrong either. Ty was a force to be reckoned with. It's why I'd tried to enlist him for our team. Our cohort, consisting of nurse Tamra, writer Chase, firefighter Jimmy, and massage therapist Melena, sorely needed rounding out. On paper, we looked like we'd possess a diverse knowledge base, but Ty's team smoked us regularly on anything news-related. My recruiting instincts were always on high alert, looking for our next teammate.

Tamra: This is your chance. Talk him into defecting to our team!

I shook my head. She had no idea how hard I'd tried. Not just to recruit him to Trebek's Rejects, but to my bed. My teen crush on my brother's teammate had bloomed into full-blown lust watching him spit out correct trivia answers at the bar every week. Sexy brain *and* sexy body? Yes, please.

I pushed away thoughts of Ty as the jury coordinator, an older man with a haircut that screamed former military, knocked on the dark wooden doorjamb, calling for our attention.

"My name is Ramon Gonzalez, and I'll be your jury coordinator. I need the following jurors to follow me." The gray-haired man pushed up his glasses, consulting a list before rattling off a range of numbers. I listened, hoping he'd skip right over lucky number sixty-nine.

"And sixty-nine," he said.

The unlucky, including me, gathered our things, following the rotund man out of the jury room and down the hall toward an imposing door.

Passing through the heavy mahogany doorway shouldn't have been intimidating. *I* wasn't on trial. But something about the gravity of the process still sobered me. I glanced behind me at the other jurors assembled from our pool. Old and young, anyone without a better excuse trailed along, expressions ranging from polite interest to boredom. I bit my tongue as I realized Ty numbered among us. He carried a canvas bag, and I narrowed my eyes. Was that pink yarn sticking out the top?

Ramon led us to benches set up along the wall. Not long after, the honorable Judge Ye was announced, and we were asked to rise. She seated us, and I noted the plaintiff and defendant tables quieted at her entrance.

The lawyers in their slick suits looked like modern-day gladiators. The defendant's counsel, a stately Black woman in a purple pantsuit, eyed us with a friendly smile to mask her inspection. The attorney for the prosecution had a sleepy, rumpled demeanor that I assumed was all for show, meant to lull the defendant into a false sense of security. Purple pantsuit didn't seem like she was fooled, but her client lolled back in his chair. Barely old enough to shave, his slicked-back dark blond hair and classic suit would have been more fitting on his father, but instead resembled a kid playacting being a grownup who wouldn't even get served in a bar. I tried not to let his clothing spark any preconceived ideas about his guilt or innocence, but as he perused the line of jurors with the smallest smirk, it was hard to suspend judgement.

I'd grown adept at reading people quickly, and the defendant's body language communicated cool arrogance. Interesting, since he was the one on trial. Too young to have much experience with the court systems, his confidence seemed misplaced. It made me wonder what kind of case we'd been called for.

The judge droned through introductions of the counsel, Ms. James represented the defendant, and Mr. Willows the prosecution.

"The defendant, Mr. Shepherd, is charged with hit and run property damage, malicious mischief, stalking, and harassment. These charges carry the possibility of jail time and fines."

My brows rose at the list of charges. Not a simple case. Any hopes for a quick resolution, a basic DUI offense resulting in a fine, or a store burglary gone wrong, evaporated. I'd banked on a few days away from the

office to rest and do something different. Not an extended absence. I bit my lip. Maybe I'd miscalculated.

Someone knocked my back with their knee, and I turned to see Ty sitting directly behind me. He mouthed a quick "sorry" and I turned back around.

At least he was going to acknowledge me. I'd wondered. We weren't enemies, but we weren't friends either. *And whose fault was that?*

Okay, mine.

Thursday night trivia had become a staple after Chase met Tamra and Jimmy married Melena. I resisted at first, but they pulled me into the game at their favorite bar, claiming they needed my legal and business expertise. I snorted. Right. As we went head-to-head with Ty's team over and over, it became clear they needed my memory for nearly-useless details.

Seeing Ty at the Knit Wits' table week after week only increased my appreciation for the adult version of the boy I'd known. I could have resisted propositioning Ty with dirty trivia after one too many cocktails. Week after week I managed to keep a lid on my libido, until the fateful night when I opened my big mouth, making my interest painfully clear.

As usual, I had more enthusiasm than sense, and I cornered him to ask him my question with maximum innuendo and minimal brain power. "Hey, Ty. What's a four-letter word that ends in 'k' and means intercourse?"

He'd stared at me blankly, and thanks to my lowered inhibitions, I'd blurted out, "Talk, you dirty-minded pervert."

Of course, I'd meant to imply more than discourse when I asked my question. He'd been sitting at the bar alone, all broody and grown up. Irresistible.

He'd laughed weakly, looking around frantically. "Is Jimmy here to drive you home?" His concerned question made it clear he didn't want to talk, much less do anything more risqué with me. He'd excused himself to the bathroom posthaste once I confirmed I had a ride. I'd thought it was only women who used that escape. When he didn't return after a few minutes, it became obvious he had intestinal issues or was hiding from me. The bartender's knowing side-eye had only cemented my shame and belief that it was the latter.

The rejection stung, but Ty's brush-off was clear, and I hadn't summoned the courage to try again. I could only be thankful he'd shed the childhood tendency to rub his opponents' noses in any failures. Whether he turned me down because he just didn't like me: possible, but not probable, 'cause let's face it, I'm a fucking delight, or because he didn't want to anger Jimmy by going home with his little sister, I couldn't tell. Or more accurately, I didn't want to.

Holding onto the dream that he turned down my invitation out of respect for his friendship with Jimmy was all that kept me going. I'd had enough rejection lately, *thank you very much*.

The attorneys brought my attention back to the present as they moved through the *voire dire* process, questioning possible jurors.

Did we know the defendant? No.

Had we heard about the case in the news? Also no.

Had any of us been convicted of similar crimes?

I glanced around at my fellow jurors, but no one struck me as a scofflaw, and none admitted to anything of the sort.

They moved on to questioning us individually, slowly excusing more and more of my peers. With each dismissal, my hopes of returning to the jury room and being called for a simpler case faded. Odds were growing that I'd be learning more than I ever wanted about the peccadilloes of one Mr. Shepherd.

I glanced up and down the bench, counting the remaining jurors. Thirteen plus me and Ty. Accounting for alternate jurors, any hopes of escaping extinguished as Ms. James excluded a young mother of two who explained she was three months pregnant and still struggling with morning sickness.

Ty's grunt of disappointment behind me echoed my own feelings. Lucky. Not the pregnant part, which sounded miserable. But the leaving part. Our odds of doing the same had officially sunk to nil. Mr. Shepherd's trial was likely to test the limits of my new boss's good graces. A simple case, done in a few days, wouldn't have caused much backlog at work, but the sheer number of charges meant our trial was likely to take longer than the original jury duty estimate. A few days of unanswered emails and phone calls

wouldn't be the end of the world, but a week or more would mean a deluge to catch up with.

Focusing on opening statements took most of my energy, but at least the case sounded mildly interesting. Mr. Shepherd was accused of harassing a local pro baseball player—Alex Hernandez. As more of a football and soccer fan, I'd never heard of him.

“The prosecution will show that Mr. Shepherd engaged in a campaign of harassment against Mr. Hernandez. Mr. Shepherd's actions both damaged Mr. Hernandez's property and traumatized him.”

I glanced at the man I assumed was Alex Hernandez sitting in the public seating behind the prosecutor's table. Big, fit, and beefy in the agile way of elite athletes and dressed in a fine suit, he didn't *look* traumatized. Not that it meant he wasn't. He'd likely been coached to hide his emotions from an early age, to push through and play the game. Everything in the toxic masculinity playbook.

“Mr. Shepherd finished his reign of terror by crashing his pickup into Mrs. Larson's garage, causing substantial damage to her house.”

The prosecutor's use of “reign of terror” sounded a bit strong, but what did I know? The defendant, Mr. Shepherd, appeared too young to plan a road trip, let alone a sophisticated harassment campaign. His earlier arrogance had faded as the prosecution laid out their opening argument. With every word, he folded in on himself in his seat, looking more vulnerable and regretful.

Play stupid games, win stupid prizes. Adulthood didn't always mean great decision making.

“To add insult to injury, Mr. Shepherd has been uploading videos of his crimes to the internet. Thanks to the viral nature of those videos, he's made a substantial amount off the suffering of others.”

I shifted in my seat, leaning forward. How substantial? The prosecution had definitely piqued my interest. And how open and shut would the case be if he was dumb enough to film his crimes and post them online?

“Mr. Shepherd's identity was obscured by the use of a reindeer costume, but we'll show the court he was the perpetrator,” the prosecutor finished with a flourish.

Reindeer costume? I held back my snort with effort, glancing at my fellow jurors to see their reactions. The grandmotherly woman next to me smirked, and an older woman down the row tittered quietly, but the rest of my peers managed to keep their expressions impassive. Tough crowd. Still, I was even more intrigued by our case. Maybe being selected for jury duty wouldn't be a colossal pain.

We were escorted into a break room after the judge called for recess, and I examined my co-jurors carefully. We were a motley crew, leaning heavily toward the retired set. They'd use the story to dine out for weeks with friends on a case this juicy. Ty looked less enthused, his furrowed brow and frown fitting perfectly with my most recent encounters with him. What had happened to the easy-going, funny guy who played soccer with Jimmy back in the day before going pro? Ty had become a surly stranger over the years.

The jury coordinator passed around menus for a local takeout joint and noted our sandwich orders before excusing himself to get our lunches.

I settled into one of the chairs and smiled at the woman next to me. She had a pleasantly creased face, purple glasses, and a cap of iron-gray hair; her smile seemed genuine as she extended a hand to me.

"I'm Shelly. Or am I juror number four? I'm not sure what the etiquette is."

I smiled. "Me, neither. And I'm Andi, aka juror number sixty-nine."

She shook her head before winking at me. "Sorry you got drafted. That's usually such a lucky number."

I bit back my grin.

"Shelly, I think we're going to be friends."

"You like the cut of my jib, eh?"

After five years celebrating Talk Like a Pirate Day, matching her playful tone wasn't hard. "Heave ho and hopefully we'll know soon if Mr. Shepherd is going down with his ship."

"I can't wait until they interrogate the scallywag about the reindeer costume on the stand. There's swagger, and then there's stupidity."

I burst out laughing, only quieting when I glanced up and collided with Ty's disapproving frown.

Shelly didn't miss his expression of disdain. She tilted her head in his

direction. “You know Mr. Surly over there? In my day, that one’s brand of handsome would have given me sea legs. Savvy?”

If that was Shelly’s not-so-subtle attempt at saying Ty was handsome, I couldn’t disagree.

I grinned at her, and another juror plopped down in the other seat next to me.

“Hi, I’m Sam, juror number twenty-three.”

The friendly thirty-something man on my right had pleasant features beneath a cap of dirty-blond hair. I took the hand he extended, shaking it.

“Andi, number sixty-nine. Nice to meet you.”

His suppressed smile at my auspicious number challenged me to keep my own poker face.

“What are you in for, Andi?”

Sam seemed at peace with his selection, his expression affable.

“Just doing my civic duty,” I answered easily.

His lips twitched. “Couldn’t get out of it?”

I shrugged. “Seemed like a nice break from work.”

“My condolences.”

His mock solemn tone had me looking at him with new appreciation. Snarky and cute, just my type.

“What about you?” I asked.

If he was disappointed to be called, he hid it beneath a layer of good humor.

“Alas, I’m not critical to Commencement Wines’ operations. My brother’s wife is covering for me in the tasting room. Really, I think my brother was glad to be rid of me for a few days. Or weeks.”

I chuckled. My brother Jimmy and I were mostly consumed with our own lives, but around the time of his marriage and accident, there were probably a few days he would have wished for me to be tied up with jury duty instead of sticking my nose in his business. Siblings: Always in your corner, sometimes annoyingly so. Doubly when you were the only close family.

“Well, it seems like his loss is our gain.” Shelly broke in with a grin and a sly glance between us.

Her face lit like a billboard with her obvious intent to matchmake. I'd need to take her aside and let her know it wasn't going to happen. Sam might be cute but dating someone new would merely be a distraction from my problems, not a resolution. This time was set aside for two things: determine if Mr. Shepherd was guilty and get my head on straight for work. Was it time to move on from my current job? Start something new? Working for Emerald Candies after getting passed over for promotion left a bad taste in my mouth. Had the hiring panel decided my personality made me too over-the-top for the role? It certainly wasn't my technical qualifications that were the issue. I needed to figure out if I could get excited about my job again, given current management.

That was the one good thing about jury duty — time. I'd have plenty of it to think and enjoy the eye candy around me. Ty might be uninterested in me, but he was still pretty to look at. Ditto Sam. And maybe over the course of the trial I'd make peace with Ty and my next career move.

CHAPTER 2 – TY

I ignored Andi as I pulled the soft pink cotton yarn from my knitting bag. The danged woman was everywhere.

Tempting me.

I scowled down at my knitting needles and picked up my garter stitch. Used to be, I only had to be mindful that I wasn't staring at her too long at trivia night but now I'd have to be on guard for the foreseeable future too. She'd been beautiful as a teen, but grown, everything about her struck a chord. Ballsy, caring, and intelligent. My kryptonite. The center of everything. Her laugh alone was enough to capture an entire room. She'd gotten under my skin with her quips and confidence, making it impossible to focus on anyone else when she was near. Until Jimmy reminded me that adult or not, she was still off-limits.

I whiled away the time before lunch focusing on my current project. Knitting had become a panacea for everything that ailed me. Something I could do almost unconsciously while on calls, and still feel productive.

To offset when I felt absolutely useless.

After almost a decade at South Sound Fire Communications as a dispatcher, I should be used to the miasma after a bad call, but it still hit me. Every time. Good results were common, but the bad ones made the news. Remembering successful CPR or AED saves helped when the swimmers swept away in our icy rivers left me feeling lost. And left an indelible mark on my heart. Coulda, shoulda, woulda. Sometimes there was nothing I could do but coordinate behind the scenes and ask for updates afterward when I knew the first responders. It always felt unfinished, dissatisfying. And accepting that was easier some days than others.

The invisible weight dragging me down was hard to shake. A change of pace, of scene, seemed like just the thing. Thus, jury duty. But I hadn't anticipated Andi joining me on my little sabbatical.

I snuck a quick glance down the table to where she sat between a thirty-something man and an older woman, smiling. Her bold laughter had more than me turning her way, curious about what was so funny and wanting to share the joke.

Her curly dark hair haloed her head, making her seem almost angelic. I snorted. False advertising. Andi was an absolute demon at trivia, competitive and quick. She answered questions lightning fast and playfully trash talked the other teams. Watching her was half the reason I went every week.

Pretending not to enjoy watching her was hard.

Turning down her blunt proposition for a night together had been even harder.

I swallowed at the memory of Andi, all sheets to the wind, sliding onto the bar seat next to me at trivia and whispering her question in my ear. I cursed quietly as I dropped a stitch on my blanket, backtracking to fix my mistake.

Mistake.

Maybe turning her down had been one. It certainly wasn't what *I* wanted. But it's what my friendship with Jimmy demanded. He'd been blunt about his sister being off-limits, and my conscience wouldn't let me take her home drunk, even if she proposed it.

Never mind that I fantasized about what might have happened until I was spent that night.

If Jimmy knew I'd stroked myself to thoughts of his sister, the next time I bench pressed at the gym, he'd be sure to let the weights drop instead of spotting me safely. If Andi had approached me sober, things might have been different, but ever since I'd turned her down, she'd avoided me. I couldn't help but wonder if Jimmy had warned her off. I'd already proven I was a bad risk in relationships. Jess, my ex, had bailed at the first sign that my soccer star had faded. If she hadn't seen something worth staying for, why would Andi be any different? She had everything going for her. Professional career, loving family, and friends.

I gritted my teeth as I dropped another stitch and had to backtrack yet again.

Keeping my attention on the present, on the trial, was the only way I'd be able to get through serving on the same jury with Andi.

I'd focus on the facts, finish this blanket, and then return to my regular life, ready to bring my A-game, running on codes, chaos, and caffeine.

Andi's bright laugh burst out from her end of the table, and I couldn't help but look up, admiring the gleam of her smile.

Her gaze caught mine, and her smile died.

Right.

Lately that had been my effect on her. Extinguishing her joy. Stoking her embarrassment that I'd turned her down. Unless Jimmy had disabused her of thinking I was any kind of catch?

Andi deserved a prince. Not a washed-up soccer player struggling to hold it together.

She dropped her gaze from mine and smiled at the blond man next to her.

Maybe he wasn't a prince, but he looked nice and normal. Someone Jimmy would approve of and welcome into her life.

The older woman on her other side caught me staring and winked.

I couldn't help the scowl darkening my features, but it only made her smile harder. Instead, I dropped my focus back to my knitting, letting my needles clack furiously as I pretended it demanded all my attention.

When I deemed it safe, I glanced once more at Andi's end of the table, only to get caught in her dark brown eyes. They searched mine, and I forced a smile.

Maybe a post-trivia hookup was off the table, but Jimmy never said we couldn't be friends.

After a quiet lunch with my fellow jurors, we listened to opening statements in the trial. The judge excused us for the night, admonishing us not to read about the case or discuss it with others. Staying away from the news would be difficult. I tended to scour it regularly for trivia tidbits. But

social media would be no struggle. Once my injury ended my professional soccer career, the last thing I wanted to do was interact with disappointed fans. I had that in common with Hernandez. Except he was still in the game, lucky bastard.

My back ached after sitting for hours. At least at work, I could knit while I talked, and sometimes pace on longer calls. Sitting on the jury meant just that: a lot of sitting still. I needed to get in extra time at the gym in the mornings before court started if I didn't want my back seizing up and my knee getting stiff. Souvenirs of a past I was struggling to put behind me.

I nodded good night to the other jurors as we packed up our things and headed out to the courthouse parking lot. Andi beat me outside, sliding behind the wheel of a familiar car.

I watched her expression turn from calm to dismay as I climbed into my truck. She thumped her head against her steering wheel. Concerned, I pushed open my door to walk to her car.

"Everything okay?" I projected so she could hear me through her closed door.

She scowled, shaking her head, and opened her door with a tired sigh.

"My car won't start. I think my door didn't shut or something. Battery must be dead."

"Do you need me to jump you?"

Her mischievous smile paired with the light in her eyes were more like the Andi I remembered. The friendly version, pre-proposition. I hadn't meant it that way, but if double entendres got us back on a more equal footing, then I'd be doubling down on every opportunity.

"If you don't mind helping me, that'd be great," she said softly.

She shivered, and I glanced dubiously at her thin jacket. I'd bundled up against the wintry Tacoma weather but clearly, she hadn't been as prepared.

"You don't have a scarf or hat?"

She laughed ruefully. "I'm always losing them. I haven't bought a new set this year yet."

"I thought it was sunglasses Washingtonians lost every year?"

She shrugged, her lips still soft, eyes playful. “I guess I’m the exception to the rule.”

I debated wrapping her in my scarf and plopping my hat over her curls but second-guessed the impulse at the last moment. Probably too familiar. We were friendly rivals, but not exactly friends.

“Why don’t you pop your hood, and I’ll get you jumped?”

Her soft snicker signaled I’d chosen the right words. “Next you’re going to claim you’ll rev me up?”

I grinned. “We’ll get your motor running in no time.”

She groaned softly, but the light of appreciation in her expression told me the teasing had done what I hoped—set her at ease with me. That was one of the benefits of long acquaintance—my sense of humor didn’t strike her as unusual.

I parked my truck closer to hers and pulled my jumper cables from beneath the seat, connecting them to our battery terminals.

Andi shivered again, and I couldn’t help myself. “Get in my truck. I think I’ve got a spare blanket or two on the back seat. You can snuggle up while we give your battery a few minutes to charge.”

She nodded, her teeth chattering, and climbed in the passenger side. I slid in the driver’s seat as she turned to me with a broad grin, her arms full of baby blankets.

“Do you have a secret brood I don’t know about?” she asked playfully. “This is a *lot* of baby blankets.”

I scratched my head, trying not to look sheepish. Knitting was nothing to be ashamed of.

“Uh, no. I knit a lot at work. Almost all the dispatchers do. It’s my turn to do donation drop-offs.”

Her face softened, and I tried not to let the gleam of approval mean too much.

“You donate baby blankets? And you make them yourself?”

I nodded, glancing back at her car.

“Yeah, they are one of the first things I learned to make.”

“That’s so sweet!”

I couldn’t let her think my hobby was all altruistic.

“Naw, we just need to keep our hands busy. It helps to combat the stress of answering nine-one-one calls.”

She snorted. “I have some idea from Jimmy of how hard dispatch can be. If knitting was just about stress relief, I imagine you’d have a baby blanket business empire by now, not be donating them.”

I glanced her way quickly, before watching another car maneuver around us and out of the lot. “We have that too.”

Her bark of laughter caught me by surprise, and I glanced back to her dancing brown eyes.

“No way.”

I nodded reluctantly. Why had I admitted to my knitting hobby again? She seemed amused, was she laughing at me?

I cleared my throat. “We have a booth at the local farmer’s market. It helps fund our yarn habit and the donated clothing and blankets we share with local shelters and hospitals.”

Spending Saturdays at the market was one of my favorite things. Being outside, watching people mill about and browsing the crafts was peaceful. The normalcy and slow pace of it all was a nice foil to my regular job.

Andi’s grin widened. “You, Ty Sheldon, are a man of hidden talents.”

I grunted, uncomfortable with the praise. “I think your car’s ready now.”

She sobered at my change of subject, and I kicked myself. It was the easiest we’d been with each other since The Incident, and I’d blown it.

“Thanks again,” she said softly. “I really appreciate your help tonight.”

“No problem. I’ll follow you home, make sure you get there safely.” I did my best to infuse my tone with things I couldn’t say aloud. Her happiness, her safety, were paramount to me. Asked or not, I wanted to be there for her if she needed me.

“Ty, you don’t have to do that.”

“No, but I want to,” I admitted.

I didn’t need to tell her how much I wanted to follow her. I’d

forgotten how being near Andi warmed me, from the inside out. Like sunshine. I needed more sunny skies in my life. Reminders that the world wasn't all chaos.

She carefully folded the blankets, setting them in the back seat, before pushing open the passenger door. I disconnected my jumper cables and stowed them as she got back into her car.

She waved, and I hopped back into my truck, following her taillights as she exited the parking lot.

Would Jimmy approve of me following his sister home? Maybe. If he thought I was seeing her safely there instead of perving on her, he wouldn't get on my case.

But the truth was, I wanted to see where she lived. Know everything about her.

And that was a problem.

I'd had my chance at a romantic relationship with her and blown it. Convincing her to give me another opportunity without shattering one of my oldest friendships with Jimmy seemed unlikely. I couldn't afford to lose more friends. Not after the debacle with Jess and Dean. Losing my whole friend group during our break-up sucked. Maybe, if Jess hadn't fallen for a teammate, it wouldn't have felt like I lost everything and *everyone* all at once. The combination of my injury and her defection meant the end of my soccer career and rejection from men who had become like brothers hit me when I was lowest. I had too few real friends left to risk losing more by angering Jimmy, pursuing his sister.

But maybe friendship with Andi was worth a try?

CHAPTER 3 – ANDI

I shivered as I stepped out of my car and waved to Ty. He'd been so sweet, helping me with my car and following me home to my apartment. Very chivalrous. Like a man who wouldn't accept a proposition from a drunk woman. Or even some mild flirting from a friend.

I scowled as I fitted my key in my door, trying to suppress the lingering feelings of rejection.

I'd screwed up.

He'd been right to turn me down that night. That's what I got for relying on liquid courage, instead of asking for what I wanted. I should be grateful to him, but all I could muster was embarrassment. All my teasing at trivia leading up to that night, and he hadn't responded to my interest. Or just didn't feel the same.

I needed to stop hitting on Ty.

As one of Jimmy's old friends, I didn't need to put him in an uncomfortable place. My frustrated teenage crush had no business intruding on the present.

I had to let it go. Let *him* go.

Maybe I needed to work on just being friends with Ty.

We'd have days or weeks together, stuck in the jury box. Surely that was enough time to overcome any residual embarrassment and find common ground? After all, he'd been nice enough to help with my car tonight. That move had set any attempts to ignore him back to square one.

And the knitting. Oof. He knew how to hit a girl in the feels.

It shouldn't have been sexy, but knowing he used those capable, nimble fingers to knit blankets for itty bitty babies made my ovaries want to burst like Jiffy Pop.

My stomach rumbled, and I pawed through the contents of my fridge, too tired to cook something new. Instead, I reached for leftover lasagna and

slid it in the microwave. My phone buzzed as I finished my dinner, and I smiled when I saw the sender.

Tamra: How was jury duty?

Andi: I can't talk about it, silly.

Tamra: Then how was Ty?

Andi: I don't WANT to talk about that.

Tamra: Why not? Huh? Huh?

I groaned. Tamra had become persistent since joining our tiny made-up family. She'd realized my bark had no bite and decided we were friends. In a desperate act of self-preservation, I did the only thing I could think of to throw her off the scent and make her quit asking about Ty.

Andi: When is your next dance class again? Maybe Melena and I can join you.

Tamra: Yesssssss!

I groaned. There would be no getting out of going to class with her, now that I'd opened the door. I'd resisted her invitations before, not sure I wanted to get sweaty and spin around a pole with a bunch of other women. Then again, Tamra seemed to love it. And I owed Melena more of a chance.

I'd been begrudging at best when Jimmy introduced his new wife, Melena, to me. Their quickie wedding had brought out all of my protective instincts. A second-date proposal was the last thing I expected from my brother, raising my suspicions that the marriage was for her convenience, not his. Jimmy was too good to let some harpy take advantage of him. But it'd become clear that Melena loved Jimmy, and I'd had to bury my misgivings. He deserved to be happy, and for Jimmy, happiness meant Melena.

Mending fences with Melena made sense, and a dance class where we couldn't really talk seemed like a safe start.

Tuesday morning dawned gloomy and cold, much like the day before. Tacoma in January vacillated between dreary and drizzly and cold and clear. It only seemed fitting that I had to suffer through the worst of both worlds for my second day of self-imposed jury duty purgatory.

I'd barely resisted checking my email, wondering how my workmates were getting along without me. With Mark moving into the director role I wanted, would I even be missed?

Any lingering worries about work shuddered to a halt when I stepped out into the cold to see a familiar truck idling near my car.

Ty.

I walked up to his open window, but he spoke before I could voice my question.

"I didn't have your number, and I wanted to make sure your car would start this morning."

My insides turned to mush. Jimmy would approve. I tamped down the faint wish for more than brotherly concern from him.

"Thanks, Ty. You didn't have to do that."

His gruff, "I know," brooked no argument.

It was clear from his grouchy tone that he already regretted the impulse.

I glanced back to my usually trusty Camry, noting that someone had also scraped the windows clear of ice. Ty again? Unless I had a window fairy, the man had gotten out of his warm car to prep mine. Warmth rushed through me, making my heart beat fast. I'd dated men that wouldn't think to do that after the world's best blow job, let alone with no incentive whatsoever.

I glanced back, but he'd already put up his window, ending our discussion.

Rude. But then again, I wasn't at my best before coffee either. And he'd shown up, out of what I could only assume was the goodness of his heart, to make sure I made it to court on time, minus any pesky car trouble.

I breathed a sigh of relief when my engine turned over, glad I didn't have to ask Ty to get out of his warm car yet again to jump mine.

He pulled ahead as soon as he saw the exhaust from my tailpipe, and I followed him across town to the courthouse.

The sweetness of his gesture stayed with me as I parked, noting he waited for me by the building entrance. He remained a silent shadow as we made our way through security. Today's knitting bag had a hint of sunshine-y

yellow peeking out the top, and the bright shade made me smile. Ty may not be the cheeriest person, but his act of kindness this morning hit me in the Jiffy Pop yet again.

Dressed in slacks and a gray button-down under a wool jacket, he resembled the picture of masculine maturity. Like the kind of guy who would check that your car started on a cold morning and help scrape the ice. Also like the kind of guy who might turn down a drunken invitation.

I scowled. Had I ruined any chance I had of even friendship with Ty, approaching him like that? Had he written me off as too much? Too sloppy? Too outspoken? I rubbed at the sudden ache in my chest. Why was I only lovable when I minimized myself? I could only keep up the ruse so long before the real, messy, me leaked out. And invariably men ran. It helped me think of him platonically when I remembered that Ty had been no exception.

I straightened my shoulders. Ty may have his charms, but if he didn't appreciate mine, he wasn't the man for me. I was done making myself less for the people in my life. Done making myself smaller for anyone, personally or professionally.

We passed through building security together, the guard teasing Ty about not weaponizing his knitting needles as a county employee. My sneaking suspicion that his status as a 911 operator brought him special privileges for his crafting supplies was confirmed, but I couldn't really fault him. Listening to the prosecutor drone on might be easier if I had something to do with my hands too. The novelty of court was quickly wearing off. Ty held the door for the jury room for me, grunting softly at my nod of thanks.

I smiled at Shelly as I slumped into the chair next to her, taking a sip from my travel mug.

“Ahoy, matey.”

Bless her. It was too early for pirate talk. I sketched a quick salute. “Captain.”

Her delighted grin eased some of the grouchiness I had no business feeling. Ty had done something sweet. Just because it reminded me of everything I couldn't have, that was no reason to take my disappointment out on Shelly.

“Are you ready for another thrilling day of testimony?”

I didn't bother to hold back my groan.

Ramon escorted us into the courtroom, and I couldn't help glancing back at Ty as we took our seats. His big body filled out the office chair, his knitting needles and yarn heaped in his lap. He caught my glance and raised his needles in a silent acknowledgement.

I did my best to focus on the first witness, but thoughts of Ty's caring, his calm strength, kept intruding, knowing he sat a few feet away. I could hear the soft clack of his needles, and picturing his long, dexterous fingers moving nimbly shouldn't have been more intriguing than Alex Hernandez's testimony, but somehow made me wish I could watch him instead.

Alex Hernandez sat confidently on the witness stand, his dark hair tamed and combed away from his rounded cheeks. The goatee covering his chin in dark stubble helped age him. Without it, he'd look like a sturdy new high school grad. Only his relaxed shoulders and obvious ease at being the center of attention signaled his experience in professional sports.

The ruffled prosecutor began his questions easily, his tone soothing. "Mr. Hernandez, tell the court, in your own words, what happened the day of September fifth?"

Mr. Hernandez cast a quick glance toward Mr. Shepherd, his frown helping confirm the earlier vision of him as a friendly teddy bear.

"September fifth was a Friday. I'd only been home from our game a few hours when the noise woke me up."

"And what noise was that?"

"This pendejo set off my alarm."

"Objection. Conjecture, your honor," the defense broke in.

"Mr. Hernandez, please refrain from name calling in my court. Only state what you saw with your own eyes, not what you think happened," Judge Ye said.

Mr. Hernandez grunted an acknowledgement before continuing. "Someone set off my alarm at about two in the morning. I'd finally installed one after some recent vandalism at my place. I checked the camera feed and turned on the lights to get a better look."

"And what did you see?" the prosecutor asked.

“Someone in a moose suit dumping a load of hot dogs in my pool.”

Shelly and I exchanged glances, and I could tell she was doing her best to hold back a laugh.

“A moose suit?”

“I couldn’t tell if it was Rhubarb or the Mariner Moose. He was moving too fast. He dumped another trash bag of wieners into my pool, then took off.”

I couldn’t control my grin at the mental image of thousands of hot dogs, floating in his pool like an edible log jam.

“And Rhubarb is?” the prosecutor asked.

“Oh. Rhubarb the Reindeer is the Rainiers’ mascot,” Mr. Hernandez answered, as if every sports team had an eight-foot reindeer named after a tart fruit to support them.

Half of the jurors looked lost. Thanks to trivia night, I was well versed in the mascots of our local minor league sports teams, but judging from the chorus of snickers breaking out around me, my fellow jurors had no idea who Mr. Hernandez was referring to.

Sensing he was losing the jurors, the prosecutor moved on. “And then what happened?”

“The moose bailed. He had his truck parked on the street beyond camera range. I heard the engine revving as I ran out to chase him. I wanted to get the license plate and put an end to all the harassment. But he must have been going too fast, didn’t quite make the turn, because he crashed his truck into the house across the street, specifically into Mrs. Larson’s living room. I caught up to him as he staggered out of the cab and took off.”

It sounded like a crime show chase scene. I couldn’t pull my eyes away, wanting to hear the rest of the story.

“You didn’t pursue him further?”

Hernandez shook his head. “I wanted to, but making sure Mrs. L was okay seemed more important than following moose tracks.”

Crashing into someone’s house was no joke, but I couldn’t help smiling every time I imagined the floating frankfurters. As pranks went, it was pretty creative. Like something I would have egged Jimmy into doing back in our less responsible days.

When the court broke for lunch, the coordinator brought in sandwiches for the jury, and Sam and Shelly chewed in companionable silence on either side of me for the first few minutes. Not talking about what we heard was difficult. But we'd been instructed by the judge to wait until all evidence was presented and we were released to deliberate before sharing any observations with our fellow jurors.

Our unnatural silence was interrupted by an older juror two seats down. The balding man gave a pained grunt and gasped, pushing back from his chair. Before anyone could act, he crumpled, lying half in, half out of his chair.

We looked on, frozen in place. Sandwiches paused midair, the moment crystallizing as we watched in shock.

With the scrape of a chair, Ty swooped in, helping the older man maneuver to the tile floor. Ty's measured movements and gentleness only served to highlight the undercurrent of panic running through everyone else. I dropped my sandwich and pushed back my chair, joining him on the cool floor. Ty's grim face as he took in the prone man's pallor and closed eyes made my stomach drop. Ty checked for a pulse and shook his head.

"Andi, help me start CPR."

The soft command was calm, but I couldn't stop the shiver that ran through me at his serious tone. I'd always thought I'd be the controlling one in an emergency, but Ty had me beat. His training and experience might mean the difference between this man living and dying.

Ty glanced up, eyes catching on Sam and issuing more rapid-fire instructions. "Go see if you can find the AED. There should be one near the stairwell in this building. *Run.*"

Sam nodded, taking off at a gallop.

Ty gestured to Shelly. "Call nine-one-one and ask for an ambulance."

"What do I say?" Shelly asked, her voice trembling.

"Possible cardiac arrest, patient unconscious, starting CPR, and will try a defibrillator. But tell them to send EMS."

I shifted on my knees beside Ty. He'd already started chest compressions hard and fast.

"Have you had a CPR class?" he bit out as he worked.

I nodded, before realizing his gaze remained intent on the unconscious juror. Juror number seven. I thought his name was Ted, but I couldn't be sure.

“Andi?” Ty’s sharp prompt brought me back to his question.

“Yes. I’m certified, just never had to use it.”

“Good. I want you to take over for me in another thirty compressions. Push hard and fast, two inches deep. Got it?”

I swallowed, my mouth dry. Ted didn’t have time for me to be anything other than ready. Ty believed I could do it. His confidence bolstered my own. I had no time to be uncertain.

“Got it.”

I took over for Ty when directed and focused all of my energy on pushing. Willing the blood to circulate in Ted’s body. His complexion remained ashen, with no signs of consciousness.

My arms ached with the strain of the pressure I exerted through the heels of my hands, but I didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. Ty was counting on me. Ted was counting on all of us. I focused on controlling my breathing, hoping to preserve my strength.

How far out was EMS? Ty had acted quickly, stepping into the breach while the rest of us sat frozen, but we didn’t have unlimited energy reserves. Even my short turn at compressions, combined with the adrenaline, was taking its toll. Already shaky, I could only hope more help arrived soon.

My attention narrowed to the few square inches on Ted’s chest and my rhythmic compressions.

“Tapping in,” Ty commanded next to me, and I sat back on my heels to catch my breath as he took over.

Most of the other jurors milled around us, some wringing hands, but I noticed a short line forming behind me. I smiled gratefully at the others ready to step in and help.

Sam skidded to a halt next to us, a bright red kit in his hands. He dropped down beside me, ripping open the Velcro fastening to expose the AED inside. Sam pulled out the scissors, cutting away Ted’s polo shirt to expose his chest.

Shelly’s frantic voice intruded from somewhere off to my right. “He

just collapsed. Now he's unconscious. Please send us an ambulance.”

“Andi. Take over. I'm going to prep his chest.”

I moved back into place over Ted, pushing with all my might. Around me, Ty and Sam shaved a small section on Ted's chest and positioned the electrode pads as the diagram on the front of the device indicated. We worked in silence, focused on our individual tasks.

Each second stretched like an hour, but I continued my compressions, ignoring the way my muscles burned, until the automated voice of the AED indicated stopping CPR and Ty tugged at my shoulder to pull me away. I sat back on my heels, breath fast and heart racing, watching Ted for any signs of recovery. Everything happened so fast, the AED's robotic voice seemed eerie in the shocked silence.

“Do not touch patient ... analyzing heart rhythm ... please wait.”

“Do not touch patient ... shock advised ... shocking patient in three, two, one ...”

“Do not touch patient ... analyzing heart rhythm ... please wait.”

“Do not touch patient ... shock advised ... shocking patient in three, two, one ...”

“Restart CPR ...”

“I've got this,” Ty said softly, gently nudging me to the side.

Ty took over with Ted, pressing rapidly. His matter-of-fact approach helped me breathe more easily. Thanks to him, we had clear direction, and I had confidence we were doing everything we could for Ted.

We continued rotating through compressions and shocks as the AED advised. When the medics arrived to take over in a flurry of activity, Ty pulled me aside. I didn't realize I was trembling until he tugged me close, squeezing tight.

“Hey. Hey.”

He tilted my chin up, and I let him see my watery eyes.

“You did great, Andi. You were amazing. We helped until the professionals arrived.”

I inhaled a shaky breath, trying to let his words soothe the ache inside. Residual fear still gripped me. Now that the intensity of the last few minutes was wearing off, the adrenaline withdrawal was making me shaky.

I glanced around the room, spotting Shelly and others watching quietly, the remains of lunch strewn across the tables. We'd done it.

I inhaled deeply, filling my lungs with the soapy-clean scent of Ty. By comparison, I was a hot, sweaty mess. It wasn't fair.

"How can you be so cool?" I asked, modulating my tone at the last moment so it didn't sound accusatory.

He'd been a hero, jumping in so quickly. I didn't want to imply otherwise.

He rubbed his hands up and down my shoulders and arms, soothing me wordlessly.

"It's my job," he murmured.

I shuddered, using the movement as an excuse to sink into his chest, seeking comfort.

"Well, your job sucks," I groused.

His bark of laughter forced a smile to my lips.

"Yeah, some days it does. But today is a win, Andi. We've got to celebrate it."

I shivered. The last thing I felt like was celebrating.

"Win? You and I have *very* different definitions of that word."

I pulled back slightly to stare up into his face. "Ted collapsed. How is that winning?"

He shook his head before meeting my gaze head-on. "We did everything we could. Did everything right. You kept it together. Be proud. I was lucky to have you with me."

I exhaled, trying to release some of the stress cocktail still fizzling in my bloodstream.

Luck. Ted was lucky to have Ty, not me. He'd kept his cool, directing the others without faltering. No hesitation, just clear direction. And his confidence kept us calm, working together. Ty had probably saved Ted's life.

I glanced over as the medics lifted Ted onto a stretcher. The other man's skin was still ashen, but he'd opened his eyes. I mustered a smile for Ty.

"You're a hero."

The light in his eyes died.

“I was in the right place at the right time,” he insisted gruffly, slowly setting me away from him. Pushing me away.

I felt the physical distance as if a gulf had opened between us. Ty didn't want my praise.

Shelly put a motherly arm around my waist, giving me a squeeze.

“You both did great.”

I forced a smile. “Thanks, Shelly. You too.”

I cast one last glance at Ty. He held himself aloof, his gaze focused somewhere off in the distance. For the hero of the story, why did he seem like he wanted to play the villain? Teenage Ty would have puffed up at the compliment. This older, softer version of the man I'd grown up with kept surprising me. High school Ty hadn't known the meaning of modesty, but this more mature version struck me with his calm competence. He'd moved away from running his mouth about his own prowess and grown into someone I wanted on my team. For trivia or in life as a friend. Any way I could get him.

CHAPTER 4 – TY

After Ramon Gonzalez, our jury coordinator, settled us back down, we went through the motions of finishing lunch before returning to the courtroom. Minus Ted. His absence hung like a pall over our group. A miasma we couldn't shake. There had been no updates from the hospital yet, which wasn't exactly surprising. It was possible we wouldn't get one at all. We weren't Ted's friends or family. More like temporary coworkers.

I resumed my knitting as I settled into my juror seat, wanting to keep my hands busy. Needing to.

Andi had called me a hero.

I bit back a snort. *Right*. 'Cause heroes sat behind a desk. I usually felt anything but heroic. Especially when things went badly. As a voice on the phone, I could direct, I could calm, but I couldn't fix anything. And some days, it killed me. Listening instead of acting, was slowly eating away at me. Telling myself I was helping didn't always appease the voice inside that couldn't control the outcome. Stepping off the field, becoming support staff instead of a key player, still chafed. But my soccer injuries meant I couldn't pass the physical requirements for other first responder jobs.

Granted, this time I'd been hands-on, helping. I ignored the fine tremor and churning in my gut, breathing out the residual stress.

I had endured the congratulations from my fellow jury members. They didn't need to know I'd been worried. I offered distracted smiles and returned to my knitting as soon as I could without being rude.

Focusing on each stitch helped. The familiar needle manipulations, slipping along the soft yellow fiber restored some sense of normalcy as I settled into my groove and returned my focus to the courtroom.

"Mr. Hernandez, you indicated that the hot dog incident was part of a campaign of harassment. Can you tell the court more about that?"

Hernandez shifted in his seat and ran a hand through his hair,

mussing it.

“It started when I moved down from the Mariners for a rehab assignment with the Rainiers. I rented a house down here. One morning, I woke up to see my front lawn all forked up. Literally. Spelled out in plastic forks, it said, ‘you forking suck.’ And that’s when I knew it wasn’t random. Fans get testy when they think you screwed up and want to call you on it, but I didn’t expect to get heat for an injury.”

“Were there any other incidents?” the prosecutor asked.

Hernandez nodded.

“Please share them with the court.”

He scrubbed his hands across his face.

“Mostly little stuff. My trash cans tipped over. A glitter bomb package. That kind of thing.”

“Any other instances you can share with the court?”

Hernandez frowned, gazing across the jury, clearly reluctant to speak. With a deep sigh, he nodded. “There was a ... display set up in my front yard.” As if ripping off the Band-Aid, he continued in a rush. “Garden gnomes in baseball gear set up in my grass as if mid-game with bases and everything.”

I suppressed my grin. That sounded like the kind of prank my old teammates would pull. Elaborate and annoying, but harmless.

Hernandez paused, a flush washing up his cheeks.

“They were all mooning the pitcher, which I supposed was meant to be me, in a Yankees uniform.”

“You used to play for the Yankees, but were traded against your will, isn’t that right?” the prosecutor prodded.

For the first time Hernandez appeared truly uncomfortable. Maybe annoyed. Slowly, he nodded.

“You must answer aloud for the court,” Judge Ye reminded him.

Hernandez leaned forward. “Yes, that’s correct.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hernandez. You can be excused.”

Hearing how some dipshit terrorized a neighborhood didn’t exactly leave me feeling favorable to the defendant in the wake of Ted’s collapse. Sure, the pranks were stupid, but crashing a truck was more than a practical

joke. I'd faced my share of harassment from fans when I played. Mostly harmless, it always had the potential to turn ugly. Sympathy for Hernandez washed through me. He'd been both demoted to the farm team and hassled over an injury he couldn't control.

I couldn't help sneaking glances at Andi, seated inches in front of me, as the defense cross-examined Alex Hernandez. Her soft curls smelled citrusy and made me think of sunshine and warmth. She invited connection, drawing you in with her soft smile and warm brown eyes. That glint of mischief never failed to capture my imagination. Andi sparkled. She lured you into a relaxed state with her friendliness, then cut in with something witty, and I'd forget all over again that I wasn't supposed to be falling for her.

It was lust, not love. You couldn't love someone you'd barely talked with. And my friendship with Jimmy meant more to me than a quick tumble with his sister. He'd become my closest friend when Jess had defected with Dean, and I couldn't afford to lose more people in my life. It still chapped my ass that I'd been dumped by not only my fiancé, but effectively my whole team and friend group.

One bad day had ended my soccer career and my engagement.

I'd already proven that any attempt at capturing Andi's attention couldn't last. She'd only approached me when she was already horny on Crown and that had more to do with the liquor than me. Since that night at Haven, she'd avoided me, choosing to hang out with whoever she dragged along to trivia to join their team. Apparently, I was easy to forget. Sure, she'd banter with me if given the opportunity, like last night. She was always up for a challenge, but I had to wonder if that was all I'd been to her: a challenge.

I let the soft clack of my needles soothe my errant thoughts and focused on the proceedings as Hernandez was excused from the stand and Judge Ye swore in Hernandez's neighbor.

Mrs. Larson looked fragile behind the witness stand, but the tracery of purple veins under paper-thin skin appeared at odds with her rigidly straight spine. Her sharp eyes seemed to take in everything about the courtroom.

"Mrs. Larson, can you tell us about the events on the night in

question?” the prosecutor asked.

“You mean the night the local police accused me of hysteria? Or the one when they figured out I was right, and there really was a rogue reindeer in the neighborhood?”

The prosecutor’s eyes wrinkled like he wanted to smile, but he maintained a smooth façade. Mrs. Larson reminded me of some of our crotcheter callers. Just because their stories sounded wild didn’t mean they weren’t true.

“Let’s start with the night of September fifth. What’s the first thing you recall?”

“Since I don’t think you meant to ask about my morning bowel movement, I’ll jump to the good stuff. I’d been in bed a while, and I woke to a horrendous crashing noise. I sprang from my bed as fast as these old bones could, to find the front grill of some idiot’s truck in my living room, headlights shining on what was left of my couch. I *liked* that couch. It didn’t show cat hair or anything. It was one of the last things my husband and I bought together before he passed.” Mrs. Larson pointed at Alex Hernandez. “This one came to check on me afterward. It’s lucky I was in bed, if I’d been up watching my stories, I’d be a bloody pancake right now.” Her frown swung to Mr. Shepherd. “Some people have no respect.”

I had to admire her spirit. Mrs. Larson had fire. So often, our callers were terrified when they called, and it was hard to pull the necessary details from them. Her blunt style may not be the stereotypical old lady display the prosecution might prefer, but it made her both credible and sympathetic. A couch that will hide cat hair *is* hard to find. At least one of my fellow jurors nodded at that description of the destruction.

“Did you see anyone other than Mr. Hernandez that night?”

Her sharp snort ricocheted across the courtroom. “You mean like a reindeer? Not that night. I was in bed when it happened.” She adjusted her glasses, glaring at the prosecutor. “Didn’t I already tell you that? I may be old, but my mind is like a steel trap.” She snapped her teeth together in a parody of jaws closing.

The prosecutor Mr. Willows looked down at his desk, rearranging his pens against his pad. Was he trying to hide a smile? Mrs. Larson was feisty.

Watching her joust with counsel had me holding back my own smile. I could imagine Andi responding with that kind of spirit.

“What about the other incidents Mr. Hernandez described? Did you witness any of those?”

Eyes narrowing on Mr. Shepherd, Mrs. Larson nodded.

“I saw some idiot in a reindeer head forking up Hernandez’s lawn. Called the cops too. But they laughed it off as the whimsy of an old woman. Didn’t believe that I saw what I saw.”

After Mrs. Larson recounted all she remembered, along with the summary of damages to her house and court wrapped up for the day, we were excused. I quickly packed up my supplies. Ramon shared an update on Ted’s condition—resting comfortably and I dodged out of the jury room, trying to avoid more congratulations from my fellow jurors. There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief when he shared the news, and I was glad. I didn’t often get updates on calls. At least Ted’s story had a happy ending.

I slid into my truck and let the engine warm as I watched the other jurors filter from the courthouse. Jimmy would want me to make sure Andi’s car started.

Sure.

I snorted. While it might be true, it wasn’t why I stayed. I’d seen how she chatted with Sam, the only other male juror under fifty. Something about the other man set my teeth on edge. Probably the ease with which he and Andi talked. I wanted her to turn to me with that soft smile, her lips quirked up as she shared a snarky comment. I wanted her to ask me for help if she had car trouble again, not some blond guy who smiled too much. Of course, it was sexist. For all I knew, Shelly was a retired mechanic.

Still, I waited a few moments more, until Andi slid into her car and sped away.

Would it seem more or less stalker-ish if I asked for her number, so she could let me know if she needed help? I didn’t want Jimmy asking uncomfortable questions, so getting it from him was out. Would Andi share her number if I asked? Maybe it would get us past the night I’d turned her down, to something closer to friendship.

Still stewing over whether or not I should ask for Andi’s number—or

even if she'd give it to me—I navigated my truck down a quiet back road to Kirsten and Julie's house in Sumner, a suburb outside of Tacoma, arriving just in time for our weekly family dinner.

“Uncle Ty!”

Rosie's squeal of delight never failed to put a smile on my face.

“Hey, Rosie-Posey.”

I tweaked her nose and ignored her scowl at the nickname. In rainbow leggings and a unicorn T-shirt, she couldn't pull off a very convincing grumpy face. Her dark hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail, and it only served to emphasize the babyish curves of her cheeks.

“Uncle Ty, I'm not a baby anymore.”

“But you'll always be my Rosie-Posey.”

Her eye roll was peak teenager, impressive given she was only six, and I just grinned back.

“Ty, that you? Come into the kitchen. Dinner's almost ready.”

Julie's call had me toeing off my shoes and following Rosie through the house to the kitchen, where the savory smells of tomato sauce and garlic caught my attention.

“Spaghetti tonight?”

Julie's wife, Kirsten, looked up from where she was grating parmesan on a loaf of split bread.

“Yep. Wash up, and we'll eat.”

I shepherded Rosie into the bathroom for hand washing and smiled my thanks as we sat down to the table with steaming plates.

“You're quiet tonight. How was jury duty? I know you can't talk about any trial details, but has the process been interesting?” Julie asked.

I shrugged, glancing at Rosie before meeting Julie's blue eyes across the table.

“There's been a little excitement, but nothing I couldn't handle.” I shifted my gaze toward Rosie, happily twirling spaghetti around her fork before slurping it off. “Nothing worth sharing at the dinner table.”

I tried to keep the harshest elements of my work away from my family. That meant no horror stories over meals. While Ted's story had a happy-ish ending, I didn't want to scare Rosie.

Julie opened her mouth to comment, and Kirsten placed a hand over hers. “You’ll have to tell us about it over dishes.”

I nodded, appreciating the tacit understanding.

“Rosie, how was school today?”

The change of subject worked, and Rosie chattered about the book Mr. Watkins read them during story time.

Julie waited until I was elbow-deep in dishes and Rosie had gone off to play before asking again about my day.

“So, brother of mine, *spill*. What happened today that had you looking so tense?”

I stared into the suds, debating how much detail to share.

“One of the other jurors collapsed at lunch, and Andi and I ended up giving him CPR until the medics could arrive.”

“Oh my gosh, is he okay?” Kirsten broke in, her soft alto full of concern.

I glanced to the fridge, where she was shuffling food to make room for leftovers. That was Kirsten, ever the soft-hearted one. The perfect foil for my no-nonsense sister.

“Yeah, we got an update at the end of the day. He’s in the hospital but doing well.”

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Kirsten murmured.

Julie clasped her hands in front of her chest theatrically. “Our hero.”

I shrugged, uncomfortable with the praise, even if she was overselling it, and she snapped my butt cheek with her towel before I could dodge away. “Don’t downplay it, Ty. You did a good thing.”

“I had help,” I added, trying not to let my admiration for Andi color my tone. Julie could sniff out my crushes in middle school at fifty paces, and I didn’t need her teasing me about Andi. Not when there was nothing I could do about it.

Her eyes narrowed, and I realized my mistake.

Smacking myself in the forehead would have left a trail of suds and bubbles, so instead I focused on cleaning the saucepan like leaving tomato stains behind would lead to my arrest for murder.

She let me work in silence for a few moments, no doubt trying to lull

me into complacency.

I'd screwed up. Julie knew my tells, and I recognized hers. Her silence trick was a classic therapy tool.

I bit my lip and debated throwing out a question about Rosie's upcoming birthday party, but Julie would see through my feeble attempt at distraction.

"You evaded my question earlier about if you met anyone interesting in jury duty. Was that your helper or your patient?" she asked.

Clearing my throat, I struggled for a nonchalant tone. "It's a small world. Andi Torres from high school got called for my jury pool, and she stepped in to help me with CPR."

"Andi Torres? Jimmy's little sister? The loud-mouthed one with the curly hair? Or was that Melanie, Jake's sister?"

"Andi's not a loud-mouth," I defended before I could call the words back.

Classic Julie. Her quick grin let me know I'd fallen right into her trap. She'd known exactly how to tip me into saying more than I wanted to.

"So, Andi helped you, huh?"

Caught. That's what I got for admitting an old teammate's sister had been called for jury duty with me. Julie remembered Andi. A little too well. They'd been further apart in school, but Andi had been hard to miss, even at fourteen. And Julie had dropped me off at Jimmy and Andi's grandma's enough times to recall them both.

I cleared my throat, debating if I could change the subject by focusing more on the emergency and less on Andi. "Yes, she was a big help, but of course it was the AED that saved the day."

Julie brushed off my attempts to focus on the mechanics and asked the question I'd been dreading since my slip of the tongue. "Is Andi still single?"

I held back my groan with effort. Julie's focus on my love life, or lack thereof, would be hilarious if it weren't so uncomfortable. She'd stalked the single moms on Rosie's soccer team, using every excuse to throw them at me. As Rosie's coach, I always had plenty of help carrying the bags of soccer balls to my truck and no shortage of snack volunteers. It was bad enough that

she'd gotten me to agree to coach when thinking about the game I'd loved still hurt. I didn't need her pimping me out at every opportunity too.

"I don't know," I admitted.

Though I could guess. Andi hadn't mentioned a significant other, and it hadn't been *that* long ago that she'd propositioned me at trivia.

She smiled brightly at me. "Well, you should invite her over next week after jury duty. We're happy to cook for one more, and it would be fun to catch up. I haven't seen her since high school."

I cut off the snort before it fully manifested. Julie and Andi had never been friends. Not enemies either, more like non-entities. The age difference alone had made a friendship unlikely. Julie had been strictly drama club, where Andi had bounced around to FBLA and debate.

My non-committal hum seemed to satisfy Julie, and my shoulders relaxed as she let the subject drop. The last thing I needed was my nosy sister pushing Andi and I together at every opportunity when I was having trouble remembering that we were supposed to just be friends myself.

CHAPTER 5 – ANDI

I'd been disappointed when Ty didn't meet me at my car Wednesday or Thursday morning. But he must have been reassured that my car wouldn't break down again. It was better not to read too much into his original chivalry, avoid any additional mortification sparked by seeing things that weren't there with him. Ty may be a good guy, but he wasn't *my* guy. Confusing the two could only lead to more pain and embarrassment.

Not that I wanted to play the damsel in distress when it came to my car, but as excuses to hang out with him went, I'd take it. His quiet competence drew me against my will and beyond my desire not to get distracted from focusing on my career. Staying away from him, avoiding thoughts of him, was the smart move, but those broody piercing eyes and his longish dark hair reminded me of the dark heroes in my favorite fantasy novels.

Why were the silent ones sexy? Emotionally unavailable men shouldn't be hot. Couldn't that be a rule somewhere? Help the single women of the world avoid heartache and rejection?

Maybe it was the hint of hurt in Ty's eyes that made me want to ignore good sense. I remembered the outgoing, confident teen. The boy who used to zoom around the soccer field proclaiming he was 'King of the World' when they scored, *regardless* of who kicked the goal. Something about life after high school had worn down his puffed-up, cocky attitude. Mellowed him. I'd heard from Jimmy that he'd spent time playing professional soccer in Chicago before an injury ended his career. I could only imagine that the death of your dreams had an impact on your world view, but I hated to see the joking jock so shuttered.

Life after high school probably hadn't turned out like he thought. Going from celebrated sports star to a voice behind the scenes during emergencies had to sting. Nameless. Faceless. Then again, most of us never

experienced the heady drug of adoration. Sports fanatics were a special breed. As evidenced by our current trial, some people made loving sports their life and whole personality. Had losing his shot at fandom changed him from the outgoing boy I remembered?

My brother, Jimmy, was affectionate and outgoing like a golden retriever by comparison. He'd never lost the goofy good nature that made him popular in school. And his wife, Melena, had made me suspicious because of it. My sweet brother was too pure, too much the firefighter hero, always wanting to save the day. Save everyone. Whether they deserved it or not. Protecting him from his own good nature had always been my job. I scowled out my windshield as a car cut me off on the way to the courthouse, slamming on my brakes to avoid a collision.

Not that Melena didn't deserve Jimmy. She'd slowly won me over during the last few months. Helping him after his accident, putting up with his moody ass. He hadn't been badly hurt, but the ladder accident at work had left him with limited mobility for weeks. While he was usually easygoing, if my brother got so much as a hangnail, he turned into a royal pain in the butt. She'd managed him admirably, and it was obvious Jimmy adored her.

I shrugged, trying to dislodge the surge of jealousy thinking of Jimmy and his new wife invariably caused. I was happy for Jimmy. I wasn't that petty. But hanging out with him and Melena, along with his buddy Chase and his fiancé Tamra so often, meant I was surrounded by happy couples. Couldn't escape them really. And it only served to highlight my own loneliness.

I'd tried dating. I'd tried apps. I'd tried setups.

Sometimes it turned into a short relationship, but never into *the one*.

I snorted. Nearly thirty and still believing in fairy tales.

If there was one thing my work in HR had taught me, it was no one was perfect. No matter how pristine the résumé, or amazing the interview, every human was simply that—human. Not a robot orchestrated to perfectly match expectations. The halo would wear off. They always did. My goal had become to find a good enough fit where everyone was still happy in the end. Perfection was an impossible goal, but happiness? That I still believed in.

Finding my own happily ever after might seem hopeless at times, but

I kept on trying.

I shuffled through security before grabbing a cup of coffee and settling in next to Shelly in the juror's room. A quick glance revealed Ty a few seats down, working steadily on a sunny yellow skein of yarn. He glanced up, as if feeling my gaze, and smiled.

Oof. Even a tiny twitch of his lips hit me in the feels. It was patently unfair that I found him so sexy, and he found me ... what? Too friendly? I swallowed, pushing down the disappointment.

I'd crashed and burned once with him already. Unprepared for the changes in him, had I approached him all wrong? High school Ty would have crowed about his heroic save to anyone who'd listen, eager to accept the accolades. But he'd seemed almost morose afterward. We'd worked well together when it came to helping Ted. Seamless, and in tune. Maybe Ty needed a friend more than anything else. After all, it was all I should be offering. I had my own worries, my own future to be concerned with. If I could make him smile, even a little bit, was it a bad thing?

"If you keep staring, you're going to burn a hole in his shirt," Shelly chided from next to me.

I hid my grimace with a sip of coffee, shifting my gaze to the older woman. Today, she sported a T-shirt that read *DEJA POO. THE FEELING THAT YOU'VE HEARD THIS CRAP BEFORE.*

"I'd like to burn that shirt," I said instead, gesturing to the soft cotton covering her chest and softening my words with a grin.

Shelly flicked a hand at me, unconcerned.

"When you get to be my age, you embrace every opportunity to be outrageous. Life is short. Lick the spoon." She cast a glance down the table to Ty. "Or the sexy knitter."

I shook my head, holding in my chuckle. If Ty thought me propositioning him at trivia night was bold, then licking him like he was mine was sure to get me banned from the bar for good. Though tracing the tendon along his neck, maybe gently nibbling along his jaw held some appeal.

Shelly wasn't ready to let it go. "Come on, you know you want a taste of that."

She wasn't wrong. But I didn't need to egg her on. Shutting down

any matchmaking seemed like the safer bet.

“Ty and I are friends,” I said instead. “Just friends from high school.”

Sam slid into the seat next to me, tipping his head to acknowledge Shelly as she coughed “bullshit” gently into her fist.

His brows rose and Sam side-eyed me before smiling conspiratorially at Shelly. “Is Goldilocks here pretending not to notice Tall, Dark, and Grumpy at the other end of the table?”

Shelly’s girlish giggle made me smile, even as I wanted to scowl at the nickname.

“Who are you calling Goldilocks?” I grouched as soon as I got my face under control. “This dark hair is all-natural,” I drawled, gesturing to my curls.

I often thought my hair would rather take over the world than submit to the sleek styles popular in the office. It was yet another way I didn’t fit in. Too much hair. Overly loud and enthusiastic. An overabundance of personality.

Sam’s confident smirk only served to highlight his urbane good looks in contrast. Dressed in slacks and a preppy green sweater, today he was clearly selling the wine connoisseur persona.

“Calm your tits, honey. It’s a metaphor. I’m too gay, and Ted was too old, but your *friend* Ty there? Just right.”

I sputtered on a sip of coffee. I could have done without the knowing glance he cast at Ty’s crotch.

“What are you talking about?” I wheezed out.

A distraction would have been better than letting Sam trap me further. But I was too startled to prevaricate.

“You look at him like he’s dessert.”

“I do not.”

“You can lie to yourself all you want, but not to Uncle Sam. I’ve been watching you seduce each other with your longing glances.”

His pronouncement jarred me, like we were an exhibit at the zoo. “Both of us?”

Sam’s lip twitched beneath his well-trimmed beard. “*I* may have been checking out your *friend*. But, Goldilocks, he only has eyes for you.

Watching him watching you when you're not watching him is—pewh!”

He fanned himself, and I glanced Ty's way. He remained intent on his knitting. Other conversations buzzed around us, and I had a moment of terror. Could he hear us? Did he know Sam and Shelly were talking about him?

I flushed when I realized Shelly and Sam had caught my furtive maneuver.

Did I feel bad objectifying Ty, given I knew he was more than a pretty face? Maybe. Probably. Okay, no. I couldn't help my feelings. Something about him stroked every hormone. And no matter how much I wanted to say I was in control of my life, focused on work and myself, Ty made me want to break my own rule about pursuing someone who didn't want me.

Because according to Sam? I wasn't the only one stuck wondering *what if*.

A quick call to help Mark at work and the long line for the bathroom kept me from sliding into my usual seat next to Shelly at lunch. She winked as I grabbed my bagged lunch from the table and tilted her head toward Ty. Had she invited juror number seventy-seven, also known as Angie, to sit next to her to push me toward Ty?

I debated taking the seat next to Pradeep instead, but if I wanted to forge an adult friendship with Ty, avoiding him wouldn't get me there.

Ty's open smile when I pulled out the seat next to him reassured me that I'd made the right choice.

“I hoped you'd join me.” He leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, “Mary keeps trying to set me up with her granddaughter. I'm sure she's lovely, but she barely looks eighteen in the photo she showed me from her purse.”

His shiver made me smile. Maybe I wasn't the only one seeing matchmakers everywhere. I swallowed a bite of my salad. “Are you sure she's not just telling you about her family? Surely, not everyone thinks

you're hot stuff?"

He shrugged his big shoulders, playing off my teasing. "Okay, maybe not *everyone*. But Mary? She's definitely been undressing me with her eyes. Tomorrow I'm wearing a baggy sweater."

I burst out laughing, enjoying his flush as I inspected the tight fit of his shirt. Ty couldn't help being pretty to look at, but his embarrassment reminded me that he had so much more to offer.

"Whatever you do, don't tell her you're a trivia god to boot. The body can be resisted, but if she learns you're smart too?" I clicked my tongue. "Look out."

His lips twitched, as if secretly pleased by my compliment.

"Trivia *god*? Laying it on a little thick there, Little Torres. You still trying to recruit me? I'm going to get a big head."

I snorted, spearing a cucumber slice with my fork. Mirth danced in his eyes over the resurrected high school nickname bequeathed to me by Chase. The *only* one Jimmy's teammates got away with calling me. Being Jimmy's little sister had been both a blessing and a pain. It'd been hard to create my own identity in his overly large shadow.

"Call me *little* again, and you won't have to worry about your head for much longer. I'm a grown-ass woman now."

"Ah, Sunshine. You'll always have a special place in my heart as Little Torres, Jimmy's fiercest defender. I used to be so jealous."

"What? Of me?" I asked, surprised by the admission. Nothing about our shared past indicated his feelings. I'd thought he barely knew I existed, always wrapped up in Jess or in some prank with Jimmy and Chase.

"Of Jimmy."

"Why?"

"He always had you in his corner."

"But you had Jess. And your parents and sister."

He'd had so many people around him; I'd never have suspected. Jess had clung to him, always there. His family had seemed supportive, attending all of his games. If anything, I'd been envious of his circle. I'd had Jimmy and my grandma. My parents had been overseas, and we didn't have a lot of other family. By comparison, it seemed like he'd had everyone.

The casual lift of his shoulders offset his serious expression. “But you were always something special, the way you supported Jimmy.”

Hard to believe. I didn’t think Ty had noticed me much in high school. But the sincerity shining in his eyes had me reconsidering. If I’d been wrong about how he felt about me when we were teens, could I be misreading him now? Was this flirting or friendship?

“Now who’s going to get a big head?” I teased as I packed up the last of my lunch garbage, pushing back my chair.

I needed a moment to collect myself, separate truth from fiction. The temptation to believe he was flirting tantalized me, but I had to stay grounded in reality.

Shelly met me at the trash can, whispering from the corner of her mouth, “You’re welcome.”

Shaking my head at her matchmaking, I couldn’t help but be thankful. Lunch had put Ty and I back on friendly footing, soothing some of my hurt feelings from the bar debacle. Maybe this friendship thing with Ty had a real chance.

My excitement for Thursday night trivia had everything to do with hanging out with my friends and nothing to do with seeing Ty.

Right.

I snorted. Being near him all day should have helped me get over my little crush, but the subtle scent of his soap haunted me. Knowing he sat inches behind my shoulder all throughout the witness testimony kept me shifting in my seat, unable to settle.

I freshened my makeup and swapped into a pair of jeans and cute heels before leaving to meet Jimmy, Melena, Chase, and Tamra. In a never-ending quest to round out our numbers, our team added and lost players depending on who was in town and available. Sometimes Melena’s brothers joined us, other times her coworker Lisa. Tamra’s nursing friend Gina and her wife occasionally dropped by. My friends from work made up my occasional contributions. I’d been working on coaxing Ed, the contractor

supporting my payroll project to join us, but thus far, he'd resisted. My life had become a never-ending nerd hunt to supplement our core group. I had to believe that if we could find that last unicorn for our team, we'd be unstoppable. Unfortunately, everyone I'd convinced to join us thus far hadn't stuck. Maybe, *possibly* scared away by the Reject's intensity. Okay, *my* intensity.

Ty's team, the Knit Wits, still challenged us at every turn. It'd become a game to see who came out on top, and we were all absolutely keeping score. Haven Brewery's trivia night was a relatively new addition to the nightlife lineup in Tacoma, but one we'd quickly adopted. Pete, the trivia-meister and one of the managers at Haven had erected a perpetual plaque, ready to start memorializing the winning team each year. I wanted Trebek's Rejects to hold that first spot of honor so bad I could taste it.

Ty's group consisted of his coworkers from the dispatch center. True to their name, at any given time, colorful skeins of yarn half covered their table, competing with pints for space as their needles clacked. Their setup should have looked nonthreatening, their knitting making them appear distracted, but instead Ty's team only came across as fiercer. Multitasking and kicking our asses more often than I'd like to admit.

I pushed open the door to Haven, smiling at Evan, the teenage host, who recognized me and nodded toward the back. I wound through the main part of the brew pub, past wooden tables full of families enjoying dinner toward the room at the back.

Dark-paneled walls and beer memorabilia made up the décor, providing a casual and funky vibe. I let my gaze touch on the Knit Wits table, noting a couple of Ty's teammates working away on projects, but there was no sign of Ty. I pushed down the pang of disappointment and focused instead on my own crew.

True to form, Chase and Tamra hadn't arrived yet. Since Tamra had entered his life, the absent-minded author did a much better job of showing up mostly on time for social commitments. I figured they'd show up at the last minute. Tamra couldn't resist any opportunity to showcase her impressive range of knowledge. After years working second shift, her hospital had moved to a new schedule, and she savored every opportunity to

enjoy a little night life.

Only Jimmy and Melena grinned at me from our booth, and I forced a smile in return. I loved Jimmy. My only brother, my constant companion. And I was coming around to Melena. Her friendliness still took me by surprise. After my outburst when Jimmy was hurt, she'd rebounded quickly, seeming to accept my words as a sister's due. Still ashamed of how I'd treated her in those fraught hours, I was making more of an effort to show her I'd moved on and accepted her in Jimmy's life. While I couldn't turn off the protective sister instincts, toning them down when it came to Melena was the right thing to do.

"Hey, Andi. How's jury duty going? You decide to hang him yet?"

I snorted. "You know I can't talk about the trial, Jimmy. And capital punishment was abolished in Washington years ago."

He shrugged before wrapping an arm around Melena's shoulders, pulling her close.

"Still, I know how judgmental you can be. Don't be hasty. It's not like you've never been wrong," he added with raised brows.

Direct hit.

But a sister can be forgiven for being overprotective, right?

Melena swiftly changed the subject, asking who else planned to join our team for the night, and Jimmy ticked off the names.

"Chase and Tamra, plus I think Gina might drop by. She was a maybe. We should be able to give the Knit Wits a run for their money tonight. What about that guy you've been working on, Andi?"

Caught off guard, I slid a glance to the Knit Wit table. He didn't mean Ty, did he?

"What's his name again, that contractor?" Jimmy asked, his brow furrowed.

"Oh. Ed." I tried not to let the relief carry into my voice. "He mostly works from his home office in Oregon, so we shouldn't count on him as a regular teammate even if he accepts. I'll be sure to invite him again when he's in town."

When the server came to our table, I placed an order for a burger and beer, clasping the mug in both hands when it arrived a few minutes later.

“So, I know you can’t talk about the trial, but how is work getting along without you?” Melena asked.

I stalled, swallowing my sip of beer, before pushing the pint away, suddenly not thirsty. Work. Four letter word of the week.

Not just the week, the month.

I’d been passed over for the promotion from generalist to director at the small candy company I worked for. And it stung. I’d put in the work, but Mark had been promoted over me. A familiar story, as old as time, and visible as fuck at any HR conference. Men disproportionately seemed to win senior leadership roles in a field dominated by women. Mark was okay as a generalist, but his golf outings with the owners seemed to have factored heavily into him getting the position. Maybe I wasn’t the most soothing person to hit the green with, but I was damn good at my job.

“Andi?”

Melena’s soft prompt pulled me out of my funk, and I rolled my shoulders.

“I’ve only fielded a handful of panicked calls from the office. Mostly to remind Mark of things I briefed him on before I started jury duty.”

“It’s important for him to understand how large a part you play in the office,” Melena consoled.

I wrinkled my nose. “Is it? It’s a double-edged sword. I needed the time away, but I don’t want this trial to drag on too long. It’s not fair to the rest of my team, and I don’t want Mark to decide he doesn’t need me after all.”

Jimmy shook his head, ever in my corner. “That won’t happen. He’d be a fool not to recognize how much you get done for Emerald Candies.”

I tilted my head, letting my silence speak for itself. It was better than opening my mouth and calling my boss anything nastier than ‘fool.’ I’d only sound like a sore loser.

Mark’s boundless optimism was probably part of the reason he’d gotten the job. He was just overconfident enough that taking time for jury duty could turn into a major mistake for my career with Emerald.

Chase and Tamra wound through the tables as we were finishing our meals, and I smiled at their flushed faces. Today, Tamra’s day-off attire

veered toward leggings and a flowy top. Her tip-tilted nose and easy grin under a mop of dark curls signaled her happiness. Chase looked tanned and content, his short blond hair less ruffled than usual, his beard neatly trimmed. He had the air of a man deeply in love, and the way they held hands as they approached our table made me smile.

Not long ago, Chase's main talent had been running off women with his mouth. He'd met his match in Tamra. The combination of her unflappability and his honesty worked. It helped that Tamra's filter was a little off kilter on occasion. They slid into our booth with quick greetings and ordered drinks when the server came to check on us.

"How's jury duty going, Andi?" Tamra asked. "Meet anyone cute? Any forbidden hotties on the witness stand?"

Chase wasn't the only one who could go for the jugular in a conversation. I avoided her gaze by taking a quick peek at the Knit Wits group. Did Ty count, if we'd already met? He was still absent from his table. And thankfully, he wasn't a witness to anything other than my previous awkward attempts at seduction.

I met Tamra's dancing brown eyes with a sheepish grin.

"Sadly, no. Though I did almost get into a lip-lock with a fellow juror."

I waited a beat as all gazes swung to me.

"Not romantically. One of the jurors had a heart attack, and we had to do CPR. Luckily, hands-only CPR is effective, so I didn't have to Sleeping Beauty him to keep him alive until we got the AED set up."

"I'm impressed, Andi, not everyone reacts smoothly in an emergency," Tamra said.

"I had help," I admitted before meeting Jimmy's gaze briefly. "Ty Sheldon is on the jury with me."

Jimmy's eyes narrowed. "Ty? Knit Wits Ty?"

I nodded waiting for a tumble of questions, and he pursed his lips before his expression smoothed.

"Well, he's a good guy to have on your side in an emergency."

Jimmy's measured response, minus interrogation had me rushing forward, hoping to cut off any questions.

“He was cool and calm; he helped us save Ted’s life.”

Tamra’s mischievous smile should have warned me. “Too bad you didn’t have to give Ty mouth-to-mouth.”

Jimmy groaned, shooting Tamra a pained look. “I don’t want to think of my sister giving anyone mouth-to-mouth.”

“Jimmy, I’m twenty-nine. Trust me, I’ve done more than that.”

Jimmy looked decidedly uncomfortable. “Yeah, but not with my friends. Knock that shit off. I don’t want to hear about it.”

I arched my brows. “And I didn’t want to see you and Melena going at it in the kitchen when I came over for dinner, but we don’t always get what we want.”

“We’re all adults here. I see Trivia Pete is about to get started. Let me out, and I’ll sign in for our team.” Melena’s soft comment broke up our sibling staring match.

“What about Gina, is she coming tonight?” I asked.

Tamra shook her head. “She texted me that she’s coming down with a migraine and will try to catch us next time.”

“Tell her we miss her and hope she feels better,” I said.

Gina was a great addition when she could join us, but you couldn’t pay me to sit in a noisy bar when I was struggling with an aura or nausea. Migraines sucked. It was just our luck to be down a player. Again.

A subtle buzz ran beneath my skin, raising the hair along my arms. I rubbed them, trying to smooth away the sensation. A quick glance confirmed my suspicion. Ty had arrived. Dressed much like he had for jury duty, he slid into a chair with his team, his back to me.

I bit my lip. It was probably for the best. I’d never hear the end of it from Jimmy if Ty and I hooked up. His broad back and head covered in a baseball cap were far less distracting than if he’d faced me. Watching the wrinkle of concentration in his brows as he considered trivia questions had caused me to miss more than one answer in past games.

Melena returned with our team’s answer sheet, and we sipped at our drinks while Pete finished checking in the other teams.

“Good evening, all. I’m Trivia Pete, your host for tonight’s game.” Pete stood at the front of the room, his mic booming across the crowd of

tables. Other nights of the week, you could find him in a Haven polo and jeans, helping behind the bar. But for trivia night, he morphed into his alter ego Trivia Pete with his gray hair slicked back and wearing a tweed jacket with leather arm patches tossed over his usual casual uniform.

“Thank you for joining us at Haven. Please be sure to tip your bartenders and waitstaff. As always, the rules are simple. Complete your sheet and turn it in to me at the end of each round. No cheating by using cell phones. For tonight, you’re a Luddite. The team with the most points wins forty dollars off their tab and the glory of going on the Winner’s Wall.”

He gestured to his whiteboard of champions, listed by week.

Trebek’s Rejects had its fair share of mentions, but the Knit Wits had us beat by one. So close. My pulse picked up as I shared a grin with my table. Our little group may be small, but we had a mighty amount of knowledge between us.

“Last, but not least, the most important of the house rules.” He wiggled his silver brows at the tables of players. “Repeat after me: Even if Trivia Pete is wrong, Trivia Pete is *never wrong*.”

I coughed to cover my chuckle as Pete stared first at me, then at Ty’s table. Had the house rule been instituted after a particularly heated debate between Ty and I over the accuracy of Pete’s ruling that snakes killed more humans than mosquitos? Maybe.

Okay, yes.

But I couldn’t help it if I was competitive. And anyone who’d played sports professionally was bound to be just as committed to winning. I shifted in my seat, thinking about how my pulse had pounded as we stood, almost touching, arguing over who was right. Pete had threatened to hose us down, but we’d only subsided when he claimed he’d dock both of our teams points if we didn’t accept his ruling.

“Triboluminescence, which occurs as sugar crystals within candy are fractured by chewing, is common in what popular candy?” Trivia Pete’s dramatic pause as he read the first question made me smile. He went hard for big Trebek energy.

“Is it mints?” Melena whispered.

“He’s looking for something more specific.”

“I know! Life Savers. Wint-O-Green,” Tamra added. “My brother used to think chewing them in the dark was really cool.”

Melena wrote our answer on our team’s sheet.

We whispered back and forth, conferring on our answers as Pete took us through a variety of topics, ranging from local history to food science. I resisted watching the Knit Wits table, focusing instead on my own team and our answers, but when the round ended, so did my resolve.

Melena and Tamra used the break to visit the restroom, and I followed. On our way back, I noticed that Ty had moved seats at his table. Instead of his back, I’d be treated to his angular jaw and features shadowed by his hat.

We took our seats as Pete stepped back to his mic.

“First round points totals are as follows. Three Chicks and a Dude, the Krakens, and Pete’s Disciples all got ten points. Guessing Gays has twelve. Trebek’s Rejects have fourteen points, and the Knit Wits are in the lead with fifteen.”

A spontaneous groan went up from our table as we learned we’d only managed second place. Every point was precious against the Knit Wits. Glancing at Ty’s table, I could see the tilt of his lips as he smirked back at me.

Determined to wipe the self-satisfied expression off his face, I turned back to our team.

“C’mon, Rejects. We need a W.”

Pete cleared his throat in a transparent bid for the bar’s attention. “Question one. If I extend my dactylion, is it an insult? And what is the dactylion?”

I stared at Tamra, who shook her head, expression sober.

Drat.

She’d been our best hope for anything medical related. I glanced at Melena, our next-best shot. Her face was scrunched in concentration, and Chase and Jimmy remained quiet on either side of her. I glanced over to the Knit Wits, who whispered furiously.

Nuts.

“What are some common insults?” I asked.

“Biting my thumb? But it’s not the thumb,” Tamra said.

“Middle finger?” Jimmy guessed.

I hummed, unsure.

“Let’s give it a shot and hope for the best,” Chase urged.

Ty’s smug smile from the other side of the room only served to make my gut churn. I bit my lip but rushed to write ‘middle finger’ down on our answer sheet as Pete moved on to the next question.

“Ice cream contains an ingredient that is a derivative of what ocean-based living thing?”

I smiled triumphantly at my teammates. “This one, I know. It’s seaweed.”

Melena’s nose wrinkled. “Seaweed? Ew, gross.”

“The extract is carrageenan. We use it in candy making too as a thickening agent.”

Round two wrapped up with a few questions on history that Tamra’s historical romance habit gave us the answers to, and Melena came through with the hot air balloon jargon needed on another question thanks to crewing as a kid in Eastern Washington.

A shadow fell over our table as I sipped at the dregs of my beer, waiting for Pete to tally the round’s final scores. The hair lifting along my arm let me know exactly who it was. Stubbornly, I took another sip as Jimmy acknowledged him first.

“Hey, Ty. I hear that you and Andi had some excitement during jury duty this week. Congrats on the save.”

His presence pulled at me, and I couldn’t resist looking up any longer. Ty’s features were still shadowed beneath his baseball hat, but looming over me, it was easier to see the stubble along his strong jaw.

“Thanks. It was nice to be in the middle of the action and able to help for once.”

Jimmy tipped his head. “Yeah, Dispatch is tough that way.”

Silent understanding seemed to pass between them, and I shifted in my seat, wanting to dispel the gloom but not knowing how.

“Sure, it must be tough denying the aliens have arrived, but I know the truth is out there.” Chase tapped his temple to emphasize his point.

“Simmer down there, Mister Romance. Most of my alien-encounter callers are regulars. You’re more likely to find them in the bar than in the belly of a spaceship. Alien abductions seem to correlate strongly to the size of their bar tabs.”

“That’s just what they want you to think,” Chase said.

We shared a laugh as Pete announced that he’d be reading the answers and scores shortly.

Ty’s glance my way had me shifting in my seat again. Had he come over to speak with me? Or Jimmy? Color flared in my cheeks as his attention lingered, and I tried to read the intent there when he didn’t speak. Melena poked me in the ribs with her elbow, and I scowled at her meaningful look.

She’d been the only witness that fateful night Ty shot me down. Was this her not-so-subtle urge to try again, this time sober?

My pride would never let it happen.

Ty cleared his throat, and I stared up at him, waiting.

A large hand appeared on his shoulder, and he startled.

“Hey, Ty. Come on back, Pete’s starting.”

I kept my face impassive. His teammate called him back just as Ty had opened his mouth. But to say what?

Burying my curiosity, I focused instead on Trivia Pete’s gray handlebar mustache as he revealed the answers. Groans filled the room as he gave the answer to the ice cream question, seaweed thankyouverymuch, and I noticed even the Knit Wits looked disappointed.

“Three Chicks and a Dude, Guessing Gays, the Krakens, and Pete’s Disciples all got thirteen points. Knit Wits have fourteen points, and Trebek’s Rejects won round two with fifteen points.” Pete paused, letting the drama build. “And that means, folks, we have a tie.”

Chase’s fist pump of victory didn’t echo my own feelings. I wanted to win outright. Not tie. A quick glance at Ty revealed a deep frown on his face.

“But wait—there’s more,” Pete crowed, and his gleeful expression made my heart race.

“We’re going to do a speed round, head-to-head. Knit Wits and Trebek’s Rejects, pick your players and send them up here at the end of our

fifteen-minute break. Everyone else, grab a last drink, and get ready to watch the show.”

I swallowed, glancing around our table.

“Do you want to go for us?” I asked Jimmy.

He shook his head, and Tamra spoke up. “I think you should do it, Andi.”

I shifted a quick glance to the Knit Wits. What were the chances I’d go up against Ty? They had five other players tonight, most of whom I wouldn’t recognize on the street. What were the odds I’d get the one man that could rattle every thought right out of my head? I swallowed, shaking my head.

“I don’t think so.”

Melena spoke up, proving she wasn’t above payback. “Oh, no. It should definitely be you. We need you to channel the ‘wearing black to your brother’s wedding’ energy to win this. Woman up, bat those eyelashes, and dominate.”

Jimmy cast a quick glance at his wife, admiration lighting his eyes, and I was toast. Chase and Jimmy were too aware of the good things they had going with their partners to risk it for me. And I owed Melena for wearing funeral garb to her wedding to Jimmy. I hadn’t kept my disapproval subtle.

Chase scooted from our booth, gesturing toward the bar.

“I’m going to get us another round. Go get ‘em, Andi.”

I swallowed, subjugating the sudden need to pee. It always happened when I was nervous. And what did I have to be anxious about? It was only a game. *Right.*

I pushed out of the booth, heading toward the ladies’ room. On my way back to our table, a strong hand snagged my wrist, tugging me gently to a stop. The instant goose bumps indicated my hanger-on before I turned to look at him.

Ty, soulful and serious. Much too serious for trivia.

“You up?” he asked gruffly, tilting his head toward the other room and Pete.

I nodded, ruthlessly trying to suppress the tingles his fingers left in their wake. Of course, he’d released me as soon as I stopped. Like I had

cooties. Stupid, alcohol-induced, likely to hit on him again, cooties. I held back my grimace, hoping I wouldn't flush and give away my residual embarrassment.

Why was he stopping me now? Was he hoping to rattle me? Keep us from winning?

My eyes narrowed, and I blurted out the accusation before I could think better of it. "You wouldn't be trying to sex me into surrender with those bedroom eyes, would you, Ty? Because it just might work."

Subtlety. Finesse.

Two words never used to describe me.

In the heat of the moment, I lost any grasp on either. Maybe this is why I hadn't gotten the promotion to management at work. Too impetuous?

"I was trying to say good luck," Ty grumbled, his expression chagrined.

"I only take good luck kisses," I answered airily, trying to hide my discomfort at being called out by pretending it was all a game. Teasing him restored some of my confidence. He'd never pick up on the implied dare.

Ty appeared momentarily stricken, before determination washed over his features. The competitive light in his eyes made my heart race. He hooked a finger in the waist of my jeans, tugging me up against his hard body, there in the hall, in front of bar patrons and any stray team members exiting the bathroom. I half expected someone to stop and yell "traitor" at us. Instead, I remained mesmerized by his dark gaze as he brushed a lock of hair away from my face, watching me steadily.

"I can do that too," he said huskily.

He could do what now? I'd totally lost my train of thought. Win? Of course, he could. His team was tough to beat. Any lingering brain cells quit firing as he loomed closer, using the hand that had touched my cheek to tip my chin up.

He brushed a quick kiss across my lips, pausing to smile when I didn't respond, too stunned by the action.

"Good luck," he whispered, pulling away.

As tactics went, it was dirty. He knew I found him attractive. I didn't ask just anyone to take me home. My crush on Ty had grown from schoolgirl

fantasies to something deeper and darker over time. But two could play at the distraction game. If he wanted to toy with my emotions, tease me, then I would give as good as I got.

With interest.

I reached for his broad shoulders, enjoying their strength beneath his soft shirt, using my leverage to push him back toward the wood-paneled wall. I stepped closer, bringing my hips into his and stood on my tiptoes, pausing a beat to gauge his reaction. The light of challenge in his eyes sealed the deal.

I leaned into Ty, sipping at his lips.

If he wanted to use seduction against me, I at least wanted to get my money's worth. Fantasies of Ty had kept me warm for months, but I needed some all-new material.

He tasted faintly of beer, and I traced the seam of his lips before he opened with a groan, returning my kiss stroke for stroke.

Hot and sweet, the soft caress sent tingles to all my best places. Our lips and tongues tangled, fighting for supremacy. Losing all sense of time, I only pulled away when I couldn't breathe.

We stood panting, staring at each other. At some point in the madness, I'd pushed his baseball hat off, running my hands through his dark hair. The longish strands stood up in places, hopelessly mussed. Ty's heavy-lidded gaze gave me a small sense of satisfaction. Sure, my panties may be damp, the growing pressure between my thighs making me needy, but I wasn't the only one affected.

Ty acted like he wanted me too.

But was it an act?

Ty gaze landed on something over my shoulder and he stiffened, pushing me away from the heat of his body, his expression collapsing into one of studied politeness.

"Good luck, Andi," he rumbled softly, before slipping away toward the trivia tables.

I stood alone in the hall, trying to catch my breath. Blind to everything but my raging hormones. Ty's kiss hadn't felt like disinterest. Had I misread the situation? Misread him?

"You consorting with the enemy, Andi?"

Startled, I shook my head, as much to recall myself to the present as to answer, and turned to face my brother. Jimmy appeared deceptively casual, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans, as he gave me a knowing look.

Had he caught our clinch in the hall? Or only Ty rabbiting away from me?

Neither cast me in the best light, and fear of discovery washed through me. I wasn't ready to share my conflicted feelings for Ty.

"I just saw Ty come this way. He looked flustered. What'd you say? I know you. Trash talk is your middle name. Don't give the guy too hard a time. He's a friend, you know."

Right.

Ty and Jimmy were friends.

I shook myself, forcing an answer through my tight throat and a smile to my face that felt plastic. "I had to rattle him some."

"Right. Couldn't let him escape without a little of that Andi charm."

I shoved at his shoulder, silently punishing him for his sarcasm.

Of the two of us, Jimmy was the one blessed with an overabundance of charm. It was part of the reason I'd been obnoxiously protective, pre-Melena. Jimmy attracted women like kids drawn to candy. He was just too sweet. Annoyingly so.

Focusing on Jimmy's shortcomings helped me move past the desire still clogging my throat.

"Come on, I don't want Trivia Pete to dock me for not being ready on time."

We wound back through the tables, and I took a sip of my drink for courage before stepping to the front of the room with Pete.

As predicted, Ty took the lead for his team, and I struggled to look past the soft lips that had devoured mine a few short minutes ago. So much for friendship.

Dammit.

We wanted our name on that plaque.

I couldn't let him win. I clenched my hands, forcing my gaze beyond his beckoning mouth, to the dark eyes above. He'd tugged his hat down low, maybe to hide the expression in them. Triumph? Pity? Desire?

I told myself it was fear.

CHAPTER 6 – TY

I stood with my hips canted away from Andi, hoping she wouldn't notice the bulge below my waist. Hoping the whole fucking crowd wouldn't notice my hard-on for her.

Instead, I thought about the procedure to help a burn victim and recited the first aid steps over and over but it did precious little to cool my erection.

Inconvenient as fuck.

Practically her brand. I'd had good intentions in the hall. Sportsmanlike goals to keep things civil and friendly. They'd gone up in flames thanks to her kiss.

It was one of the things I admired about Andi. She went for it. No half measures. No fear.

Remembering Jimmy's appearance helped cool the blood rushing at thoughts of our kiss.

Anyone could have walked by. And anyone did. The one man who'd specifically asked me not to pursue his sister. I bit back my groan, trying to focus on Pete's instructions.

"Any questions before we get started?" the older man asked, glancing between Andi and me.

I'd missed the rules entirely. But did I dare admit it?

"Three questions, we can bet points each one, the one with the most points wins?"

Andi's recap was a lifesaver, but she scowled when I sent her a grateful smile.

Her earlier accusation rang in my ears. She believed I'd seduced her to rattle her. But I was the one struggling to focus.

Pete handed us each a small whiteboard and pen.

"Okay, first question: diamond painting is sometimes conflated with

what other craft?”

I shifted a quick glance at Andi. Did she know? I’d spent enough time haunting the craft store aisles, picking up yarn to have a pretty good idea.

Quickly, I scribbled down my answer and wager.

Andi bit her lip as she considered her answer before writing her response.

Pete waited as the other bar patrons finished humming the *Jeopardy!* theme song before turning to us with a beatific smile.

“Okay, first up—Andi from the Rejects. Final answer?”

Andi forced a smile. “Cross-stitch?”

I held my expression calm, waiting for the rest.

“And how much did you wager?” Pete asked.

“All of it,” she responded confidently.

“Allllllll of it. Righty-ho. And, Ty, what about you?”

The older man turned his gaze to me, and I grinned. “Cross-stitch.”

“And you wagered?”

I flipped my board so he could see.

“All of it.”

Pete wiped his brow. “Wow, okay then. You two did not come to play. Let’s go to question number two. The score is still tied.”

My heart raced as I waited for the question, sneaking a quick peek at Andi. Her curls rioted around her head, reminding me of the stolen moments in the hall, and how springy they’d been in my hands as I cupped her face, kissing her.

Remembered heat washed through me, and I shifted quickly to focus on Jimmy.

One of my oldest remaining friends. One who had specified his sister as off-limits.

“Next up, the topic is famous traitors.”

Ouch. I glanced guiltily at Jimmy. I hadn’t done anything irrevocable.

Yet.

I had to keep it that way.

“This member of the Jesse James’ gang famously shot Jesse in the back of the head, which was generally considered a dick move in the Old West. Who was this dickish traitor?”

Luckily, I’d cut my teeth watching westerns with my grandpa. Jesse James was peak cowboy, and I knew the culprit.

Andi bit her lip, and watching her worry the plump flesh sent a shiver down my spine. Jimmy wouldn’t tap me in the back of the head if I hooked up with Andi, but I’d for sure be drilled out of the gang. No more workout buddies, no more game nights. I shook myself, focusing instead on my answer.

As the bar wound down their humming, Pete turned to us with a grin.

“Well, folks? What have you got? Ty, why don’t you go first this time?”

I grinned. “Robert Ford was the famous asshole who shot Jesse James,” I replied confidently.

“Very good. And how much did you wager?”

“All of it.”

Pete let out a long whistle. “Nice. That brings the Knit Wits total to one hundred and sixteen, a new record for trivia night. Andi, what about you, did you get the right answer?”

The tiny wrinkles around her eyes told me she didn’t, before she shook her head no. “I had Bloody Bill Anderson.”

“And how much did you bet?”

“Only one point.”

I did the quick math in my head. Her bet put her down to fifty-seven. A comeback would be impossible unless I flubbed the last question. I held my breath, waiting for Pete to announce the category.

“Okay, folks. Last question: this is about Excel formulas.” I barely held back my groan. I used computers at work, but not a lot of spreadsheets. By comparison, with her business degree, Andi was probably a whiz. “In Excel, name a popular formula used to cross-reference data between datasets.”

My mind raced. Cross-reference? I had no clue. I could sum and average, but Pete was looking for something entirely different.

Pete's rules meant I had to wager something, and I needed an answer. I racked my memories, hoping something would come. Nada. I glanced at Andi to see her staring back at me, a smug smile lighting up her features.

She knew the answer.

Dammit.

I scribbled down my best guess right as the other teams drew silent on the theme song.

Pete intoned deeply, "Okay, players. Let's start with the lovely Andi first. What did you answer?"

"VLOOKUP," she responded calmly, a tiny smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

I held my breath. Knowing Andi, she'd wagered it all. We were both competitive that way.

"And what did you wager?" Pete asked, hamming it up in his best game show host impression.

Andi beamed. "All of it, of course."

"Excellent. Your bet brings your total to one hundred and fourteen."

"Now ..." Pete paused dramatically, turning to me. "Tyler. Did you also get VLOOKUP?"

Reluctantly, I shook my head.

"And the question everyone wants to know ... How much did you bet?"

I flipped my board, where I'd written '1' large.

Trivia Pete's grin threatened to overtake his mustache as he crowed. "Knit Wits only bet one, bringing their total score to one hundred and fifteen. It's Knit Wits one hundred and fifteen, Trebek's Rejects one hundred and fourteen."

The bar erupted into cheers, but my own smile was weak, faltering around the edges.

It'd been close. And I could have just as easily lost if the question order had been reversed. At the end of the day, I couldn't get cocky. Knit Wits hadn't answered any more questions correctly than Andi's team.

"Good game," I said, reaching out a hand to shake hers.

She stared at my extended hand as if it were a rattlesnake.

“Good game,” she said softly, keeping her hands to herself.

Why did I think those words meant something differently when she said them? Like she was referring to our time in the hall, not answering questions in front of the crowd.

I opened my mouth, wanting to say something—anything to wipe the vaguely hurt expression from her face. But Jimmy and the rest of her team approached before I could get the words out, and I faded into the background, returning to my table.

I accepted the congratulations from my fellow Knit Wits as best I could. Something about the victory felt hollow. Crowing about it like the rest of my team didn’t hit right.

We’d won.

Fair and square.

But why did it feel like I’d lost something too?

Remembering those heated moments in the hallway had me shifting uncomfortably in my seat as I sipped at the last of my pint.

Kissing Andi had been everything I’d dreamed. Hot, sweet, and just right. Perfect height, delicious weight in my arms, sexy mouth. Everything about us sizzled.

And I’d ruined it by pulling away. Again.

I glanced over to where she was scooting from her team’s booth, saying her goodbyes.

Jimmy and his wife Melena seemed content to hang out longer, and I debated my best move. Talk with Jimmy, let him know that I wanted to date his sister? Put it all out on the table, and hope it didn’t sink our friendship? Or follow Andi, make sure she got her car started safely, and let her know I hadn’t been toying with her in the hall?

In all honesty, I’d been overcome.

Spending hours close to her this week, listening to testimony, chatting with the other jurors, and having her jump in to help with Ted had changed my perception of her. Pushed the last vestiges of her being Jimmy’s sheltered younger sister first and foremost, away. She was Andi. Beautiful, courageous, strong, smart Andi. All woman.

A woman I wanted a real chance with.

I'd spent too much time reflecting, and she'd disappeared. But Jimmy still sat in their booth, smug and satisfied, his arm around Melena, Chase and Tamra on his other side.

I swallowed, wiping my hands on my pants.

He wasn't Andi's father, and she wasn't sixteen anymore.

We didn't need permission.

But I couldn't afford to burn any more bridges. Disrespecting one of my oldest friends would be a mistake. But maybe he didn't get a say. That decision belonged to Andi. To me.

I took a deep breath, wishing the stragglers from my team good night before approaching Jimmy's booth.

"Mind if I sit?" I asked.

The big man nodded. "Sure, we can be magnanimous in defeat. Nice win tonight. You got lucky."

He wasn't wrong, but I pushed down the arrogant impulse to claim it was skill that brought us the win. Letting my competitive instincts take over might jeopardize my real mission in approaching him.

We made small talk while I waited for my opportunity. When Chase offered to grab another round and Tamra and Melena used him scooting out of their booth as an opportunity to hit the restroom, Jimmy and I were finally alone.

"Did Andi tell you we're on a jury together?" I asked, moving the conversation in the direction I wanted.

Jimmy nodded, the light of mischief in his eyes. "Yeah. Funny that you're both gluttons for punishment."

Him thinking about punishment wasn't exactly the tack I'd hoped our talk would take. I didn't have a lot of time before the others returned.

"I think Andi's great."

There. Clear, to the point.

"Of course she is, she's my sister."

I held back my grimace. Not the response I was going for.

"I'm going to ask her out."

Bald. But maybe more effective?

Jimmy's brows arched. "It's a free country, I can't stop you. Lord

knows, I can't stop Andi. But are you sure you can date when you're on the same jury? Aren't there you know, rules?"

I was so relieved that he seemed okay with it, the second part of his answer took a moment to sink in.

Shit.

I had no idea.

Pushing the problem away momentarily, I focused on Jimmy.

"You'd be okay with it? Last time we talked, you warned me off."

His nonchalant shoulder raise had me narrowing my eyes. "I warn everyone off. If that's all it takes, she's not the woman for you. Anyone who wants to date my sister has to be strong. If you can't make it through li'l old me, you don't have a chance with her."

Huh.

This wasn't the Jimmy I remembered. He'd been more intense in high school. Nothing in the way he talked about Andi when we hung out since then made me believe he'd relaxed when it came to his sister. I searched his face, wondering what had changed. His eyes tracked something, no, *someone* approaching from across the room before his gaze met mine.

"If you're brave enough to go after what you want, put it out there, then maybe there's hope for you yet, Sheldon."

"You've changed," I accused, watching the warmth bloom in his expression as Melena reached our table.

"You bet I have," he claimed cheerfully as he grinned at his wife. "Life is precious. Don't waste it."

I shook myself, hearing his words echo over and over. Had I wasted another opportunity with Andi, worried about Jimmy? Letting small roadblocks keep me from moving forward instead of going after what I wanted? What did that say about me?

An image of Jess and Dean bloomed in my mind, arms thrown around each other as they explained that she was breaking off her engagement to me for my teammate.

Right.

Losing the woman you thought you were going to marry in the most public and humiliating way possible would make anyone shy.

Remembered heat from kissing Andi rushed through me, washing away the shame of being dumped. Jess was the past. If I missed this opportunity with Andi, I'd have no one but myself to blame for my future. And that really would be a shame.

With new determination, I glanced between Jimmy and Melena, snuggled up in the booth.

“Thanks for the pep talk, Jimmy.”

His dancing eyes should have warned me.

“Oh, I'll be cheering for you. It's Andi who might have issues with this free kick conversation. You'd better make it count.”

The next day's testimony droned on. It was difficult to focus with Andi sitting close.

Our kiss and Jimmy's metaphor kept winding through my mind.

How to make my shot count? Would Andi block any attempts to take our relationship to the next beyond friendly rivals?

I glanced toward Ramon, seated at the back of the courtroom, ready to lead us away for lunch. I'd scoured the internet looking for rules on juror relationships and couldn't find much. Jeopardizing the time and effort everyone had put into the last week of the trial seemed wrong. Getting answers before I picked my approach seemed the wisest course, but wisdom and lusting after Andi didn't exactly go together.

She'd been giving me the cold shoulder all morning. I'd tried to make small talk before we were called into court, and she'd kept her impassive mask in place. No sign of the real Andi I knew on display, just the professional shellac used to keep people at arms' length. The woman who'd kissed me passionately in the hall at Haven had disappeared. I worried that in my hesitation the night before, I'd already lost. Had waiting to talk with Jimmy killed my last chance? I'd already squandered one the night she'd approached me.

Were we all bad timing and doubts?

Or could I convince her that giving me a real opportunity was worth

waiting for?

Finding out how far I could take my feelings for Andi while we were on a jury together circled constantly in my thoughts, making it difficult to focus. I wanted more with her. But the question of what she wanted, what the rules would allow, kept me anxious about what the future held.

I pulled Ramon aside during lunch, hoping he didn't catch my nervous swallow. "Hey, question. Are jurors allowed to date during a trial?"

The other man blanched.

"You're not allowed to talk to other jurors about the case," he cautioned. "We've already had to replace Ted because of his medical condition. I wouldn't risk it."

"What about the other alternate jurors?"

His frown didn't abate. "I've seen whole swathes of juries taken down by food poisoning. We need every alternate we have, just in case."

I glanced at my empty sandwich wrapper. Should I be bringing my own lunch?

He caught the direction of my gaze and rushed to reassure me. "We don't order from that restaurant anymore. But still, dating your fellow jurors, at least during the trial, is frowned upon."

Andi's light laugh called to me from the other end of the room, and he gave me a knowing look.

"Just wait. This will be all over soon, and you can romance whomever you want."

Patience had never been one of my virtues. I looked at my knitting, the scarf in sunny yellow nearly finished. Learning to knit had taught me about taking things step-by-step, starting slow to avoid mistakes. But going after what I wanted without giving up was more my style. Sometimes I had to sneak up on a goal, but in the end, I always took my shot.

Jury duty wouldn't last forever. But given a chance? Andi and I might.

Staying focused on Friday's court testimony with Andi close enough to touch was a losing proposition. But I tried. It was hard to listen to the defense

drone on and on about Mr. Shepherd's so-called youthful indiscretions when the soft scent of her lotion tickled my nostrils. I wanted to nuzzle the nape of her neck exposed by her hair pulled up and back in a messy knot.

I put my restless energy into my latest knitting project, a baby blanket I was planning to donate to the women's shelter. Busy fingers couldn't lead me astray. But, damn, I wanted them to.

Still, my cautious first steps with Andi might be doomed to failure. It all depended on how things went when she met Rosie. My heart, and my niece. Biologically my daughter, but in every other sense, Kirsten and Julie's. Other women had shied away when they realized I'd helped my sister's wife conceive. We'd used IVF, but still, it wiggled some women out, knowing I had a child.

To Rosie, I was Uncle Ty, but we didn't hide the truth from her. She knew she was loved. By her moms and me. I'd always be there for her.

Maybe it was weak to test Andi with Rosie too soon. But I needed to know how she'd feel before I grew too attached. And then, there was Jimmy. My gut still rumbled at thoughts of losing another friend. Been there, done that. Breakups sucked. But anticipating the end before the beginning was a sure way to erode my confidence.

Moving on from Jess after my soccer career ended had looked a lot like sleeping with anyone who would have me for a while. But I'd moved past the bitter phase, and I didn't think the monk-like existence I'd been living since Rosie arrived on the scene was healthy either.

Letting myself be vulnerable to another woman scared the shit out of me.

But if it had to be anyone, Andi was it.

She probably had no idea I'd noticed her in high school. Not romantically, she'd been too young, and I'd been bewitched by Jess. But Jimmy's little sister showed no restraint when it came to roasting her older brother and watching them banter always made me smile. Her quick wit and competitive spirit shone even in then. In retrospect, Jess had been a little jealous of my other friendships, always around, especially if any other girls were present. Highly ironic that she'd been the one to cheat. Maybe it was an early sign, if she couldn't trust me, that I shouldn't have trusted her either.

But I'd been oblivious. And it cost me. Not everything, but enough. Friends I'd built over years. Loneliness, combined with the loss of my soccer career had contributed to my himbo phase. I was grateful to Kirsten and Julie for pulling me out of it, giving me something else to focus on in Rosie.

As court wrapped up on Friday, I packed up my knitting, glancing down the juror table in our break room to where Andi was saying goodbye to her new friends.

I shuffled her way, nodding to the others, softly cursing when she slipped out of the juror room before I could catch her.

CHAPTER 7 – ANDI

“Andi!”

The masculine call sent shivers down my spine. The husky timbre reminded me of those fleeting moments in the hall at Haven. Kisses I needed to forget, for my own pride and sanity.

I believed I’d escaped from the courthouse free and clear, managing to avoid Ty all day. Rushing to close my car door and ignoring his call remained an option, but I didn’t have it in me to be rude.

Reluctantly, I turned from my car and Ty jogged up, stopping scant inches away.

“Hey. Last night was fun. I’m looking forward to the rematch.”

The way he said it had me wondering—was he referring to our hallway makeout session, or the final round of trivia? Either way, he’d emerged victorious, and I’d been left feeling like our trivia team name was too on the nose. Like I was a reject.

My crush on Ty needed to die. Sure, he was hot, in a broody, antihero way. I knew he was calm under pressure and intelligent. Hardworking. But he also blew more hot and cold than Washington in spring, and I was tired of it.

Chasing someone until he caught me didn’t appeal. I had to get us back on friendly footing. Fast.

“Our team loves trivia night. We’ll be there next week. You and the rest of the Knit Wits are worthy opponents.”

Moving things from the individual to the group seemed the easiest way to emphasize there was nothing personal between us. Not anymore.

He ran a hand through his dark hair. Had I rattled him, keeping our conversation as impersonal as possible and off the subject of our kiss? *Good.*

“Well, I wanted to congratulate you again and offer a consolation prize.”

He seemed to realize how it sounded as soon as he said it. Like maybe kissing me had been the consolation prize, though the timing didn't fit. Or did he think offering me another kiss would cheer me up? His cheeks flushed, and I watched, entranced, as he pulled the buttery yellow muffler he'd been knitting free from his bag.

"This is for you."

He proffered the yellow scarf in one big paw of a hand, the golden threads spilling from between his fingers like treasure.

"May I?" he asked, stepping forward to wind it around my neck.

"For me?"

His sheepish grin sent a zing between my thighs. He'd been sitting in the jury box, working on this project, all week. Had he been thinking about me as much as I'd been thinking about him?

"Yeah. It's still cold. There's a matching hat too. I made them for you. I thought you might help keep you warm."

The thoughtfulness of the gesture hit me hard. The tiny, caring gift was yet another example of what made Ty special.

"Ty, you didn't need to make these."

He shrugged, ignoring my gaze as he wound the soft cotton around my neck before tugging the matching hat over my curls. I shivered as his fingertips grazed my ears and neck in a brief caress.

"I wanted to."

I cracked a smile, unable to resist teasing him.

"I've noticed you have a problem."

He quirked a brow. "Oh, yeah? Is it a certain mouthy and competitive woman?"

I snorted softly. "Other than that particular issue, I've observed that you have busy, busy hands."

The suppressed mischief in his expression held me entranced. Bantering with him made everything brighter. But I'd resolved not to encourage him further. That thought had me rushing to forestall more flirting. Choosing not to chase him anymore was turning out to be a hard promise to keep.

"I'm talking about ..." I stalled, searching for a more mundane

direction than my dirty mind wanted to allow. “Your knitting, of course. I guess it’s all in the name—the Knit Wits, right?”

His lip twitch let me know he was still tempted to tease.

“Yes. Our team sells a lot of what we make. If you want to see more of our wares, come to the farmer’s market Saturday.”

His invitation took me by surprise. Was it a date, or an invitation to support his habit?

“I can show you around the other booths, introduce you to some of my favorite vendors. We can hit up one of the food trucks for lunch.”

It sounded more and more like a date with every word. I bit my lip, debating. Did this count as him chasing me? My heart raced at the possibility, my earlier resolution dissolving. He’d approached me before trivia. Helped with my car. Knit me a beautiful scarf. Had I misread his signals?

Since when had I become a fading flower, uncomfortable asking the hard questions? Straightening up, I channeled my inner HR boss and asked him directly.

“Is it a date?”

His expression darkened, and my stomach sank. So, not a date. At least I could set my expectations accordingly.

“Jurors aren’t supposed to talk about the case or date,” he responded gruffly. Something about his sour expression soothed my ego. He watched me steadily. “But I figure if we just happened to meet in a public place and talked about anything other than the trial, we’d be okay. Saturday? Say noon?”

A thrill shot through me at his words. Definitely a date. No matter what he wanted to call it. I let my smile reach my eyes as I nodded.

Unable to resist a parting salvo, I gave him my cheekiest grin. “I look forward to seeing all your wares.”

His bark of laughter kept me warm as I got in my car and pulled away. I sank into the scarf, enjoying the soft fibers tickling my chin. Ty’s nimble fingers had made it. For me.

Tamra, Melena, and I had agreed to grab dinner together before our dance workshop. They'd already picked out a table at a small Thai restaurant, and I joined them, unwinding my scarf and placing it over my jacket and hat at my seat.

"Cute scarf. Is it new?"

Melena's innocent question sparked a warm glow in me. I couldn't help the small smile that crept over my features.

"Ty made it for me."

"Ty, huh? You consorting with the enemy now?"

Tamra's teasing question pricked at my playful side.

"Define consorting."

"Like you're up to your asterisk in lust. Letting him tickle your fancy," Melena offered.

"Where that *fancy asterisk* is your vagina," Tamra added helpfully.

Melena's peal of laughter had the other diners turning toward our table with gentle smiles.

"So, you and Ty, huh? Does Jimmy know?" Tamra asked.

Low blow. I shifted a quick glance to Melena, who'd borne the brunt of my own romantic meddling and disapproval. If she wanted payback, dropping any hints that Ty and I were dating to Jimmy would be perfect. Her innocent expression didn't reassure me. Then again, she had brothers, maybe she'd understand.

"It's none of Jimmy's business."

Melena's giggle had me narrowing my eyes.

"Right. His only sister and one of his oldest friends. He's going to have opinions."

I shrugged, pretending a cool I didn't feel. "It's just a friendly meetup. I'm not even sure he's into me."

Tamra radiated skepticism as she glanced from the soft yellow cap to the warm scarf folded on the chair back.

"Sure. Because friendly men knit me items of clothing *all the time*."

I ignored Tamra's sarcastic remark and held Melena's gaze with my own. "You won't tell Jimmy, will you?"

"He's my husband, I don't keep secrets from him."

Her soft censure simultaneously reassured and annoyed me. Melena didn't owe me anything. She was Jimmy's wife. And I didn't want her keeping secrets from him ... except mine. If I had to guard my tongue too tightly around her, I'd never be able to relax and truly trust her. But it was good to know Jimmy could.

"But I don't have to bring it up if he doesn't ask," she relented. "A friendly meetup isn't exactly breaking news."

"Unless it turns into a *meat* up." Tamra's rounded eyes and pursed lips did little to contain her mirth. After a beat, like she could hardly contain herself, she flipped her hand up, mimicking an erection in a naughty parody of a pledge. Our combined laughter rolled over the table, eliciting more smiles from the diners around us.

Maybe they wouldn't be so indulgent if they knew what we were laughing about.

Our meals arrived, and we passed the rest of dinner making quiet conversation about Tamra and Chase's upcoming wedding.

"You've rented the park pavilion where you and Chase had your first real date? That's so sweet," Melena said.

Brows raised, I couldn't help but ask, "Will your sister get a key to the pavilion kitchen?"

"Hell, *no*." Tamra's lips twitched, her face alight with mischief. "You and I are going to be the only ones with those keys, bridesmaids o' mine. And there'll be a *strict* procedure for entry. A 'Do Not Disturb' sign, a reservation system, the works."

"You going bridezilla on us, Tamra?" Melena teased.

Melena must have also known the story behind Tamra and Chase's interlude in the kitchen at her brother's wedding. There'd been drama between Tamra and her sister Jennifer when the latter discovered Chase and Tamra enjoying the privacy offered by the locked door.

When we finished dinner, we caravanned to Tamra's dance studio, using the bathroom there to change for class.

I slipped into my yoga pants and tank, trying to suppress the butterflies tickling my insides. Tamra was the dancer of our bunch. I liked to have fun on the dance floor, but I'd never taken formal classes. And nothing

even remotely resembling a pole class. Every dance movie I'd ever seen whipped through my mind, making me wonder if our instructor would be a hard-ass. Wasn't that the stereotype?

I slid onto a seat in the studio's lobby to wait with Tamra and Melena for class to start. The instructor, who introduced herself as Meghan, appeared innocuous enough—curvy and middle-aged with long blond hair, she looked more likely to tell me about her latest juice cleanse than like she'd demand I drop and give her twenty. More yoga chill than drill sergeant. It eased some of my misgivings about agreeing to the class.

A few other women filtered into the lobby, and after the instructor checked everyone in, with us newbies signing waivers, she invited us through the curtain to the studio itself.

Low light illuminated a series of poles fixed to the floor and ceiling, and a wall of mirrors reflected back the soft light. Meghan had already placed folding chairs at intervals around the room. It struck me as funny that it looked like a Dancer's Anonymous twelve-step program was about to start. The ridiculousness of that thought helped me break through my nerves. No one here knew me but Tamra and Melena. I was free to be campy, or sexy, or whatever the hell I felt like. On the dance floor, being too much was an asset, not a liability.

After a quick warm-up, Meghan walked us through the first few steps of the routine by starting standing behind the chair, then strutting around and seating ourselves, thighs pressed together. Over the next forty minutes she drilled us on the choreography, as we strutted, spread, pointed, and body-rolled our way through a seductive routine. The freedom was heady. No judgment, just me enjoying my body, trying out different variations of moves until one felt like me.

Most of my attention went to watching Meghan and listening to her cues, but I caught a few glances of Tamra and Melena as they worked their way through the routine on either side of me. Melena's intense focus made me worry there would be a quiz later. Tamra, on the other hand, transformed into a totally different woman under the soft lighting. On the dance floor, Tamra lit up from the inside. Confidence radiated from each motion, and the soft, sexy smile on her mouth drew every watcher into the fantasy. She had a

presence. It was easy to see she loved every minute.

By comparison, I felt like a klutz, catching my foot on my chair and scraping it across the floor loudly. Sheepishly, I mouthed “sorry” to the other dancers near me, before I pushed my shoulders back to try again.

“If you stumble, make it part of the dance. No apologies,” Meghan said.

She used her foot to push her chair across the floor before straddling it, a wicked smile on her face. She looked fierce. In control. I loved it.

Recapturing my confidence, I redoubled my efforts as she led us through the choreography once more. This time, when I stumbled, I pushed a triumphant smile onto my face, like I’d meant to do it. All bravado, leaving my brain and its messages of self-defeat behind.

And it felt good. Sure, everyone in class knew I didn’t follow the choreography exactly, but anyone who didn’t know the steps would have no clue. And weren’t most of us oblivious to the internal lives of others? If I didn’t give myself away, who would know?

Meghan clapped as we finished the last run-through, and I added a final flourish at the end.

“Looking good, ladies. Now let’s try it with music for each other. We’ll break into groups.” She counted us off quickly. “Group one, you’re up.”

I shook off my nerves, eager to perform. Learning something new had been fun. The challenge and the edge of discomfort felt real, like I was pushing myself. And embracing my mistakes as part of the dance felt less like a cover-up and more like adding extra flair after practicing so many times, catching the little touches others added out of the corner of my eye. There was no wrong way to dance. Here, being perfect meant being boring. It was the variations, the personality I added, that drew the eye and made the routine my own.

As if sensing my resolve, Tamra said, “You’ve got this, ladies.” Her gentle confidence bolstered my own.

Meghan cued our song, and I let my features relax into a soft and sultry expression as the first vocals of “Unsteady” by the X Ambassadors flowed through the room.

I sank into the song, letting the yearning and sensual beat slow my breathing, every motion achingly slow. Allowing my hands to caress my curves and my hair whip to the beat, softly closing my eyes to the room around me.

My classmates' clapping brought me back to the present as the song wound down, and I opened my eyes, breathing hard. Melena's beaming smile from the chair next to me echoed my own emotions.

"That was amazing. Both of you."

Triumph washed through me. I hadn't been perfect, but I'd been me. And that had been more than enough.

"Thanks, Tamra. I can't wait to watch you."

Group two's performance was everything I imagined the routine would look like when a varied group performed. Tamra wasn't the only experienced dancer in the group. Another woman she seemed to know, Becca, was also phenomenal. The Black woman whipped her braids around to the beat and let her hands wander over her full figure. *Hot*. They both were. Tamra had perfected the art of slow motion. I fanned myself, watching as she let her head roll from one shoulder to another. Something so simple shouldn't have been sexy, but it built an odd sort of anticipation, just watching.

Seeing how each woman expressed her individuality within the broad strokes of the choreography only reinforced my appreciation. A hair toss here, an extra hip swivel there, those little touches added personality. I could understand why Tamra loved these classes so much, why she'd badgered us into joining her. I felt sexy and powerful, and it was exhilarating.

After our cooldown, we hung around the lobby sipping from our water bottles. My hair had frizzed thanks to the humidity in the studio, and I pushed a sweaty hank away from my cheek.

Tamra grinned at us as she took another swig of water. "What did you think? Glad I made you come tonight?"

"Yes," Melena responded with alacrity, and I nodded.

"It was good to just *be* for an hour. I forget what it's like to be totally absorbed, learning something new and not checking my phone or thinking about what I have to do next," I admitted.

“Exactly.” Tamra’s triumphant smile beamed at me. “I get so caught up in the day-to-day, taking some time out to appreciate what my body can do and enjoy it is a nice change of pace. I’m glad you both came tonight. Maybe again, sometime soon?”

“For sure.”

“That is, if you’re not too busy with Ty,” she said suggestively. “Dance isn’t the only thing that can give you a transcendent, out-of-body experience. He seems like he’d like to give you a hand at letting go.”

I groaned at her teasing, glancing at Melena, who remained impassive. As if she didn’t want to hear anything that would prompt her to tell Jimmy about my blooming feelings for Ty. It would serve me right if she ran home and blurted it all out. Maybe I underestimated Jimmy. It was possible he wasn’t as protective of me as I was of him. But payback was a bitch, and so was I when he first introduced Melena as his wife. If he wasn’t already planning to interfere out of some misguided protective instinct, would he be tempted to anyways, just to mess with me?

Regardless, it was too early to worry about Jimmy’s reaction. Ty had turned me down once. An invitation to meet him at the farmer’s market wasn’t exactly fuel for sexy fantasies. But the makeout session in the hall at Haven had been. I shifted, resisting the urge to flex the tired muscles in my thighs to relieve the sudden phantom ache there.

I glanced longingly back at the studio. Forgetting my life, even for a bit, had been a relief. Work worries had been pushed out of my mind while I’d been focused on class.

“Out-of-body experiences aside, I’ve got to get this body home and into a shower.” I held back a yawn with effort. “I’ve got to finish my weekend chores and catch up on work before the farmer’s market tomorrow.”

“And you wouldn’t want to look tired for *the farmer’s market*,” Tamra said, going the whole nine yards with air quotes and heavy intonation.

Melena mimed zipping her lips, and I relaxed. My smile was more than a little sheepish.

“Yeah, that’s part of it.” At Tamra’s snort, I relented. “Okay, yes, that’s all of it. Have a good night and drive safe.”

I bundled up, snuggling into the yellow scarf around my neck, and

braved the cold on my way to my car.

Spending time with Tamra and Melena had been what I needed to clear my head. Ground me. Their gentle teasing reminded me that things with Ty didn't have to be hard. Though I wanted *some* things to be. I giggled at my own joke, sad Tamra wasn't there to witness it.

I'd take my time with Ty. Let things develop naturally. There was no reason to rush. The sizzle and fizzle we created at Haven didn't have to be the pattern we followed. We could take it slow, keep it friendly, and see where things went.

CHAPTER 8 – TY

Keeping the triumphant smile off my face took effort. Asking Andi out had been easier than I expected, though I hadn't exactly been Mr. Smooth. I glanced at my phone as I slid into my truck.

Jimmy: Meet me at the gym in the morning?

I gulped. Would he be able to smell my lust for his sister on me? I hadn't been avoiding Jimmy since I asked Andi out per se. But I hadn't exactly been begging to get together either. Sure, he'd given his blessing, but I struggled to believe it. One measly conversation couldn't immediately offset every dirty look he'd doled out in high school. He'd been notorious for warning the entire team away from his precious sister. I couldn't blame him, they'd been living with their grandma at the time, and he'd been protective. But it made believing the new, improved Jimmy difficult. I kept expecting him to fall back into old patterns.

Was this how it started? The erosion of friendship? Not with outright confrontation, but avoidance? None of us were the same as we were in high school. Faith that Jimmy could be okay with Andi and I dating had to start somewhere. I couldn't stall any longer.

Ty: Sure. I have the farmer's market, but if we meet early, I can fit it in.

Jimmy: See you there.

Would he use his bro-jo to sense I had plans with Andi? Or should I just tell him? We were both adults and had been a long time. We didn't need his permission. He'd made that clear. But I didn't want to lose his friendship. One slip of the bar, and I could be easily injured lifting. It'd look like an accident.

Jimmy was too honorable for that. He wouldn't injure me on purpose. Unless I messed up.

I swallowed, finding my resolve. Tried to let go of my lingering

paranoia.

So just don't mess up.

Sure.

Easy.

Not.

Blown knee. Dumped by my fiancé. Sure, I'd stumbled into a new career I loved as a 911 dispatcher, but if things hinged on me not screwing up, I was doomed.

“Hey.”

I tipped my head to acknowledge Jimmy's gravelly greeting, stretching my arms wide to warm up. We were used to early morning workout sessions, sometimes with Chase joining us, but it still took Jimmy a while to get fully awake.

“Morning. Chase coming today?” I asked, trying to keep my tone casual.

I hadn't decided if having Chase present would help or hurt my case with Jimmy. Chase was enough of a wildcard; it could go either way.

Jimmy grunted before nodding. He looked more tired than usual, and I peered at him closely as I pulled my heel to my glute, stretching.

“Everything okay with you?”

He hid a yawn behind his hand, nodding as he rolled out his ankles. “Yeah, just a late night with Melena.”

The underlying contentment in his words made my lips twitch.

“I remember a time when a late night meant something else. Marriage suits you.” I toasted him silently with my water bottle.

“Yeah, it does.” His smug smile said it all. “When are you going to take that sweet walk to the altar?”

I choked on my sip of water, coughing to clear my airway and buy time. Had Andi said something about our plans? I glanced down. Was I wearing a sign that said *TOTES LUSTING AFTER YOUR SISTER*? I cleared my throat, assessing his expression. Jimmy appeared calm. Innocent. Not like he was

trying to trip me up.

I rubbed a hand through my hair. “You know I haven’t been serious about anyone since Jess and I broke it off.”

His scowl reminded me he’d never been Jess’s biggest fan.

“You’re better off without her. She only wanted one thing.”

I raised my brows. “You lecturing me on sex right now?”

He chuffed a laugh. “No, pervert. I meant your fame. She wanted to be the wife of a famous athlete. She didn’t want you.”

“Ouch,” I said, rubbing my chest.

“I’m sure your pretty face had something to do with it too,” he acknowledged. “But you can do better.”

Taking a deep breath, I put it out there. “Like ... Andi?”

I caught Jimmy as he was taking his own sip from his water bottle, and he coughed, wheezing.

My gut clenched. His face turned red as he worked to catch his breath, and his expression was hard to read. I waited him out, watching as his color returned to normal under his tanned skin. Had his pep talk at trivia been all for show? Now that I’d finally asked Andi out, changing his mind wasn’t out of the question.

“If you think you can handle Andi, you’re welcome to try.”

“What, really?”

Too easy. There had to be a catch. I leaned away, examining his expression. Sincere, or messing with me? If I turned, would he haul back and kick me in the butt for having dirty fantasies about his sister? Flashbacks of him stuffing Tommy Barnes in a locker for copping a feel slithered through my mind.

“As she’s reminded me, she takes care of herself. And sometimes me.” The last bit he muttered under his breath, but I still caught the faint words.

My eyes narrowed. “Are you sure you’re the same guy who said he’d nut and disown any of our teammates who hit on his sister? I distinctly remember threats to spike our water and frame us for steroids.”

Jimmy shrugged, all relaxed satisfaction. “What can I say? I’m a happily married man. While it’d serve Andi right if I meddled in her love life,

she's likely to give you more grief than I ever could all on her own."

"Thanks, I guess?"

Unsure how to react, I took another sip of water. Was I supposed to defend Andi's honor, or accept that Jimmy really was older and wiser and be grateful? While I was deliberating, Chase arrived, looking more than a little rough and bleary-eyed. Living that glamorous writer life, probably up late writing all the words.

"Sorry I'm late. I'll stretch and catch up."

I nodded, still thinking about Jimmy's easy acceptance as we moved to the bench press. I spotted Jimmy for his first set, then moved into position for my own.

Focusing on my breathing and making each motion smooth, I sank into the lift, counting out each repetition. My arms shook from the effort as I reached the last one, and Jimmy placed his hands beneath the bar, ready to help if I needed it.

I made the mistake of catching his gaze, and the gleam there should have warned me. He placed a hand against the bar, keeping me from seating it in the brackets, and waited as my arms shook harder.

"Andi may be able to take care of herself, but don't mistake that with thinking you can break her heart. She's still my sister."

His vocal register grew deeper as he intoned his last words, matching the dark expression on his face.

"Easy there, killer," Chase spoke up from over Jimmy's shoulder. "I'd like a turn at the bench before you turn our friend into a pancake."

Jimmy winked, helping me replace the bar, and I inhaled deeply before shaking out my hands and sitting up. I could beat my chest and push up into his space, but part of me understood. If anyone screwed with Julie, I'd be all over their ass too. So, no pressure.

We were mostly silent as we worked through our rotation for arm day. But it was still a friendly sort of quiet. And Jimmy didn't try to crush me. I didn't even insist Chase swap with him when it came time to spot me. A little posturing wasn't the end of the world. He had to save face, couldn't let me off the hook too easily. But still, it was an enlightened Jimmy. Maybe his wife's influence? He'd always been a charming bastard, but with

Melena's arrival in his life and that shiny ring on his finger, he'd reached new heights of self-assurance and what I could only assume was peace.

Happiness looked good on him. And if it meant I had his blessing to date Andi, I'd be thankful to Melena.

After cleaning up and changing into fresh jeans and a T-shirt for my farmer's market shift, I loaded up my folding table and chairs in the back of my pickup and drove to Proctor for the market. The air was crisp, but the sun was burning away the morning fog, and it promised to be a gorgeous day for the farmer's market.

The Knit Wits booth helped fund our yarn obsession, keeping us in skeins to knit for our donation projects. I'd grown adept at hats, blankets, scarves, and mittens. Knitting kept me from going stir-crazy on calls, keeping my hands busy. Feeling productive, even when I had no control, helped soothe the helplessness after hard calls. Jeannie had coached me in my early days as a dispatcher, helping me learn. Knitting lessons had been a key part of her curriculum for emotional survival, and she'd been right. The soft yarn slipping through my fingers as I manipulated the fibers into new patterns had a meditative quality that couldn't be ignored.

I set up our table and chairs, waiting for Jeannie to arrive with our tent and wares for the day. Fiftyish and fit, Jeannie ran marathons in her spare time and had the wiry strength that went with pounding out those miles. She could never stay still, which also made her a prolific knitter.

"Hey, Ty. You ready to make some green today?"

I turned to smile at the older woman. Dressed in bright orange activewear and a navy hoodie, her short gray hair complemented her brown skin and dark eyes.

"You know it. Do you mind if I bug out for a while at lunch? I have a friend dropping by."

Her grin turned mischievous. "Is this 'friend' the hottie from Trebek's Rejects?"

"Ye-es," I drew the word out. "How did you know?"

Her peal of laughter had others turning our way. "Romeo, you're not as subtle as you think you are, making out with the opposing team in the restroom hallway. Linda, Bill, and Maggie all saw you treating the lovely

lady to your version of tonsil hockey. They reported back with a play-by-play. And here I thought you were only a soccer guy.”

She giggled at her own joke, and I rubbed my hands through my hair, unsure if I should be embarrassed or just brazen it out. Jeannie didn’t act like the team cared.

“You don’t mind?” I asked.

She shook her head. “So long as you stay with the Knit Wits and don’t defect to the Rejects, we’re good. However, try to change teams, and it won’t be pretty.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered sheepishly.

A delighted smile lit her face. “I was young once, you know.”

“Jeannie, you’re still young. You can run circles around me.”

“True,” she said. “But I’m not getting horny in any bar hallways. Just don’t let that pretty young thing keep us from winning and we’ll be fine. She can have your little brain, we just need the big one.”

She chortled, and I sketched a quick salute, knowing better than to argue about which was which with a woman who could be my mother.

We set out our beanies and pot holders, then moved on to display the shawls and more elaborate cowls and blankets. The rainbow hats I’d made with the big pom poms on top were still my favorite. Colorful and cheerful, working on them always made me feel optimistic. Traffic to our booth was slow and steady throughout the morning, and I couldn’t help but keep glancing at my phone, anxious for Andi to join me. Not specifying a time had been a rookie mistake. It left me stuck in anticipation mode, her arrival imminent, but just out of reach.

“You’re making me nervous,” Jeannie finally complained. “Go get me a cup of coffee or something and walk off some of your energy.”

“Sure, Jeannie. Black?”

“Like my soul,” she cackled.

I shook my head indulgently. Yes. Because dark individuals volunteered their time and talent to knit projects for charity. I stood in line and bought a cup for her at a booth a few tables down, and darn if she didn’t have me half-convinced she was actually a witch when I returned to find Andi standing at our booth.

My smile brightened as I caught her hesitant expression. I had reason to be nervous. There were a thousand ways I could screw this up. Probably already had. But Andi? She had nothing to be concerned about. She was beautiful. Sexy. Clad in casual jeans and a bright orange sweater, she looked like what I'd come to think of her as—sunshine. Bright and bold, sometimes shining light in uncomfortable places, but always with a warmth that came through in everything she did.

“Thanks for coming,” I rumbled softly through the sudden obstruction in my throat. “Let me drop this off for Jeannie, then I can show you around.” I turned, Jeannie’s watchful gaze taking in everything about me and Andi. “Your coffee, milady.”

Jeannie flicked a hand at me. “Oh, get on with you. Show Andi all the best spots at the market.” She winked. “It’s too bad there aren’t any dark hallways to explore.”

I flushed, casting a quick glance at Andi to see if she’d picked up on Jeannie’s meaning. Judging from her pink cheeks, she had an idea what the older woman was referring to. It was our own fault. Cuddling in plain sight of our teammates should have had predictable consequences, i.e., not flying under the radar, even for a moment.

Pushing aside any remnants of embarrassment, I grabbed Andi’s hand, giving it a quick squeeze as I responded to Jeannie, “You’re just jealous.”

“Damn right.” She saluted me with her cup. “Now, go. Have fun. I’ll still be here when you’re all done.”

With those parting words, Andi sketched a quick wave to the other woman, and we turned to explore the other booths. Andi was uncharacteristically silent, and I kept sliding glances her way, trying to guess what was going on in her head.

“Everything okay?” I asked. “It’s not a big deal if the Knit Wits know we’re seeing each other. I have no plans to hide our relationship.”

Her shy smile warmed my heart, unlocking the lingering bit of tension there. While my grip on her hand was loose and easy to pull away from, her hand stayed warm and sure in mine.

“I feel foolish for not realizing we’d have a hard time keeping this on

the down-low.”

“Why would we want to?” I asked. Was she ashamed of me? Of us? Kissing wasn’t anything scandalous. I glanced again at our joined hands. Did she already have regrets?

“The court case?” she reminded gently.

Right. Dating could mess up the trial. Our civic duty, blah, blah, blah. I’d pitched today as a simple meet up, a casual date. I had to get us back on that footing. It was too early to scare her off. And I had an obligation to my fellow jurors not to screw up.

I cleared my throat. “Sure, court. Cue change of subject.” I gestured to the booth of local raw honey in front of us. “Joe’s has the best honey in the state.”

“Are you an expert? Have you tasted all the honey in the state?”

Her teasing question shouldn’t have provoked the dirty desires that flared in me. I’d like to taste *her* honey. The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I resisted.

Casual. C-A-S-U-A-L. See, I could still spell. Maybe I hadn’t been totally addled watching her lips form the word “honey” and asking after my expertise.

I cleared my throat, wondering how close to the line I could tiptoe without going over it. “I do love honey,” I said injecting as much suggestion as I could into the words. “But I haven’t had the time to taste everything I want to. Good things take time, and I’m willing to wait.”

Andi bit one rosy lip, and I nearly groaned. She wasn’t making it easy to hold back.

Her expression turned mischievous as she tracked my focus on her lip. “Not me, I’m like a kid. Dessert first.”

I ignored the hoarse quality to my voice, pretending nothing was wrong, that her words didn’t make me want to spontaneously combust, as I said, “Let’s go check out the Ramirez Farm. They have really ...” *Don’t say anything dirty. Don’t say anything dirty.* “firm fennel,” I choked out.

“Yeah?” She let a small smile tilt her lips. “You going to cook for me? Make me something mouthwatering?”

“I’d love to cook for you.” Was what I said, holding back the more

honest response. *I'd love to make you wet. Mouth. Pussy. You make my mouth water.*

"I'll have to take you up on that sometime." Andi had no idea how her words stoked my fantasies, though maybe the heat in my gaze tipped her off. "Especially if you're making something tasty."

Tasting her was all I could think about. Shoving any thoughts of taking her lips with mine, I did my best to play guide.

We admired the produce at the Ramirez booth, and I tilted my chin, acknowledging Eduardo.

"Hey, Ty. What can I get you today?"

I bit back answering *a brain that doesn't spit out double entendres when I'm trying to play it cool* and forced a smile. Andi swooped in before I could answer, asking if he had any leeks and giving me a cheeky smile before inquiring about fennel. "I hear you have the firmest fennel around."

Thankfully, Eduardo ignored any less-than-innocent glances Andi shot my way and simply nodded. "Yes, all of our produce is farm fresh, picked this morning."

Andi made a few purchases, tucking them away in a canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

"What else do you want to get? I didn't realize you were shopping."

She winked. "Just anything that strikes my fancy."

I rolled my lips between my teeth to keep the smile in. Maybe I wasn't the only one falling back into comfortable catchphrases.

"See anything you like?" I asked innocently, spreading my arms wide.

"A few things," she answered, her expression cagey. "But right now, I'm positively aching for ... a tamale."

The flirtatious light in her eyes could have kept me entertained for days but feeding her had been part of the deal.

"You got it. Sara's stand is around the corner."

I placed a hand at the small of her back, using it to shelter her from the growing crowd as we wound our way between groups toward the south end of the park. Sara's Tamales had a long line out in front, and we took our place in the queue.

“I’m glad you joined me today,” I admitted, admiring the sun shining on her dark hair.

“Yeah? Me too,” she said softly, watching me steadily. “It was unexpected, after you brushed me off the other night at Haven.”

Was she referring to the first time, or the second time? I held back my wince. With our track record, it was a wonder Andi had given me another chance. Would it help or hurt my case if she knew part of the reason I’d held back was Jimmy?

We reached the head of the line, saving me from answering. After receiving our tamales, we found seats on a bench at the nearby school. Andi dug into her pork tamale, and the look of pleasure as she bit into the steaming mixture of masa, meat, and chiles had me shifting in my seat, pausing to watch. Her blissed-out expression was one I’d like to see again. Over and over. But maybe not publicly.

“So, do you miss it?”

Her question caught me off guard. “Miss what?”

“Soccer.”

I chewed, giving myself time to consider my answer. Poking at the spot where my regrets lived, seeing if it still hurt. And more than a little surprised when I came away pain-free.

“For a while, yeah. But now? Not so much,” I admitted. “I really do like being an operator, as much as some days are hard.” Not wanting the shadow of difficult days to impact our time together, I rushed into my own question. “What about you? Do you enjoy your work?”

“Most days. Lately, there’s been a lot of turmoil and management changes at work. I’m not sure where that leaves me.”

Sensing her disquiet, I searched for a happier topic. “What about outside of work? I know you’re a regular at trivia, but any other hobbies?”

“Reading, travel, food, Toastmasters, the usual.”

Andi sold herself short too often. Everything about her was exceptional.

“Ah, Andi. That’s where you’re wrong. You’re anything but usual. What is Toastmasters? A drinking club?”

Her chuckle confirmed I’d guessed wrong.

“It’s a public speaking organization. We meet weekly and work on developing our skills and compete.”

I nodded. “Now *that* sounds like you.”

“You calling me competitive, Hot Stuff?”

“Let’s not forget mouthy.”

“Hey!”

Her mock protest left me chuckling as I snagged another bite of tamale, glad to have lightened the mood. As we were finishing our lunch, I spied a familiar dark head.

Rosie had spotted me too, running up to us with a soccer ball in hand.

“Hi, Uncle Ty.”

“Rosie! What are you doing here?” I asked, glancing between her and two other girls on her soccer team, Lissie and Gemma.

“Sorry, Coach. It looks like you’re busy, but the girls wanted to say hi,” Gemma’s mother apologized as she got close enough to be heard.

Rosie leaned into my side, snuggling next to me. “Who’s the pretty lady, Uncle Ty? Are you going to bring her to family dinner? Mom says you need a woman who’s not a one-hit wonder.”

Her faux whisper wasn’t nearly as quiet as she thought, and Andi’s shoulders shook with the effort to hold back her laughter. Rosie’s face scrunched with confusion. “What’s a one-hit wonder, Uncle Ty?”

“Girls, it’s time to go. Coach, we’ll see you at the next game.” Gemma’s mom saved me, butting in with a contrite smile as she pulled them away.

“Coach, huh?”

Thankful Andi left the one-hit wonder comment alone, I nodded.

“Yeah, in case you didn’t catch it, Rosie is my niece. I coach her soccer team.”

“That’s freaking adorable.”

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck. Would it change her opinion if she knew Rosie was also my daughter? There was a slight resemblance, mostly in the shape of our noses, but not enough to give us away. I opened my mouth, then closed it, something holding me back. Maybe blurting out our family dynamics on the first date was too soon. It had been

an immediate red card for other women I dated, and I didn't want to risk it with Andi. Not yet. Not when we were getting along so well. I took in Andi's generous smile, those soft lips calling to me. There'd be time to tell her later.

"Ready to keep exploring?" I asked instead.

I threw away our trash before extending my hand for Andi's. Her soft fingers clasping my own made my heart race. The warmth of our connection both exciting and soothing. I'd existed without the comfort of someone else for too long. Usually, I'd hang out at the Knit Wits booth, making small talk with customers and chatting with Jeannie or whomever was on shift with me. But such surface interactions lacked the closeness of having a person there just for me. With me.

We wandered the other stalls in the market, admiring the handicrafts and foods. This time of year, the market was small, but when late spring hit, it would be flush with more shoppers and produce. Andi picked up a few more items for her canvas bag before we returned to the Knit Wits booth with Jeannie.

"Did you buy everyone out?" she asked teasingly.

"I certainly thought about it. This is a great farmer's market. But I have to get going, and I know you still have work to do," Andi said, poking me in the arm.

The sparkle in her eyes and good humor had me wishing we were somewhere more private. With Jeannie as witness, hauling off and kissing her seemed a bit much. Instead, I smiled.

"I'm glad you came to have lunch with me today. Maybe next time it can be dinner?"

Her lips quirked. "I believe Rosie already beat you to that invite," she teased.

"Well, I'll second it then. We'll have to set something up after the trial is over."

I didn't want her to leave. She stared steadily back at me, as if waiting for me to make the first move. Cheeks flushed, lips velvety, I wanted nothing more than to sink into her softness and yield to the subtle tension between us.

Jeannie cleared her throat, reminding me that we had a whole market

full of witnesses. In other circumstances, kissing Andi in public would be my pleasure. But with our jury duty obligations, I felt the pressure to be more circumspect. I'd argue that Andi couldn't sway me with kisses, but it'd only take a single look in the mirror to see the lie in my eyes. Andi's influence on me was growing faster than I wanted to admit.

Unable to resist watching her as she walked away, I believed I managed some level of cool, pretending to reorganize the hats at the same time, but Jeannie wasn't fooled.

"You really like her," she teased.

"What's not to like?"

"This is the same woman you called a pesky know-it-all?"

I shrugged. Her intelligence was one of the many things I *liked* about Andi, not exactly a deal breaker. Pretending it had annoyed me had been the best coping mechanism I had at the time.

"Well, I guess one of the keys to happiness is a bad memory. She seems lovely. At least when she's not wiping the floor with you."

CHAPTER 9 – ANDI

Feeling giddy after spending the afternoon with Ty hadn't been in my plans. Sure, I liked him, probably more than I should, but the effervescent lightness was unexpected. New and delicate, like bubbles I didn't want to pop.

Hearing the little girls call him coach made all my eggs drop out of my ovaries like an elevator gone bad. And I didn't even think I wanted kids. But he was adorable with them, and it was fun to see a different side of the gruff, competitive man I'd grown to admire.

Tamra: How was the MEAT up? Tasty?

Melena: It'd better not taste like defeat. We still need to WIN on Thursday. Keep your panties on.

I chuckled as I read through their comments. Tamra's opening salvo on our group text shouldn't have surprised me. But Melena piling on did. Usually quiet, I'd been able to prick her into pushing back a few times, but her normal policy with me and Tamra was calm acceptance.

I bit my lip, debating my response.

Andi: Innocent as pie. I'm still ready to dominate next trivia night.

Tamra: CHERRY pie? Just so long as you come out on TOP.

Melena: Don't let lust win.

I'd typed out "What about love?" in jest before I could stop myself. My finger hovered over the SEND button. Did I mean it? I believed in love, but my time with Ty was too new, too delicate to label. We'd barely scratched the surface of what it meant to be friends, let alone lovers.

Then again, I'd known Ty off and on for years. Hung out at his games when he and Jimmy played together. He'd been to our gran's house for dinner more times than I could count when we were teens. True, he'd always been attached at the hip to Jess, and we'd never dated, but their relationship hadn't stopped me from dreaming.

As an adult, he hit every note. Maybe grumpy and competitive at times, but those hints of sweetness were still there. Watching him with his niece reminded me of all the times he'd been kind to a younger me. At his root, Ty was a good man. Caring, hardworking, smart, and with a body that wouldn't quit.

I could feel myself getting serious quickly. Probably too quickly. But did he feel the same?

I deleted my draft. Committing that much, even in text to my friends, didn't feel right. Yet.

I gulped. It was the *yet* I mentally attached to my statement that scared me. Was Ty fundamentally decent? Absolutely. But he'd already demonstrated the ability to blow hot and cold with me. Mostly cold. Protecting myself a while longer, holding back until I was sure of him, made sense. Giving too much of myself too soon had only led to heartbreak in the past. Unequal affection was not what I wanted for my future.

Andi: A little lust never hurt anyone.

So false, but maybe something they'd buy.

*Melena: Tell me that after you slip and fall on his
<eggplant emoji>.*

Playful threats aside, Tamra and Melena would have my back. I had nothing to fear. Except my own runaway feelings.

Shelly's T-shirt on Monday morning proclaimed CLEVERLY DISGUISED AS A RESPONSIBLE ADULT and I smiled at the sentiment.

"Good morning."

The older woman looked up from a sudoku book. "Good morning, Andi. Have a nice weekend?"

I nodded, unable to help shifting a glance to Ty's empty seat. "I did."

"Hmm."

Shelly's knowing smile had me taking a quick sip of coffee to hide my expression. I hadn't told her about our date, but she seemed to sense something was up.

“Ready for another day of thrilling testimony?” I asked, trying to divert her.

She shook her head before leaning in and dropping her voice. “I was talking with the coordinator, and there’s a rumor they’ll sequester us after today. Baseball fans have gotten wind of the case and made threats to the courthouse on social media. Can you imagine? Getting upset over baseball? I hope we at least get a nice hotel.”

“Can they do that? I didn’t think this case would warrant something that severe?”

She lifted a shoulder, and I frowned. I’d been able to stay up on work after hours, picking away at emails and urgent projects, but sequestration might change my options. Would I be allowed to have my laptop?

Ty strolled in, a travel mug in one strong hand, and his knitting bag slung over one shoulder. Dressed in a dark green polo and tan slacks, he looked tasty enough to eat.

“Yummy, hmm?”

Sam’s vocalization of my thoughts startled me, and I glanced to where he’d taken the seat next to me.

“Something like that,” I admitted.

His dark blond hair was smoothed back from his face, and he gave me a toothy grin.

“I’d flip you for him, but I have a feeling you’ve already got this one on lock.”

Unsure of what to say, I was grateful when Ramon arrived to brief us on the day’s schedule and to confirm Shelly’s suspicions. “Unfortunately, due to security concerns, we expect Judge Ye will order sequestration today.”

“What does that mean?”

Ramon frowned. “You’ll all be issued hotel rooms for the remainder of the case. Please leave any laptops or smart watches at home.”

Groans erupted from my fellow jurors, and Ramon held up his hands.

“I know, I know. It’s not what you signed up for, but it should only be for a few days.”

There was a lot of grumbling among the jurors, but not a lot we could do otherwise. Ty looked resigned to his fate. Maybe he’d been expecting the

judge's move. He had more experience than the rest of us with the media and attention that could surround professional sports. After a day of mind-numbing financial record testimony and character witnesses, the judge excused us for the evening. We were given an hour to gather clothes and toiletries before reporting to our hotel.

I packed swiftly when I got home, staring longingly at my laptop. Leaving it behind was going to hurt. As much as I'd wanted a break from work and jumped at jury duty as my way to get it, this kind of disruption was going to make my life hell when I finished. Imagining the emails piling up after at least two days away to wrap up testimony and deliberations made my head ache. I placed a quick call to Mark, hoping I'd get voicemail.

"Hi, Andi."

Darn caller ID. It would have been easier to provide him with a fait accompli in the form of a message. After all, it wasn't like Mark could argue with the judge.

"Hi, Mark. How have things been at work?" I asked, dreading his response.

"We're managing," he answered mildly. Was that a good sign or a bad one for my future there? "We definitely miss you though, is there any news about when your trial will end?"

The hopeful note in his voice made me grimace. He was about to be *very* disappointed.

"About that," I said, "the judge has ordered sequestration, so this will be my last contact for a while."

"What? They can do that?"

I frowned. It wasn't like I asked for this. The disbelief in his tone stung.

"They're moving us to a hotel and cutting off our communications until we finish, but I think it'll only be a few more days."

"I still can't believe they're sequestering you. It's rare, isn't it?"

"Mark, you can contact the county with my juror number to confirm if you don't believe me," I said sharply, feeling impatient.

"No, no. It's not that," he backpedaled swiftly. "We're just anxious to have you back in the office. I'm eager to have you back. I didn't realize

how much the department relied on you before now. We're lucky to have you."

Somewhat mollified, I gentled my tone. "It should only be for a few more days."

"We'll count on it. I want to talk more about your role in the department when you return."

Still mulling over the conversation with Mark and the possible meanings behind his parting remark, I drove to our assigned hotel. The court put us in a clean yet basic local chain hotel without any frills other than a restaurant/bar. Shelly met me in the lobby, a hot pink roller bag in tow.

"Hey, Andi. We're meeting in the restaurant for dinner after we get settled. Then I've got us booked for karaoke in the bar."

She seemed so thrilled with the pronouncement. I didn't have the heart to tell her karaoke wasn't my thing. I gathered my key from the front desk before taking the elevator to the fourth floor and my room. I slid my key into the reader as the door next to mine popped open.

"Andi?"

I gulped, letting his rough and tumble voice rattle my nerve endings.

"Hey, Ty."

He stood in the door to the room next to mine, his polo and slacks from earlier slightly rumpled from our day in court and the shadow of stubble darkening his jawline. Everything I wanted after a long day. I could easily imagine cuddling on the couch, watching TV and talking about our work. Longing washed through me as I took in Ty's broad shoulders. Snuggling up against him sounded like heaven.

Except we couldn't. Stupid jury rules.

I swallowed hard, meeting his gaze and letting my fantasies of a relaxing evening together disintegrate.

"Are you coming to dinner?" he asked, tilting his head to the elevator.

I nodded, forcing a smile. "Yes, Shelly's talking about karaoke after, but I'm not sure I'm that brave."

He snorted. "You? Not brave? That doesn't sound like you."

"I'm truly terrible. You have no idea what kind of torture you're

asking for.”

His lips tilted in a smile. “Even if that’s true, I bet you give it all you’ve got, and that’s something I want to see.”

“Yeah, what about you, Hot Stuff? Are you going to be giving us the solo vocal stylings of Ty Sheldon?”

He shifted his weight in the door, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m more of a back-up vocalist. I like to blend into the background.”

I chuckled. “Ty, you couldn’t blend if you tried. Tell you what, I’ll sing solo tonight—if you will. Winner gets the drink of their choice from the bar.”

His grin was a thing of beauty, taking over his whole face, causing his eyes to crinkle.

“Challenge accepted. I’ll see you down there?”

I nodded, moving inside my room and quickly hanging my clothes. The hotel room had a single king-size bed and a small desk, nothing fancy but still functional. After freshening my makeup, I took the elevator back to the lobby and joined the other jurors at a collection of tables pushed together in the restaurant to accommodate us.

Ty glanced up from his menu, gesturing to the seat beside him. “I saved you a spot.”

“Thanks,” I said as I slipped into the chair. “Anything look good tonight?”

His onceover had me tingling from my head to my toes, pressing my thighs together. Here we were, surrounded by ten of our fellow jurors, and I couldn’t suppress the fire blooming inside as if it were only the two of us.

I took a quick sip of the ice water in front of me, trying to cool my overheated system.

“You could say that. Are you hungry?”

With his gaze still focused on my lips, I had a feeling he was talking about more than food.

“Famished,” I admitted.

“Order whatever you want,” Shelly crowed from beside me. She winked when I turned her way. “I have a feeling it’s all on the menu tonight.”

Her playful smile reminded me we had an audience. A very bored

one. I glanced around, noting the open stares and surreptitious glances.

I cleared my throat. “What are you having, Shelly?”

“Nothing as delicious as tall, dark, and grumpy over there. I’m going to have to settle for steak.” Her exaggerated wink made me smile. “At my age, I need all the red-blooded satisfaction I can get. Don’t waste that young body you’ve got.”

Ignoring her advice, I glanced over the menu, settling on a pasta dish. The server came around to take our orders, scribbling furiously to catch it all. I felt sorry for the teen girl, she looked barely old enough to be working. Her usual crowd was probably more sedate than twelve jurors who’d been cooped up in a courtroom too long. A current of suppressed excitement ran through our group, ready for release.

We were on our best behavior through dinner, avoiding talking about the case and testimony, but it was hard. For the most part, it was the only thing we had in common. Shelly kept things lively asking random questions.

“Would you rather be rich and famous or have a huge impact on the world but be unknown?”

I glanced at Ty, curious how he’d answer. He was the only one of us who’d ostensibly experienced both.

“I played professional soccer for a few years. Soccer didn’t make me rich, and here it doesn’t make you all that famous, but it still garners a lot of attention.” He shrugged. “There’s a lot of downside to being noticed.”

I wondered if he was thinking of our trial as he said it, but he didn’t address it directly. Ever the rule-follower, our Ty.

“I’d pick impact over fame. Being unknown might be a perk,” he admitted.

To be fair, I’d probably pick the same, though the idea of never having to worry about job stability or rent again held its own appeal. Maybe not enough to trade my privacy. Having a nosey older brother was bad enough, I couldn’t imagine being subject to tabloids and paparazzi.

As dinner wound down, Shelly ushered us to the tiny hotel bar. Dark and dimly lit, it was probably usually a relaxing place to grab a cocktail. But our group filled it to capacity, and I groaned as I noticed the karaoke setup in the corner. Why had I hoped she’d been kidding?

I glanced at Ty, remembering our challenge from earlier. He grinned back, provocation in every line of his lips.

My mind raced, thinking of songs I could manage. There were precious few. Jimmy liked to tease that I could caterwaul like a howler monkey. Not the most flattering description, and closer to the truth than I liked to admit.

I glanced longingly at the bar. It might take a shot or two to gather the courage to sing in front of my fellow jurors. And Ty. Glancing at his broad shoulders, I gulped. Couldn't forget about Ty. He'd been especially confident, challenging me to a sing-off. He probably had an amazing voice. The deep bass that reached into my heart probably translated beautifully into song.

The long-haired karaoke attendant invited us to fill out song cards, and I stared longingly at the door. Returning to my room held a lot of appeal. Taking a deep breath, I steeled my resolve. Maybe they had autotune? If the world's pop singers could get a little help, couldn't I?

Shelly interrupted my desperate thoughts with a jab of her elbow.

"You pick out a song yet?"

I shook my head. "What about you? Do you have a favorite?"

"I've always been a sucker for Def Leppard's 'Pour Some Sugar on Me.'"

I could picture it. Shelly could probably croon with the best of them.

She sighed, melting back into her seat. "The eighties, man. Those were the days. Big hair, fast sex, and good times." She squinted at me from between slitted eyes. "Don't waste your youth or those tits, Andi. Go for what you want." She cast a sly look at Ty. "*Everything* you want."

Mary got up to sing while I debated my song choice. I hadn't spoken much with Mary, but I admired her for volunteering to go first. Then again, she was easily on the dark side of seventy-five and probably had a barren field of fucks to give for anyone else's opinion.

She paused, inhaling dramatically before nodding to the attendant. My eyes rounded as I recognized the opening beats of an iconic Divinyls song, and she started to shimmy. Light sparkled on her rainbow sequin top, and I couldn't hold back my grin as she belted out the first notes. Her

rendition of “I Touch Myself” had the whole bar clapping and singing along, whooping and hollering for her.

In the break between songs, Ty settled down beside me with his song card, and I watched as he nibbled on his lower lip, deep in thought.

“Trouble picking a song?” I asked casually, wishing the bottom lip he worried was mine.

Had he been all talk? Was he as nervous as I was about showing off for our fellow jurors?

“You could say that. There are so many songs that would be excellent, but I think I’ve got the winner.”

He winked and pushed back his chair, folding his paper to bring it to the front. His stride didn’t even tempt me to watch his bubble butt move in those pants. Nope. Not me.

“Phew. That man. Great ass.”

Busted. Shelly might be a mind reader after all. She jabbed me with her bony elbow. “I can’t wait to hear what he picks. He looks like he can sell it.”

I scribbled down the first song I believed I could pull off. I needed a win. Something about Ty’s swagger had me worried I’d bitten off more than I could handle with our challenge.

Sam took the stage for a rousing rendition of “Firework” by Katy Perry, and then the grizzled attendant called Ty up. Sam slapped him on the back as he handed over the microphone, and I pressed my thighs together when Ty grinned across the crowd at me, his dark eyes sparkling.

I laughed as I recognized the opening beats and Ty started swinging his hips. He belted out the lyrics to “The Man” by The Killers with soul.

I covered my mouth to hold back my laugh. He was *terrible*. Awful. It was such a high-pitched song for his voice and his attempts at a falsetto made me feel much better about my musical talents. But Ty’s moves sold it to the crowd. He swiveled his hips and strutted around the stage like he didn’t suck, clearly loving every minute.

I had no idea he was such a ham. Competitive Ty, I’d become familiar with. Grumpy Ty, sure. Even sweet and caring Ty didn’t take me by surprise any longer. But I’d never seen him goofy and relaxed.

And as he finished the last lyric about being the man, I knew it was true. He was *the* man. For me.

My heart raced, and I fought to control my breathing. Shelly was too alert to my interest in Ty, and I didn't need her blurting out my feelings for him before I could.

I was falling for Ty Sheldon.

Too fast and yet still so slow, given how long we'd known each other. Tonight's performance, the revelation of his silly side, only made me more eager to keep learning about him, peeling back the layers.

I stood and wolf whistled as he finished with a flourish and a bow, grinning like a maniac. I couldn't help myself; I threw my arms around him in a tight hug as he reached his seat.

"That was fantastic," I crowed.

Ty wiggled his brows at me. "I can't wait to see what you do."

He'd been ridiculously bad, and it bolstered my courage.

"You're on."

My legs were wobbly as I made my way to the stage to drop off my pick. It's not every day you decide you've met the man you want to love.

All the wishes in the world couldn't make him love me in return if it wasn't how he felt. But there was hope. A chance to make things work with Ty. And I'd take it.

The DJ collected my paper with a nod while another juror, Angie, belted out "Since U Been Gone" by Kelly Clarkson. A forty-something mother of two, she sang with soul, and I couldn't help but be impressed.

Our group gave her a supportive round of applause as she finished, and the DJ called my name. I gave Shelly, Sam, and Ty a nervous smile, covering the certainty that I'd make an absolute ass of myself. Pushing my shoulders back, I strode to the stage, taking the mic with a smile.

"Whatever It Takes" by Imagine Dragons flooded the speakers, and I took a deep breath before bringing my voice into play. Maybe I didn't have Ty's swagger, but I did my best approximation. And I felt those first few words down to my *soul*. Falling too fast.

Tongue-tied by the fast wording, I lost my place more than once, but our group pitched in to help me out and I was able to laugh off the mistakes,

focusing on belting out the chorus. Maybe it hadn't been a world-class rendition, but I'd overcome my nerves and had fun. That in itself was a victory. That rush carried me back to my seat, grinning as our fellow jurors applauded my performance.

Ty doffed an imaginary hat to me as I regained my seat, and the warmth of his approval washed through me. It may have started as a bet, but in this little game between us, there were no losers, only respect.

We continued to take turns assaulting the airwaves, and Ty scooped his chair closer and closer as the evening wore on. Aware of every inch of his big body next to mine, adrenaline sparked in my bloodstream. How much trouble would we be in if we snuck back to one of our rooms? Looking around at the assembled faces, expressions relaxed and good-natured, I had a feeling they'd turn if we tried to leave. It was all fun and games until someone screwed with the trial that had taken center stage in our lives.

A faint touch traced along my thigh beneath the table, and I cast a startled glance at Ty.

If that wasn't him, someone had some 'splaining to do.

He tilted his head, as if asking permission, and in answer, I covered my hand with his. Briefly, I debated returning it to his own lap, but the rush of knowing he wanted me and the possibility of discovery, stalled me. How far would he go?

I stroked a finger down his hand, releasing it while staring steadily into his face, challenging him. He smiled with his eyes, no doubt trying to hide our flirtation from the others at our table and slowly traced a pattern along my thigh as the last strains of "Summer Nights" faded.

Every soft caress sent new tingles radiating along my thighs. Pretty soon, I wouldn't be able to hide that I was squirming with desire. But maybe two could play his game. I reached a hand over to Ty's thigh, glad we were sitting close. His warm heat bled through the soft fabric of his pants, and the firm muscles beneath my fingers flexed as the DJ called another song.

"Ty, honey. It's your turn again," Shelly urged.

We'd been so caught in our silent battle, the announcement had bypassed us altogether.

Ty cleared his throat, releasing me beneath the table.

“Right.”

His strangled acknowledgement made my lips twitch as I released my hand from his thigh.

If Ty moved a little woodenly toward the stage, his body turned away from our party, I was sure no one else noticed.

My heart stopped as the opening strains of “Simply the Best,” the instrumental version from *Schitt’s Creek*, filled the small bar. After our playful battle earlier, I expected something equally campy from Ty in this go-round, but he surprised me with his choice.

His dark gaze steady on mine, he crooned the lyrics, and I couldn’t stop the tightening sensation around my heart.

“Oh, honey. This one’s a keeper,” Shelly whispered in my ear as the last strains trickled into the ether.

More than a few of our group swiped away tears. Granted, they were also the crew at our table who’d already finished three bottles of wine together, but it didn’t dull the sentiment.

My emotions felt too big for tears. Too big for the moment. The song was sappy and sentimental to the extreme, but also incredibly sweet. Nothing I would have imagined from the man who brushed off my first advance. Not the man who played hot and cold in the hall. This Ty seemed sure. Confident.

My eyes burned as he returned to the table, giving me a shy smile.

I resisted the desire to lay my head on his shoulder, aware of our witnesses, but I couldn’t help but return his smile with a grin of my own.

Ty Sheldon was going to get very lucky sometime soon.

Maybe not tonight, but soon. My heart demanded it.

CHAPTER 10 – TY

I had whiplash from all the emotional extremes I'd put my body through. From a little horny under the table groping, to singing my heart out, Andi evoked it all. I'd surprised myself with the emotion that gripped my throat as I sang those first words to "Simply the Best." I'd first chosen it as a troll, a way to tease her about our ongoing rivalry. But with every word, I realized our friendly competition had turned into so much more.

Andi had captivated me with her humor and intelligence. I loved the fire in her, her unwillingness to quit that had her going toe-to-toe with me at every opportunity. She didn't give up, she didn't give in, and she didn't give a fuck, unless it was about those she loved. Unwaveringly loyal, she'd be a fierce defender and champion. A small thing like a career-ending sports injury wouldn't make her falter.

I pushed away memories of Jess and old hurts, focusing on the woman in front of me.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her up to my room for a private drink when Shelly broke into our moment.

"That was beautiful, Ty. Very nicely done. We'll have to make this a tradition, as long as the trial lasts."

Biting my lip to hold back a groan, I leaned back in my chair.

The trial.

An excellent reason for Andi and me to hold off taking our relationship further. Assuming it was what she wanted too. As much as I wanted to rush ahead, soaking up every moment together, our duty demanded we didn't.

We'd done an admirable job avoiding talk of the trial so far. But every moment we spent together put the case at risk of a mistrial. Waiting until after the deliberations wouldn't be the end of the world for us. It might wreak havoc on the hotel's water bill for me to wait, but I could keep myself

in check a few days longer.

Our group downed the last of their drinks , and pushed in chairs as we made our way to the elevators. Andi's hip grazed mine as we made room for everyone going up, and I bit my lip, hoping the edge of pain would diminish thoughts of taking her to my room when we reached our floor.

She'd be sleeping, with only a single wall between us. Maybe naked.
All. Night. Long.

Her deep sigh next to me had me peeking to see if she looked as disappointed as I did about Shelly's reminder of our obligations. I couldn't commiserate under the watchful eyes of the others, but I wanted to.

"Good night," she called softly as she swiped her key card.

She paused after pushing the door open, as if waiting.

"Night."

Closing the door behind me, I let my head thunk back against the door, staring at my lonely bed.

Picturing Andi next door, letting those jeans slide down her curvy thighs, unhooking the bra holding her breasts aloft, only made it worse.

I stumbled toward the shower, stripping my shirt away and kicking off my shoes as I went. Twisting the temperature to cold, I stepped inside as soon as possible, hoping the water would chill me, ripping away the heated fantasies of Andi.

When the frigid water didn't work, I stroked away my demons, hoping to exhaust myself enough to sleep. Staying away from Andi, now that I was determined that we had a chance together, was going to take all the patience I *didn't* have.

Sam's bleary-eyed glare as he blew on a cup of coffee at the courthouse made me feel better about my own life choices. He'd clearly continued drinking the night before and was paying for it today. Dark bags under his eyes were barely covered by light makeup, and his normally perfect hair hung as lifeless as his limp red shirt.

By comparison, I at least felt relatively fresh after my morning

shower. Never mind that I had to stroke it out again after imagining Andi showering in the next room left me harder than rock. Jeannie would say I was acting like a randy teenager. And she'd be right.

Keeping my mind on the trial was difficult enough before I'd kissed Andi. Before I'd enjoyed the supple heat of her thigh beneath my hand. Thoughts of what I was missing kept me on edge.

"What?" I grumped at Sam, annoyed by his narrow-eyed perusal.

I sipped at my coffee, trying to let it soothe the irritation. The trial wasn't Sam's fault. Being cooped up, so close to Andi, and yet unable to do anything about it was absolutely not his fault. But his stare rubbed me the wrong way.

"I know people."

His ominous words made me frown. "Good for you?" the sarcasm leaked out, and I felt briefly guilty for acting the ass. Still, with little sleep, cryptic threats weren't exactly hitting my sweet spot for conversation.

I'd tossed and turned all night, in part over my lust for Andi, and partly due to the strange hotel room. Imagining her beyond the thin wall didn't help.

We were called into court before Sam could elaborate or I could talk with Andi, but judging from her tired eyes and the yawns from the other jurors, no one had slept well.

Closing arguments were scheduled to wrap up today, which meant jury deliberations would begin. The end was near. Pretty soon, I wouldn't see Andi and the others daily. We'd go our own ways. Me, back to dispatch, and Andi back to her job. Would the return to reality change things between us? We'd had more time together in the last couple of days than we'd had in the last fifteen years.

I liked to think we gained a new understanding of each other, a new appreciation. But once reality intruded, the pressures of work and opposing schedules, would we fall back into old habits?

Her secret smile as she caught my eye over her cup of coffee reassured me that our connection could stand the return to regular routines. Chemistry like ours didn't disappear overnight.

Everyone looked weary by the time closing arguments ended. The

judge gave us instructions before directing us back to the jury room to cast our votes. Judge Ye appointed Shelly as the foreperson, responsible for corralling the rest of us into a decision. Given Shelly's talent at arm-twisting us into a night of karaoke, she'd picked the right person for the job.

"I know we're all tired and it's getting late, but I want to see how we'd all vote right now. We have five counts in front of us. Andi is passing around slips of paper. Write your verdicts, numbering them one to five for each charge we have to decide on."

The room was mostly silent as we scribbled. Group work had never been my favorite, and voting this way seemed like the ultimate test. Had everyone else considered the facts I had?

Randy Shepherd was a dick, for sure. I was convinced he'd broken the law, numerous times, in his attempts to terrorize Alex Hernandez. The pressures of professional athletics were hard enough without adding crazed fans to the mix.

I numbered my slip one through five before scribbling my verdict for each: guilty.

There could be no other answer after the evidence and testimony we'd been presented with.

We passed in our slips to Shelly, who tallied them silently.

"It's a mixed bag, folks. Let's go back to the hotel, eat a good dinner, and get a peaceful night's rest. Tomorrow, we'll work out the kinks in our voting and get this done. We need to be unanimous in our decisions."

I wished I had Shelly's confidence. Our initial count was a long way from a verdict.

We gathered our things, and I stuffed my latest knitting project into my bag before joining the others in front of the courthouse. They'd asked us to leave our cars at the hotel, choosing to transport us to and from court in the hotel's shuttle for safety.

"You look exhausted," Andi said as she sidled up next to me.

I smiled tiredly back. "I am."

"Didn't sleep well last night?"

Shaking my head, I couldn't help but tease. "You know whose fault that is?"

She widened her eyes, all innocence. “Those crummy beds?”

“That too. Sit with me at dinner?”

Her slow smile released some of the tension that had tightened my shoulders throughout the day. I slid into the seat next to her on the shuttle, noting our quiet group. A much different vibe from the night before, when we were cutting loose in the bar.

The weight of the decision in front of us had taken hold, choking off the light atmosphere of the previous night. I glanced at Andi, silent beside me, as the shuttle pulled away from the curb. The temptation to ask her how she voted wouldn't leave me alone, but I suppressed it.

Dinner was a somber affair. None of us seemed able to shake the burden of our pending vote, but we also weren't in a place to talk about it and work out our differences. It left me feeling restless and dissatisfied as we returned to our rooms.

I watched Andi as she swiped her card. Soft dark waves framed her face and the expressive lips I loved so much.

“Sleep well.”

“You too,” she said, hesitating at the door.

Was she going to invite me in? I glanced around the hall. Most of our fellow jurors had already escaped into their rooms, probably ready for a break from the pressures of the day. The faint hope for an invitation died as she slipped inside her own room, shutting the door softly behind her.

Without my phone or the TV for distraction, all I had to think about was the work I was missing and our case. And Andi. So close, and yet so far away. We'd been carefully monitored at dinner, contributing to the dour atmosphere. Moving into deliberations, unsure where the others stood on the verdict but not able to talk about it, added extra tension to the evening. I couldn't believe we needed an extra day. To me, the evidence was obvious. We could all be returning to our jobs and regular lives right now if we'd been on the same page. My time away from dispatch had been what I needed to help me reset. Oddly enough, hearing testimony on the emergency response, knowing it got Mrs. Larson help quickly, had reminded me that though I'd never see the results of my guidance, it was critical. If it weren't for the need for more deliberations, I could be free to return to work and date Andi for

real. Touch her. See her.

The knock on my door served as a welcome distraction. Opening it to find Andi standing in a T-shirt and sweatpants brought an involuntary smile to my face. She reminded me of teenage Andi, swimming in the too-large clothing.

“Everything okay?”

She shook her head with a grimace. “A pipe burst above my bed. It’s been dripping on my mattress all day. My bed is soaked.”

“Did you call the front desk?”

“No phone, remember? I walked down and spoke with them, but they don’t have any other rooms available. There’s a large group of railway maintenance staff in town for a project.”

“What about Ramon or Shelly?”

“I’m not sure what room either is in. I don’t want to knock on all the doors and disturb everyone.”

Of course, she’d thought of other solutions already. Andi was no fading flower. In other circumstances, I had no doubt she’d start knocking on doors until she found a dry bed. Swallowing hard, I didn’t know if I should be thankful or panicked that she’d known my room number. It made me, and my one bed, the logical choice.

“Do you want to stay here?” I asked, hoping my voice didn’t sound as hoarse to her ears as it did to mine.

Obviously, doofus. I’d be cheering the opportunity to sleep next to her if we didn’t still have to come to a decision tomorrow. But turning her away wasn’t an option. Not if she needed me. Lying down next to Andi would test my honorable intentions to their limit. Even now, her soft curves called to me.

She nodded reluctantly. “It’s either that or sleep in the desk chair.”

“I can sleep on the floor.” More like, I could lie awake all night on the floor ... but desperate times yadda, yadda.

“No, you can’t. We’re adults and well past floor sleepover age. There’s no reason to be uncomfortable.”

Right. Because sleeping beside the woman I had growing feelings for would be a total breeze. Last night’s sleeplessness would pale in comparison

to the tossing and turning I'd do lying next to Andi.

She seemed to sense my discomfort. "If it's too much to ask, I can keep knocking until I find Shelly and sleep with her."

"No, you don't need to do that." I forced a grin. "I'm just thinking about how hard it'll be for you to keep your hands to yourself."

Her soft snort turned my smile into genuine mirth. That was the Andi I knew and loved. Competitive to a fault.

"Joke's on you, Ty. I sleep like the dead. You have nothing to fear from these wandering hands."

She shook them in the air, and I grinned, holding out mine, palms up.

"And you're not worried about mine?"

Her disbelief caught me by surprise. "I trust you, Ty."

Just like that.

"And maybe a little mutual wandering wouldn't be a bad thing. We don't even have to hide it under the table this time."

I bit back my groan as my pulse picked up.

"You know I won't feel right about violating our agreement as jurors." Sticking to my word was important to me. As much as it sucked.

Her grin hinted at mischief. "Then let's make it interesting. I'm strong enough to resist. After all, it won't be much longer until the case is over. I'm capable of keeping my hands to myself. Are you?"

Honestly? Maybe not. But I'd try. Her dare was a stroke of genius. She'd hit on the one thing that might help me keep control. Only the thrill of matching wills with her could overwhelm my desire to touch. Andi found a way to put more than our honor on the line and ensure I'd rise to the challenge, proving she knew me almost *too* well. The competitive light in her eyes reminded me of Trivia Night and past battles. My only choice was to bluster through. If I showed any weakness, she'd tease me mercilessly, and I'd be sure to lose. A man could only take so much.

"Sure."

I forced my expression into one of total confidence, assuming the calm persona I used on calls. She'd never see me sweat. If it's what she needed to feel comfortable with tonight's arrangement, I'd wrap my arms in barbed wire to keep from reaching for her.

“Good. Then you won’t mind a wager. If I win, then you join the Rejects for trivia next Thursday. We’re still short one player.”

My team would kill me. It was the one thing Jeannie had warned me not to do. After playing together for months and working together longer, I’d never hear the end of it if I defected. There would be decaf in the regular pot, and whatever else my coworkers could come up with to pay me back. The only thing they took more seriously than Trivia Night was our office pranks.

“And if I win, you’ll do the same?”

“Fair is fair,” she agreed.

“What if we both succeed?”

“Everybody wins,” she said with a nonchalant lift of her shoulders.

Except that still sounded like me losing. Sleep would be impossible with her next to me, even all bundled up. But I had to hold it together. For my own integrity, and to prove to Andi that I was trustworthy. Someone who wouldn’t bail when things got tough.

Slowly, I nodded my agreement. Other than hunting down somewhere else for her to sleep, my fate had been sealed when she knocked on my door. Another sleepless night wouldn’t kill me. But losing to Andi might.

I debated stacking the deck in my favor as I watched her move to the right side of the bed. My boxers and T-shirt seemed restrictive with her so close. But I didn’t need to win by cheating. She’d played fair, showing up in sweats. There shouldn’t have been anything seductive about the soft fabric. But tell that to my dick.

My plans for Andi didn’t include fumbling in a dark hotel room like illicit lovers. If anyone found out we’d spent the night together, we could jeopardize the case. Then again, no available hotel room meant she had to share with someone ... Maybe I should help her find Shelly’s room, solve this a different way. But seeing her in her oversized gray sweatpants, fresh-faced and ready for bed, I wanted nothing more than to pull her close.

Which I’d just agreed *not* to do, dammit.

I glanced back at my bed. Blessedly, a king-size mattress, but it could be whale-sized and it still wouldn’t be enough room. Scrubbing a hand through my hair, I gestured toward my bathroom.

“Do you need the bathroom?”

She shook her head, pulling back the covers and slipping beneath with an angelic smile.

“Nope. Good night, Ty.”

I stood, watching her for a moment. *Creep alert*. But she didn't seem to mind. That sweet twist of her lips didn't turn down, and her lashes lay quiet, her expression serene.

She was going to sleep.

Just like that.

I regretted not stripping my shirt off at least, giving her something to think about.

My night had become purgatory, I was sure I'd wind up lying stiff as a board next to her, contemplating my sins for hours, and she looked thirty seconds from snoring.

Life wasn't fair.

I brushed my teeth slowly, trying to draw out every second before I slipped into bed next to Andi. After I hit the mattress, there'd be no avoiding her scent, warm like sunshine, next to me in bed.

How long had it been since I just slept beside someone? I gulped as I realized it'd been years. The last woman had been Jess. Any heat I'd been harboring cooled at the reminder of her duplicity. Jess had no problem sleeping next to me, lying about her relationship with Dean. Until it became more convenient to come clean. I pushed away memories of our breakup. Andi wasn't Jess.

But channeling thoughts of relationships gone wrong might help me win our challenge.

I turned off my bedside lamp and slid between the sheets, listening for Andi's soft breathing beside me. So, not snoring. Not yet, anyway.

There was at least a foot between us in the bed. If I slept still, there'd be no danger of encroaching on her space. Focusing on my breath, I willed myself to sleep.

Minutes ticked by, and Andi's soft breathing turned into a gentle snore.

So, not faking it.

Sighing, I turned on my side in the dark, searching out her shape beneath the covers. Jealousy over her sleeping superpower washed over me. I flipped to my back again, staring up at the ceiling. If Andi could sleep soundly with me beside her, then I could too.

Thoughts of the trial intruded, and I welcomed them. It was better than obsessing about Andi beside me. Her warmth. The soft skin begging for a stroke, and her curves demanding a cuddle.

Not. Going. To. Happen.

Not without her consent, and not with trivia abandonment on the line. I could resist. I *had* to resist.

Briefly I debated getting up to knit, but turning on the light might disturb her, and I couldn't bring myself to interrupt Andi's sleep. One of us should be well rested tomorrow.

I ran through the evidence presented at trial before thoughts of Andi intruded again. Spending time with her had been the best thing about my court experience. It'd given me the courage to try again. Put myself out there with someone I cared about. Julie's admonitions that I'd stopped trying after Jess had hit too close to home.

Thinking of Andi as off-limits had become a habit in high school, and she took me by surprise when she approached me after trivia. Going home with her was more tempting than it should have been, but I'd never be able to look myself in the eye, or Jimmy either, if I hooked up with Andi when she was anything less than stone-cold sober. Admittedly, fleeting thoughts of whether she truly wanted to sleep with a washed-up soccer player also intruded. When she knew me last, I was a Big Deal. I snorted softly. Maybe only in my own head, but still. It took a while to remember she'd never been interested in the sports star. To her, we'd just been her brother's friends. And somehow, that made it worse. I couldn't blame her deserting me later on anything but myself, my own flaws, if she'd never been entranced with Ty the Soccer Stud.

Rejecting her had been the right move at the time, though I'd tried to do it gently. Clearly, she remembered it differently. But it was yet another sign that I'd made the right decision.

If, no, *when* Andi and I slept together, I wanted it to be good for both

of us. No regrets, no hasty decision-making or alcohol clouding things. No siblings or ghosts of girlfriends past, only us.

I smiled into the dark, liking how “us” sounded in my head.
Just us.

My alarm blared, and I cracked an eyelid open, feeling for the clock beside me on the table to shut it off. Limbs heavy with sleep, I enjoyed the lassitude, unable to remember the last time I’d slept so well.

The feminine moan and soft puff of breath gusting on my neck brought me back to myself. Andi had wrapped around me like a vine in the night, but before I could declare victory in our little war, I realized my leg was thrust between her thighs, my left hand gripping one firm butt cheek. No wonder I’d had sweet dreams.

I unhandled her quickly, but probably too late to claim total innocence.

Andi disentangled herself from me, and I immediately missed her warmth snuggled against my chest.

“Morning,” she yawned, eyeing me sheepishly from beneath heavy-lidded eyes.

“Morning,” I rumbled back, my voice rough from disuse and tight with desire.

I wanted nothing more than to tumble her back into the covers and forget the world for a while.

“So ...” She gestured between us with her pointer finger.

I yawned, trying to act casual, like I wasn’t hard, seeing her rosy cheeks and sleep-mussed hair.

“Yeah, both losers, or winners, depending on how you look at it.”

“I choose winners.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” I smiled to cover the desire her warm curves seemed to inspire in me, awake or asleep. “Do you want to get into the bathroom first?”

She shook her head, appearing almost uncertain. I’d missed an

opportunity to reassure her with my winners or losers comment. Sleeping with Andi, even if all we did was cuddle, was definitely winning.

“Nah, I’ll head back to my room. Leave you to shower in peace. Thanks for letting me stay.”

“No, thank you.” Unable to resist, I leaned forward, placing a quick kiss on the shoulder exposed by her drooping T-shirt. “Best sleep I’ve had in a long time.”

Her arched brow indicated her disbelief. “Really?”

“Oddly enough, yes.”

“Well, now I’m disappointed.”

Her moue of displeasure tickled me, and I released a quick chuckle. If I kept things light and playful, maybe she wouldn’t look too closely at my lap and see the evidence of my arousal.

“What? Take it as a compliment. I always sleep poorly in hotel rooms.”

“Not exactly a sexy story to share with the girls. Apparently, I’m more sandman than seductress.”

I hated to see her lack confidence in herself. Doubt that I would be her eager partner if she so much as snapped her fingers at me after the trial finished. “Sure, the first hour was agonizing, I went through every stage of grief over being unable to touch you. But once I succumbed and accepted my fate, I slept like an angel.”

“Well, at least there’s that.”

“What, the agony?”

Her lips twitched at my playful outrage.

“So, I’ll see you later?” she asked shyly, leaning against my door.

My hand fisted in the sheets.

So. Damn. Beautiful.

Andi, fresh from my bed, was a sight I could get used to. Her slouchy T-shirt would look great on my floor. I shook myself, trying to remember her last words. Right. She’d see me later. As if she could get rid of me.

“You have no choice in the matter.” I smiled to soften the words. “See you at breakfast?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

With those parting words, she slipped out, and I let out the breath I'd been holding. Keeping up the casual façade with a raging hard-on hadn't been easy. I glanced at my lap. But it had been necessary.

One more day. Maybe a few at most. I could last that long without sacrificing my principles.

Andi deserved better than secrets and potential scandal. She deserved everything.

CHAPTER 11 – ANDI

Oddly floaty after a night cuddled with Ty, I couldn't keep the grin off my face as I successfully made it into my room without witnesses.

I wrinkled my nose at the wet mattress. The office claimed they'd get maintenance in while I was at the courthouse and replace it, but I hoped we'd be going home before I had to sleep there again. At least the water pressure in the shower remained strong.

Stepping beneath the stinging spray helped bring me more fully awake. I shook myself as images from the morning heated my skin. Waking up in Ty's arms had been almost all I'd dreamed of. Too many clothes for real satisfaction, but that had been the deal. I worried my lip with my teeth.

Our relationship had hit a weird no-man's-land. We were sort of dating? Not yet intimate, though I wanted to be. Getting to know Ty now, the man he'd become, eclipsed other priorities. But soon, those other commitments would come rushing back. Work loomed. After my absence, I'd be pulling some late nights to get caught up. When Ty and I weren't thrown together, would our relationship shift? Return to our previous state as friendly rivals, childhood pals? Did he want me enough to accept me, flaws and all? Or would he tire of my competitiveness like boyfriends before him? Sore losers, all.

Though we'd slept in the same bed, last night seemed like a speed bump. I'd felt closer to him than ever before. If he'd reached for me, I would have gone to him eagerly, trial or no trial. I wasn't that strong. Sleeping next to him had left me wanting more.

My challenge to Ty had been to try to soothe his conscience. Ty had been honorable to a fault, but was it due to the trial or something more? My inner critic couldn't help but see doubts instead of progress. Would our momentum slow such that we stopped altogether? Had he realized that I was still the loud-mouthed girl with the overabundance of energy inside, maybe

not a woman he wanted to be with? It all boiled down to one thing: did he want me enough?

Echoes of his past rejection still slipped down my spine, chilling me. Maybe my memories were faulty, clouded by time, but I couldn't shake the memory of his eyes, so cold, as he asked if he could call me a cab. As an adult woman, I could call my own damn car. And I could take someone home with me if I wanted. At the time, I'd wanted *him*.

But I didn't want a one-sided relationship. Been there, done that. I deserved someone who cared about me enough to put me first, at least some of the time. Pragmatism demanded it couldn't be all the time. I couldn't even make that commitment.

Pushing my misgivings aside, I finished washing my hair, then dried and dressed for the day. Hopefully, for my *last* day of jury duty.

Randy Shepherd had young and dumb on lock, but I wasn't convinced his crimes were enough to jeopardize his future. He'd made bad choices, but didn't we all? The difference between him and Jimmy, was Jimmy hadn't ever been caught. He and his friends used to pull all kinds of pranks. Sports prank wars were practically legend. And something about this case felt off. The niggling doubt kept me from voting guilty on the charges right away. We were missing something, and I wanted to review the evidence presented to be sure of my decision. I couldn't convict him until I was satisfied we had all the facts.

Shelly's knowing smile as she handed me a copy of the financial documents we requested for review pricked my conscience. "Late night?"

"Hmm?" I tried to play innocent. Surely she hadn't seen anything, didn't know anything. Besides there wasn't much to tell. Sleeping next to Ty wouldn't change my mind on the case.

"Hope you had sweet dreams of that charmer, over there. Are you ready for this to be over?"

She must have sensed some of my reluctance in my nod, because her eyes narrowed. "Worried about returning to real life? That your prince will turn into a frog in the light of everyday life?"

Not exactly, but she wasn't far off either. "Everyone's a little bit frog. I've known Ty long enough to confirm he's the real deal."

"Then what's the problem? I figured you'd be thrilled to have the freedom to boink your tiny brains out."

I choked on a laugh. But the sentiment did match her T-shirt. It was a wonder that Ramon hadn't made her change. Today's offering had a glittery unicorn and said, ALWAYS HORNY.

Shelly passed around Randy Shepherd's bank and credit card statements for a second review. The defense had highlighted them in court, but we hadn't examined them in-depth. The weakest part of the prosecution's argument was that they couldn't explain how Shepherd, who worked as a rideshare driver and lived at home, could afford to pull such elaborate—and expensive—pranks on Alex Hernandez. Sam used the whiteboard, penciling out the hot dog caper.

"At six inches in length and maybe an inch in width, spread over a pool that measured thirty feet by forty feet, enough hot dogs to get the coverage shown in the crime photos is roughly two thousand hot dogs."

"Maybe more," I added.

"That means the cost of the hot dog prank alone penciled to over a thousand dollars. Too much for someone with limited income and almost no assets," Pradeep murmured.

Scanning the credit card and bank statements, Randy spent small amounts on pizza and groceries, but nothing of the magnitude needed to fund his hot dog caper. No large cash withdrawals either. And what about the costume? The quality of the reindeer head in the videos hadn't been cheap. His income from the videos hadn't been enough to fund him. Where had Randy gotten the money? The defense had hammered home the inconsistency, and I couldn't help but agree.

"Shelly, where do you think Randy got the cash to fund his pranks?" I asked. "Do we have finances for anyone else involved? Have we reviewed everything provided by the defense and prosecution? Does Randy have ties to the area sports teams we don't know about?"

"I can ask Ramon, but that's a fair question."

"What if this is about more than a crazed fan?" I asked. "I don't buy

the prosecution's motive. They didn't demonstrate any real evidence that Shepherd's personality would lead him to these lengths."

"Doesn't matter," Mary grumped from down the table. "Shepherd is still guilty."

Ty's nod of assent made my stomach sink. Did he believe in Shepherd's guilt?

"But what if he's a front? A fall guy?" Sam asked.

The possibility pricked my sense of justice and ignited my fighting instincts. Shepherd seemed like the type who would be easy to manipulate, while letting him believe he was the mastermind. True, it appeared he'd carried out the pranks, but what if someone else was pulling his strings? Convicting Shepherd when we didn't know the whole story didn't sit right.

"I never believed he had the brains for this. A mastermind, he is not," Sam opined.

"But what if someone else is?" I asked.

"Who?" Ty asked. "We don't have any evidence to support your theory."

The implied criticism stung.

"We don't have all the facts to convict him either."

"I won't convict him without understanding the financial angle," Angie spoke up.

"I say, no harm, no foul." Pradeep said from down the table. "As long as Shepherd's insurance will pay for the repairs for Mrs. Larson's house, the rest all seem like harmless pranks to me. Not enough to send him to jail. Certainly not for any length of time. At most, I'd say he should face a fine."

Ty's expression turned mulish. "It's clear he did what they said. Vandalized Hernandez's property and pool. Crashed into Mrs. Larson's house. He's been menacing Hernandez."

Ty's attitude took me by surprise. Objectively, what he said was true. I believed Shepherd was the man in the reindeer suit. But I'd expected more empathy for bad decisions out of Ty. Nothing Shepherd had done had been truly malicious. Just bad judgement. As the newest player on the team, Hernandez was probably used to team pranks. The hit and run was harder to excuse.

Ty's stance seemed over the top, given I had a sneaking suspicion he'd participated in his share of new team member teasing in his soccer days. Granted, Shepherd had taken it too far, but I hadn't expected Ty to be so unyielding.

Mary, Angie, Pradeep, and the others all grunted their agreement, and Shelly gazed around the table, meeting each of our gazes head-on.

"What I'm hearing is that we have a split. What evidence or testimony do we need to review? We need a unanimous decision, and I don't know about you, but I want to go home."

Pradeep folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not convicting if we don't work out the financial angle. At least, not on the most serious charges. Malicious mischief is all I'd agree to, based on what we have now."

"No one made him hit and run," Ty argued. "That was all him, no matter who may have put him up to the pranks."

I sighed. True. Leaving the scene had been a terrible decision on top of his bad choices. If Shepherd had stayed and checked on Mrs. Larson instead of doing a runner, he'd be more sympathetic.

"Let's take another vote, and see where we're at," Shelly said.

We scribbled our votes and passed them up silently. After a few minutes to tabulate, Shelly sighed.

"We've got a unanimous guilty verdict on the hit and run. But we've still got a way to go on the rest of the charges. We have three votes to acquit for the counts of harassment, stalking, and malicious mischief."

Ty slouched in his chair, arms crossed. Dressed in a collared navy shirt and jeans, his jaw freshly shaven, I couldn't help but admire the bulge his biceps made under the shirt. He looked strong and sure. Immovable. His posture mirrored most of our group.

Shelly must have arrived at the same conclusion I had. "Let's take five, and I'll consult with Ramon on where we go from here."

We milled around, and I refreshed my coffee. Ty approached, his presence like a buzz under my skin.

"What are the chances of us getting this done today?" he grouched, gripping the back of his neck and scrubbing a hand up over his head.

Reading the other jurors, disgruntled seemed to be the overall

disposition. My own irritation held the edge of sexual frustration, but most of the rest of our group just looked tired. Ready to be done. I firmed my shoulders. Fatigue wasn't a compelling reason to give up on my principles. Ty's steady gaze, almost resigned, made me think he'd come to the same conclusion.

Being at odds should have felt normal for us, but it stung. I wanted us to be on the same page. About everything. But maybe that wasn't realistic. We weren't kids anymore, moldable and easy-going. We'd both grown and matured, become more fixed in some ways. Had our share of bumps and bruises along the way. And Ty's sense of justice, his honor, were traits I admired. It was part of why going toe-to-toe with him was so satisfying: he'd give as good as he got.

If I wanted to win, it needed to be fair and square. I had to convince him and my fellow jurors to vote together. See things the way I did. But if Ty dug in, would the conflict ruin our budding relationship before we began?

We spent the next few hours hashing details out, reviewing the evidence on the other charges. Round and round we went, with Pradeep, Angie, and I the strongest voices for acquitting. I couldn't convict based on what we had. Not for all charges. Not if it meant he'd go to jail for years. The hit and run were punishment enough. He'd for sure lose his job and do a few months in the county jail. Community service and fines for the rest I could get behind, but the felony stalking charge could mean five years alone. Add in the harassment and property damage counts, and he could lose longer. My soft heart considered that a raw deal for a few hot dogs and lawn ornaments. Especially if someone else put him up to it.

Who would have the most to gain from Hernandez being off his game? His other teammates? Rival teams? Shepherd may be a rabid fan who hated Hernandez for leaving the Yankees for his favorite, but it was hard for me to believe that was enough motive for everything. Eventually, the fans would accept Hernandez. Especially if he helped them win. It was a sore spot that they were still paying his exorbitant contract, and he'd been bumped down to the farm team for a rehab assignment. Once he was back to full health and winning with the Mariners, fans would forgive him. Anything to win.

Shepherd maintained his innocence, but he hadn't taken the stand in his own defense. His attorney had probably advised against it. But the need to know the *why* burned. It didn't add up. Giving in and voting to convict would leave me unable to sleep at night. I'd obsess. Replay the case over and over in my dreams when my body gave out. I knew myself. I had to vote my conscience. Glancing around at the tired faces of my fellow jurors, I pushed down one guilt in favor of another. Doing the easy thing had never been me.

Ty looked frustrated, seated a few chairs down from me. There would be no under-the-table groping today. Maybe ever. We were at an impasse.

I spent our lunch break poring over the evidence we'd requested, examining the records for clues. Anything that would help us reach a decision we could sleep easy on.

When I'd signed up for jury duty, I'd considered it a lark. Something harmless to take my mind off work and give me a break from my reality. I'd been so wrong. There were no open and shut cases. We held someone's life in our hands. Their future. And I couldn't feel good about making a hasty decision, no matter how much drawing out the process hurt me personally. I needed to get back to my life. I glanced around the table, Sam was munching quietly at a tuna sandwich, Angie inhaling a cobb salad. We all had lives to get back to.

But that didn't make Randy Shepherd's matter any less.

I scanned another page of Shepherd's financials, looking for anomalies. Any evidence I could provide my peers that he wasn't the only villain we had to consider in our decisions.

Randy ate a lot of pizza. Not exactly a smoking gun. Pizza, pizza, and a gym membership. Something about the gym struck a chord. A vague memory from Hernandez's testimony. Hernandez had an endorsement deal with the chain. Shepherd had begun his gym membership in May. Well before the incidents with Hernandez. Was it more proof of him stalking Hernandez before he progressed to property damage, or something altogether different?

"Shelly, can we get a device with internet? I want to check something." I asked.

If I was right, Randy Shepherd hadn't been a harasser at all. He'd been hired.

"We can't have any electronic devices until we're done."

"Can Ramon get us any pictures from Alex Hernandez's public appearances in the last few months? Especially any at the Evergreen Gym? Can we ask Judge Ye for more?"

Shelly frowned, and my stomach sank.

"I don't think so, but I'll try." Her kindly eyes met mine. "You have a theory, Andi?"

I nodded. "It's too soon to say anything, I'd like to have proof if we can get it."

The others grumbled when they finished lunch and Shelly hadn't returned, but I held out hope. Maybe the wait meant we'd get what I asked for.

All eyes turned to the heavy mahogany door as it opened to admit Shelly. Her quick head shake sank my hopes. I sighed. I had my suspicions, but were they enough? Would my fellow jurors join me, without evidence to back it up?

Shelly cleared her throat, and attention swung to her at the head of the table.

"I went to ask the judge for additional evidence, but we were denied. We have only the testimony and exhibits already provided to make our decision. We can only vote on whether the prosecution presented enough information to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he committed the crime." She focused on me. "Andi, do you have something to share with the group?"

I pushed to my feet, taking a moment to assess the faces around me. Sam looked interested in what I had to say, but I knew he was already in Camp Acquit. Ty's expression was neutral, and that was all I could hope for.

"I have a theory that makes it difficult for me to convict on the harassment and stalking charges, given the reasonable doubt standard." I paused, swallowing. "Looking at Shepherd's financials, I find it implausible that he pulled this all off without help. He needed a lot of cash to fund these pranks, and there are no signs he had the money. *Unless* he had help."

I let the words hang over the group. Ty shifted in his seat. “From whom?” he asked.

“Alex Hernandez.”

Jack threw up his hands at the end of the table. “What kind of crap is this?” he asked.

I held out my hands, palms out.

“I know, I know, but think about it. I found a credit charge for Evergreen Gyms on Shepherd’s statements. Hernandez endorses those gyms. He told us himself that he’s made multiple appearances there. What if Hernandez and Shepherd aren’t strangers?”

“So?” Jack shrugged. “Doesn’t that only add weight to the stalking charge if they met?”

“But what if this is Hernandez’s plot to return to the Yankees? In his own testimony he admitted to being unhappy with the trade. What better way to encourage the Mariners to trade him again than to fake an injury? And when that didn’t work, add in bad press?”

Maybe I’d watched one too many court dramas. Admittedly, it was a stretch. Still, I couldn’t convict without at least airing my theory.

“You really think a professional athlete would fake an injury?” Ty asked.

Ty’s censure cut deep, but it was a fair question. And I could understand his disbelief.

“Think about it. Shepherd seemed to know Hernandez’s schedule, and some of those pranks would have taken hours to execute. Is it plausible Hernandez wasn’t in on it somehow? Maybe for press, maybe for sympathy? I don’t know, it seems fishy to me.”

“Hernandez did say there was talk of trading him once the pranks became common knowledge. Something about the fans not accepting him hurting ticket sales. Management may want to win, but they also want to fill seats. It could have been a bid to go elsewhere,” Mary said.

Ty shook his head, and my stomach sank. “I’m not sure I buy it.”

“Nevertheless, let’s take a new vote,” Shelly said.

Silently, we marked out fresh pieces of paper, passing them to her. When she finished counting and smiled, I hoped my theory had swayed

some.

“We now have all but two votes to acquit on the harassment, stalking, and property damage charges. Any discussion?” Shelly asked.

Ty’s dark stare made me think he was one of the holdouts. But how to convince him? I glanced around the table, wondering who the other was. Only Bill had his arms crossed.

“We’re just looking for reasonable doubt here, folks,” Angie said.

Sam nodded. “I’m not much of a sports fan, but Andi’s theory seems plausible. Everything about the evidence fits it about as well as the prosecution’s theory.”

“If Hernandez orchestrated this whole thing, just to get out of Seattle, letting them both off doesn’t feel right,” Ty grumbled.

Holding his gaze steadily, I asked, “But who was harmed, if they were in it together? Shepherd is still paying for his choices with the hit and run charge. The amount he earned from the videos will barely make a dent in the restitution amount suggested by the prosecutor. Hernandez had the expense of cleaning out his pool and yard. Granted, it’s something he can easily afford, but I don’t know how likely it is that he’ll profit from his scheme. As much as he wants to be traded back, I have a feeling Mariners management is more stubborn about winning than anything else.”

“Are we ready to vote again?” Shelly asked.

I held my breath, making eye contact with each of the other jurors, ending with Ty. One beat, two, and Ty nodded. I gusted out a sigh, hoping my speech had been enough.

Shelly’s grin after she tallied the votes had all of us relaxing in our seats.

“We have a unanimous decision,” she crowed.

Relieved, I smiled at Sam, who tipped his chin, seeming satisfied. We’d done it. Carried out some measure of justice. At least one I could live with.

Shelly filled out the final verdict paperwork, and we signed our names before submitting it to Judge Ye. We filtered back into the courtroom. I couldn’t help but examine Randy Shepherd at the defendant’s table. Gone was the cocky young man who’d sat there a few short days ago. He’d

sweated through his button-down shirt, and his hair was mussed. The process had aged him, knocked some of the arrogance out of his posture. As it should.

The prosecuting attorney looked calm behind his table, unflappable. He expected to win.

Alex Hernandez was nowhere to be seen. Interesting, given his earlier testimony. It only added to my gut feeling that there had been more going on between Hernandez and Shepherd than had come out in court testimony. A connection.

Shelly read our verdict aloud for the court reporter, and I watched as Shepherd melted into his chair. He didn't smile. He'd face a sentence for the hit and run charge, but he'd escaped penalties for the worst possibilities.

We milled around the jury room, gathering belongings, after we were excused from service. Now that we weren't deliberating, everyone seemed more relaxed. Almost jubilant. Ready to return to our lives. I exchanged phone numbers with Shelly and Sam, and invited them both to join the Rejects for trivia soon. Not the most auspicious beginning to a friendship, but I had a feeling Shelly and Sam would both be strong contenders.

"What are you smiling about?" Ty asked softly.

He looked exhausted. And I remembered waking up with him, secure in his arms, his leg wedged between mine. Heat flared, and I saw an answering burn in his eyes.

I let a smile flirt with my lips, enjoying when his gaze followed the motion.

"I'm thinking about trivia," I admitted.

The light in his eyes guttered, and I regretted my answer. Maybe *wishing you were still holding your hot body against me* had been the right answer after all ...

"So, I'll see you Thursday at Haven?"

His offhand question made my heart race. It wasn't a date, per se, but it was a promise to see each other.

"Assuming I don't get too caught up at work, I'm in," I said.

They'd have to chain me to my desk to keep me from Ty. But saying that aloud might destroy any pretense of a casual plan to meet at trivia. And I wasn't sure how he felt about me after our jury deliberations. My strong will

was all well and good until a man ran smack against it. Ty had gotten a taste of my tenacious side today. If he had any lingering doubts about me, they were probably highlighted in six-foot neon now.

When Ramon returned my phone, I turned it on to a flood of messages. Everyone who needed to know was aware I'd been sequestered, but that still left me a lot to catch up with. Yet I ignored my personal messages and quickly did an image search for Alex Hernandez's gym endorsement promo pics. I had to know if I was right. Evergreen Gym's social media page featured Hernandez prominently, and I scanned each image, searching for Shepherd. There. Pinching to zoom in, I'd recognize Shepherd's frame anywhere after staring at him in court for days. Grinning like a fool, he shook hands with Hernandez. In a Yankees jersey. The traitor. He wasn't a rabid Mariners fan, he was a Hernandez fanatic. They'd been in it together. An attempt to get Hernandez traded again, away from his rivals. I quickly forwarded my findings to the prosecutor's office, hoping that even if the scrutiny didn't lead to charges, it would sink his plans. He didn't deserve to profit off of the whole ordeal.

The thrill of triumph flooded me, before it was washed away by my next realization. Being right was cold comfort if it meant I'd lost Ty. Then again, if my passion for justice was a turn-off, we weren't meant to be to begin with.

I made the mistake of opening my office email and instantly regretted it. More than eight hundred new emails. Catching up would be painful, and likely take me the better part of a week. Texts from my boss had grown increasingly frantic, even though I'd let him know they'd be taking my phone. Immediately, I moved into damage control mode, kicking out replies on the most urgent questions. Maybe the deluge would distract me from thinking about how Ty and I had left things. With luck, I'd be able to resurface in time for trivia night and see where we stood.

Tamra had been relentless in prodding me into attending tonight's trivia at Haven, aware that I'd be overwhelmed with work and tempted to cancel. She

needn't have worried. As soon as I could get my head above water at my office, it was all I could think about.

Seeing Ty. Stroking the stubble on his chin. Enjoying the light in his dark gaze as he watched me. Feeling his heat again as his big body eclipsed mine.

In the rush of finishing our jury duty assignment and reassuming my work responsibilities, we hadn't talked much. My fingers had hovered over my phone to text him, but I couldn't bring myself to hit SEND. Not until I saw him in person, could read his expression and make sure I wasn't the only one still thinking about our time together.

I arrived well before the first round was scheduled to begin, hoping to catch him before Pete started. Melena caught my repeated glances toward the Knit Wits booth and finally called me on it.

"He's not here yet, Andi. I'll let you know when I spot him."

That caught Jimmy's attention, and he looked up from his menu, eyes narrowing. "Who's not here?"

"Her archnemesis," Tamra responded, rushing in to save the day.

"Or more accurately, her heart-emesis," Melena said.

Tamra frowned. "Heart vomit? I don't think that means what you think it means, Melena."

"I thought it was kinda poetic," Jimmy said in defense of his wife and put an arm on the table, leaning in my direction. "Though, Andi, do you have something to share with the team?"

"My heart is fine," I grouched, shooting an accusatory look Melena's way. So much for sisterly trust. "The only thing that makes me want to vomit is watching you cozy up to your wife like a sad sack."

"You're just jealous," he grumbled back, relaxing into his seat with a smirk.

Not wrong. He'd hit the truth, without even trying. I'd grown to admire their closeness, maybe resent it a bit. Since their hasty marriage, Jimmy now leaned first on Melena and didn't come to me for advice as much as he used to. It wasn't a bad thing, only a natural evolution of adulthood, but I missed him. They were partners. And I was the odd one out.

Chase returned from the bar, sliding a tray of drinks onto our table.

“Everyone ready to rumble tonight?” he asked. “Andi, did you bring the heat?”

Glad of the subject change, I smiled. “You bet.”

Tamra kicked me under the table, and I scowled before she tipped her head to the Knit Wits team.

Ty.

Dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt spread lovingly across his chest and shoulders, a Rainiers ballcap pulled low over his forehead, he nodded at me from across the bar.

A nod. Part of me was disappointed by the subtle acknowledgement but after glancing at Jimmy and the others at my table to check their reactions, maybe he had the right idea.

Pete kicked off the first round, and we huddled over our answer sheet.

“Stadium High School was made famous by what turn of the century film?”

“Ooh, I know this one,” Tamra said.

“*Ten Things I Hate About You*,” Chase whispered, beating his fiancé to the punch. She mock scowled at him, but he snuck a quick kiss along her jaw, and her expression relaxed.

“Okay, second question. What urban park in Washington is second only in size to New York’s Central Park?” Pete asked.

Jimmy slid a quick grin at Melena. “This one, we know. Point Defiance. Come for the views, leave with a wife.”

Their soft smiles had me glancing at Ty’s table. Did the Knit Wits know the answer? I doubted anyone on his team had the personal connection to the park that Jimmy and Melena did. Their infamous quickie-wedding had taken place at Point Defiance. It had been a beautiful setting for an almost-fake ceremony.

“If you hear the lahar sirens, what should you do?”

“Bend over and kiss your ass goodbye before the volcanic mud washes you away?” Jimmy asked playfully.

I rolled my eyes. “Get to higher ground as soon as possible after the mountain erupts.”

“I knew that,” Jimmy said.

“Sure, you did, slick.”

Jimmy flicked a dismissive hand my way. “The fire department supervises the evacuation drills for the local elementary students.”

“Quit squabbling, we’re going to miss the next question,” Chase admonished.

I crossed my eyes to prove I wasn’t cowed, but I didn’t pick up the argument. It was just for fun, anyway. We’d all done our share of drills in high school.

“What does the name of our fair city, Tacoma, actually mean?”

“Stink City?” Tamra suggested.

I balled up my napkin, throwing it at her. “No, you traitor.”

“What? The tide flats smell sometimes. I can’t help but thinking the name reflects the Tacoma aroma. Truth in advertising, and all.”

Melena rolled her eyes. “I don’t think that’s the answer.” She looked to her husband. “Jimmy?”

He shook his head. “No idea.”

Crud. I glanced at Ty’s table, catching a quick wink. Did his gesture mean the Knit Wits knew the answer?

Nothing else stumped us the rest of the round, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I turned in our sheet to Pete at the front of the room. Even if we missed the city name question, we should still finish strong.

“Hey.”

Ty’s casual greeting shouldn’t have me buzzing like I’d finished two cups of coffee, but his appearance at my side triggered an immediate rush.

“Hey.”

His eyes crinkled at the edges as if glad to see me, but he still looked tired. I wanted to reach out and smooth the lines there. Give him a hug and offer what comfort I could. But I wanted to wait, see how he reacted before claiming him in front of Jimmy and everyone.

“You been working hard, making up for lost time after court?” I asked instead.

“Something like that.” His lips twitched into a soft smile. “I’ve missed you.”

My pulse evened out, thumping hard at his words. He'd missed me.

"Well, I guess we could do something about that," I teased.

"Yeah? Like maybe you'd join me for dinner one night this week? Add in a round of mini golf if you feel like taking a beating?"

Trust Ty to turn a simple date into a competition. Still, he knew me too well. My weaknesses, my strengths.

"You're on."

"Yoo-hoo, Ty. Come on. Round's about to start," Jeannie hollered from their table.

"I'll text you later and we can work out the details?" he asked.

I nodded, unable to keep the grin from blooming across my face.

"It's a date," he promised, sketching a quick salute before turning on his heel to return to his table.

I stood a moment longer, soaking in the anticipation, and okay, maybe also watching his firm butt in those jeans, before returning to Jimmy and the others.

My brother proved he was ever the trained observer, his eyes narrowing at my no doubt goofy expression. "That looked awfully friendly. What were you and Sheldon doing together?"

"Nothing," I claimed, trying to distract him. I didn't need him nosing in my business. Not until I was more confident that Ty and I were ready to present a united front.

"He's not trying to woo you to the Knit Wits, is he?"

"Yeah, we have better brains," Chase boasted, taking a sip from his beer.

I snorted. "No, Jimmy. Our trivia team is safe." I shook my head. "You and Chase, with your high school hang-ups. You and Ty used to play for the same team. He's not the enemy."

"Oh, so now he's *not* the enemy? You sure have changed your tune. Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?"

Melena and Tamra giggled, and I couldn't help but smile too. They had me there.

"I'm just saying, Ty isn't out to get you. You don't have to be all competitive when we were just talking. You either," I said, letting my

exasperation show.

Sometimes Chase made me feel like I had two brothers, not just one.

“What makes me competitive? My fabulous gaming skills?” Chase’s playful question and dancing eyes made it an invitation for a burn, like he could guess what was coming.

“Punching above your weight with a beauty like Tamra,” Jimmy said.

Chase shoved him in the shoulder, though his expression was more playful than annoyed.

“At least she’s marrying me because she *wants* to,” Chase taunted back.

Melena, the veteran of two brothers, wouldn’t let his dig stand. “Oh, I *want* him all right.”

The accompanying wink and squeeze of my brother’s thigh was more affection than I really needed.

“Melena, that’s still my brother you’re talking about.”

My protest lacked heat. The change of subject had gotten me out of talking about Ty. It was too new to share. Too tenuous. And Jimmy had too many darn opinions. Old habits, like keeping my crushes secret, died hard.

Pete announced the victors for the first round, and our team groaned theatrically when we tied the Knit Wits with fourteen points. I guessed neither of us got the city question right. Luckily, we emerged victorious from the second round, beating them by one, and keeping us neck and neck with the Knit Wits for the overall Haven score. The perpetual trophy in our honor was so close, I could taste it. Ty tipped his hat in my direction as he accompanied some of his teammates out, and I tried not to feel disappointed when he didn’t stop to talk.

We’d have the time we needed to establish our footing on our date.

Jimmy caught my secret smile, his eyes narrowing.

“You have that look,” he accused.

I shrugged, going for nonchalant. “What?”

“Like you’re planning something.”

“Brother dear, I’m always planning something. Have you met me?”

“You’re not planning to wear black to Chase and Tamra’s wedding

or diss her at the ceremony, are you?”

I snorted gently. “No. I *like* Tamra.” I shift a glance to Melena. “No offense, but I didn’t know you then.” My attention lasered to Jimmy. “And neither did *you*. I think my response was proportionate.”

He hooted, a grin taking over his face. I noticed Melena smiling indulgently. “Proportionate? To what?”

“You harshing on my dating prospects growing up, interfering in my love life.”

“Who, moi? I didn’t interfere.” Jimmy’s feigned pearl-clutching and open-mouthed horror at the suggestion that he was overprotective made my lips twitch.

“Liar,” Chase coughed out next to him, smiling innocently up at Tamra as she slid into the booth next to him.

“What did I miss?” she asked.

“Jimmy is full of shit,” Chase said.

“Nothing new there.” Her calm response made my lips twitch. Chase had been lucky to find Tamra. Melena and Jimmy were holding hands under the table, and the sweetness of the gesture made me all gooey inside. They’d both been lucky.

That night, when I got home to my lonely apartment, I struggled to focus on my book. Not one of Chase’s romances, but a court thriller. Maybe a little too real after my recent brush with jury duty. Inaccuracies kept taking me out of the story, and I put it down to try another day. In a better frame of mind, I’d chalk it up to fiction reasons and keep reading. Translating the sometimes boring and alternately confusing and awkward experience to the page isn’t something I’d wish on anyone.

My phone buzzed with an incoming message, and I bit back the tiny thrill. It could just be Tamra confirming our next dance class. Or ...

Ty: Congratulations on your win tonight.

Ty: But don’t get used to it.

I huffed out a quick laugh at his postscript. Always the competitor.

Andi: I don’t know, I think this is the beginning of a hot streak. Knit Wits seem to have lost their mojo.

Ty: YOU LIE. We have mojo to share. And I’ll prove it to you ...

Saturday?

I worried my lip, holding back the smile.

Andi: Saturday works for me.

Ty: Good. Prepare to be dazzled.

Anticipation rushed through me, thinking about all the ways I'd like to be overwhelmed by Ty. His hand stroking the nape of my neck. His thigh snuggled up against mine in a booth, burning through my jeans with his heat. The sweet tickle of his breath along my cheek as he moved in to kiss me. I was halfway there already, wanting him so bad I could taste it. Taste him.

I shifted in my seat, pressing my thighs together, debating how to respond.

Ty: I didn't sleep well without you this week.

Aw. He beat me to it. And chose the one response tailor-made to put me at ease. I'd been thinking of him, wondering if he'd been doing the same. Some of the uncertainty I'd been holding onto faded at his words. Ty was jumping in with both feet. Maybe it was time for me to do the same.

Andi: Me either. My bed has been lonely without you.

I hit send before I could call back the words, slow my roll. I had no chill when it came to Ty. It had gotten me in trouble before, but maybe this time I wasn't alone?

Ty: ...

My heart raced as I waited on his response. As the seconds stretched out, my inner critic took over. *Foolish. I'd taken it too far.* Always a smidge too much, the step that turned fun into scary. Mild flirting to something more serious. Weightier. Too eager. Opening myself up to rejection.

I bit my lip, worrying the soft flesh there as the dots appeared and erased, indicating Ty couldn't settle on a response. As the minutes ticked by, I hardened my heart, trying to protect myself. Big, scary, Andi, with her emotions and demands. Ty had been timid before about revealing his own feelings. Had moving too fast pushed him away? I'd vowed not to minimize myself for someone else. If he wasn't into me, I was better off alone.

Ty: We'll have to see what we can do about that. I have no intent to leave you lonely.

I grinned, my shoulders sagging as I relaxed into my couch. Not

exactly an offer to drive right over, but I couldn't expect him to jump ten steps ahead like I was tempted to. Ty's text reassured me that my worries were unfounded. Ty knew what he was getting into with me. I hadn't hidden who I was, and he seemed all in. I couldn't fault that he needed to be sure. So did I. We hadn't even slept together. I had no intention of actually *sleeping* this time. As wonderful as it had been, snuggling in Ty's arms, I wanted more than comfort from him. I wanted it all.

CHAPTER 12 – TY

The days after jury duty passed in a blur of routine as I settled back into dispatch. Jeannie welcomed me with a fresh skein of ombre chenille yarn in a wash of blues and greens. Working the soft fibers as I answered calls gave me a fresh sense of purpose. My break had reminded me that while most of our work was invisible to others, an anonymous voice on the phone, the coordinating we did in dispatch had a positive impact. We made sure the cavalry arrived and provided virtual triage in the meantime. It helped that I had Andi sweetening my dreams at night. It was much easier to let bad calls go when I had something else to look forward to. *Someone* else.

I couldn't shake the anticipation of spending more time with Andi. She'd thrown me for a moment with the blunt lonely bed text, but her honesty was refreshing. I'd expected her to make me work for an admission of loneliness, but instead she'd chosen vulnerability and volunteered her feelings. I'd had women aggressively flirt or straight-up proposition me in my soccer days, but I'd been loyal to Jess. Since our breakup I'd protected my heart and avoided getting in too deep with anyone new. Mostly one-night stands until my hiatus after Rosie.

Which was why Andi simultaneously exhilarated and terrified me. I was already foundering in the deep end, feeling more than I had in years. Playful competitiveness. Concern for her safety and comfort. Fear that things would blow up on me again. That I'd lose again.

When I pulled up to the gym Saturday morning, Jimmy's car was already there. He'd given me his blessing. I wanted to ask his opinion on Andi, get more ideas for things to make our date special, but I was wary of flipping the switch from helpful friend to overprotective brother.

I needed to find my way with Andi on my own. If he didn't ask, I wouldn't tell. Rolling my shoulders to ease some of the tension there, I tilted my chin to acknowledge Jimmy warming up on the mats.

“Hey,” he grunted.

His face relaxed, he looked happy, if not well rested. I bit back a teasing comment about another late night with Melena. Opening up conversation about our love lives might lead to topics I was trying to avoid.

Chase ambled up a few moments later, and we worked through our lower body circuit, mostly in silence. The quiet fit our early-morning MO, and I relaxed. As much as I wanted to talk about Andi, discretion was the better part of valor when it came to Jimmy. He’d been dead serious with his threats in high school, and part of me couldn’t stop remembering the younger, scrawnier version of him threatening me every time thoughts of Andi bubbled up from my subconscious.

“You ready for your big date?”

I nearly swallowed my tongue at Chase’s point-blank question, and my good intentions scattered like blown dust. Clearly, he knew. Jimmy’s expression of stoic acceptance helped me drop my tense shoulders.

“Do you think she’ll like Bayside Seafood?” I asked.

Chase’s smirk had me steeling myself for his response. “I think she likes *you*. Wherever you take her will be fine. But Bayside is a good choice. Their oysters are fabulous.” He wiggled his brows as obnoxiously as possible. “Quite the aphrodisiac.”

Jimmy smacked Chase across the chest, grinning when the other man recoiled as if mortally wounded. “Quit talking about aphrodisiacs and my sister.”

“What? I’m not the one who’s dating her.”

Jimmy grunted his disapproval. “Still.”

I peered closely at him, but Jimmy didn’t turn his ire on me.

“Do you think I should tell her about Rosie tonight?” I asked, glancing between their thoughtful expressions. “Assuming she doesn’t already know?”

Jimmy shook his head. “It hasn’t come up, and it’s not my story to tell. That’s all you, man. Besides, I’m still disappointed they didn’t ask me for help.” He gestured to his body, grinning playfully. “I mean, grade-A specimen, right here, and they went with *you*? Rosie is beautiful, and I get that you’re family and all, but, *c’mon*. I would have made a gorgeous baby

too.”

Chuckling at his pretend offense, I let his words sink in. Figuring out when to introduce it into conversation and how to explain my relationship with Rosie, Kirsten, and Julie was a little tricky. For me, it had been simple: Julie and her wife wanted a baby and needed a donor. I’d always be Uncle Ty. Always part of Rosie’s life. But some of the women I’d dated looked at me differently after they found out. They either believed it meant I was ready to be a father and wanted to hop on the baby train or that I was a deadbeat dad, letting my sister and her wife raise Rosie. Explaining our family had become complicated. But it wasn’t something I wanted to hide.

“Just tell her,” Chase urged.

I shifted to Jimmy, curious for his advice. His casual shrug didn’t tell me much. “Andi understands about family,” he finally said.

I rolled my shoulders, stretching out my neck.

She’d understand. Andi knew Julie. She’d met Rosie. I used each thought as a brick, shoring up my confidence. If we were meant to be, she’d understand.

I’d scheduled a haircut, wanting to look my best for Andi, then stressed the entire time I was in the chair that my barber wouldn’t finish on time, and I’d be late for our date. I rushed home afterward, wanting time to shower and change before picking her up. Speeding through the process hadn’t left me much time to prepare. And by “prepare,” I meant assuage the tension built up from our last text exchange, letting my release relax the tight anticipation no amount of self-pleasure seemed to diminish.

I pulled up in front of her apartment complex and took the stairs two at a time to her door. Sitting outside to make sure her car started wasn’t the same as an invitation inside. I was curious to see how Andi lived. She was all bold prints and bright colors. My sunshine. Would her home be the same? Or would another side of Andi emerge?

I wanted all of her secrets. Worry dimmed my excitement as I paused at her front door. Telling Andi about Rosie was becoming critical. I couldn’t

ask for Andi's confidences if I wasn't willing to share my own. But something about the admission felt too big, too serious for a playful night out. I'd yearned for this opportunity with Andi. Hadn't I earned a one-night reprieve, before letting the realities intrude? I wanted it to be impossible for her to walk away, as impossible as it was becoming for me to imagine my life without her. Shoving aside the guilt, I focused instead on her front door.

She answered my knock almost immediately, and I grinned. Maybe I wasn't the only one eager to spend time together. Focusing first on the soft flush in her cheeks and the welcoming smile on her lush lips, it took me a moment to get the full effect.

Andi was gorgeous. Dressed in a short red dress and tall black boots, her dark hair pulled back from her face and her mouth bright with a matching shade of red, she looked like sin incarnate.

I swallowed down the rising tide of lust and desire to push her back against the wall, hiding it behind a more civilized greeting.

"Hi, Andi. You look beautiful."

Her pleased smile distracted me from the growing bulge in my trousers, the sparkle in her eyes warming my chest instead.

"You're pretty handsome there yourself, Hot Stuff."

My lips twitched at the nickname. It put us on familiar, competitive footing, and I was glad for the evening I had planned. My gaze flashed down to where the red dress flirted with her thighs. I'd decided it was too cold for mini golf. But she hadn't dressed for go-cart racing. I knew no matter her wardrobe, Andi would rise to the challenge. But I also knew myself. Imagining her sweet red dress fluttering around her thighs as she raced me would keep me on edge all evening, trying to answer the age-old question: what was she wearing underneath?

I coughed, trying to hide the part of me that was ready to rise to the challenge.

"What time is our reservation?"

"Six. We have time to walk along the waterfront first if you won't be too cold?"

I'd broken down and done the smart thing: asking Andi what sounded good for dinner. Even though I thought I had a decent read on Andi,

checking with her seemed like the better bet.

She shrugged into a heavy coat, and I brushed the few tendrils caught under the collar free.

Not an excuse to get close enough to smell the hint of her lavender soap. *Sure.*

I cleared my throat and worried she'd think I was sick if I couldn't get my body under control. My coughing and throat clearing were sure to send the wrong message if I wasn't careful.

We stepped outside into the brisk evening. Winter was fading into spring, which usually meant rain and more overcast days in the northwest, but today had been one of those perfect, puffy cloud and blue sky afternoons. Minus the wind blowing off the Sound, it'd be pleasant down by the waterfront.

I found parking in one of the gravel lots on Front Street, and we crossed to pick up the path full of joggers, walkers, and other couples out for an early evening stroll along the water. The fading light glinted off the rippling waves, and I glanced at Andi out of the corner of my eye. Her focus was on a container ship nearing the port, and I searched her expression for signs of discomfort.

“Are you warm enough?”

Her lips turned up at my concerned tone, her dark eyes sparkling when she examined my face.

“Have you always been so solicitous? I vaguely remember overhearing an argument between you and Jess in high school when you refused to give her your letter jacket.”

The reminder that Andi knew most of the things about me, and we had a shared history, was both exciting and daunting. Would she like the changes? Approve? Or turn her back once she realized I wasn't the good-time jock I once was? I liked to think I was a better, humbler version of myself. Except when it came to competing with her.

Her playful expression had sobered during my silence, and I rushed to fill in the gap, going for rueful.

“I like to think I've learned a few things since high school.”

Her lip quirked. “Oh, yeah? You going to tell me all the things

you've *learned*?"

Reassured that we were back on playful footing, I couldn't resist amping up my anticipation and hers. "I'd much rather show you," I husked, grasping the edges of her wool jacket and pulling her into the shelter of my body on the side of the path.

Andi tilted her chin up, and I took it as the invitation I'd been hoping for, leaning down to brush my lips across hers.

"Sunshine, I've learned all kinds of things I'd like to show you," I growled in her ear, smiling at her shiver in response. Recalling the steady stream of pedestrians brushing past us, I tamped down the desire cuddling her close elicited. "But half of them would get us arrested here. And tonight's plans don't include handcuffs." I paused, letting my words sink in. "I want to save those for our second date."

Andi chuckled, and I pulled away reluctantly, struggling to tear my gaze from the sweet curve of her lips.

Andi shivered, and we turned around on the path, heading back toward the restaurant. As much as I wanted her reaction to signal desire, I had a feeling she was also actually cold. Bayside Seafood had a rustic exterior. Cedar shingles covered the outer walls, helping shelter it from the elements where it sat exposed on its own pier over the water. The interior was blessedly warm after the cutting wind, and the host showed us to a table by the windows with a smile.

Dinner was everything I'd hoped. A mashup of friends getting to know each other after years apart, with the tingle of possibility highlighting every revelation. Andi listened as I talked about my soccer days, asking insightful questions as I transitioned to talking about the 911 center.

"What's your mix of calls like?"

"This time of year? Mostly vehicular accidents on icy roads. The occasional carbon monoxide poisoning." I sobered, thinking of the family we'd rushed to the hospital. Some mistakes couldn't be undone.

"Is it difficult?" she asked.

Her liquid brown eyes drew all my feelings to the surface. The inadequacy, the powerlessness.

"Yes," I admitted on an exhale. "I love helping people, but some

days I question if I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just a voice on the phone. I can’t actually *do* anything.”

“Ty, that’s *not* true. Dispatching resources is *doing* something. You’re getting them help. Being the reassuring voice on the phone, keeping people calm, is *doing* something. I know hearing your strong voice on the phone during an emergency would be a lifeline if it were me. You forget, I saw you when Ted collapsed. Without you giving us instructions, he might not have made it.”

I didn’t believe her, but it was clear from the sincerity in Andi’s expression that she did. Seeing the approval in her expression, the admiration, soothed a phantom ache. I might not be a soccer player any longer, but Andi hadn’t liked that version of me. The man I’d become, she respected. Cared for.

Would her view of me as a hero survive learning about Rosie?

Things were so new, but so amazing between us, could I risk it?

“The calls can’t all be bad. I bet you have your share of funny situations.”

I shook my head, dispelling thoughts of secrets. Her change of subject confirmed that Andi wasn’t ready for my skeletons; she was interested in my stories.

“There have been a few memorable funny calls,” I admitted. “We have the occasional drunk dialer to entertain us. My most recent called to complain when the local tittie bar, Dream Girls, wouldn’t admit him with his pet kitten. But he phrased it a little differently. According to him, ‘they won’t let my pussy in.’”

Snickering, Andi shook her head. “And I bet you were *real* mature throughout that conversation.”

“We had to watch the classic SNL skit ‘NPR’s Delicious Dish’ as training for the call center.” I said with a straight face.

“You did *not*. The ‘no one can resist my Schweddy balls’ radio show? As training?” her eyes twinkled with mirth, and she seemed on the edge of believing me.

“They don’t include it in our onboarding, but they should,” I

admitted with a sheepish grin. “That parody is a master class in remaining calm in the face of ridiculousness.”

“And the calls from kids can be hilarious. I had a six-year-old call to complain that her big brother was pinching her.”

“What happened?” Andi asked, eyes wide.

“I had her pass the phone to her brother, and it turned out she’d been cheating at Go Fish.”

She chuckled. “Been there.”

She looked hesitant for a moment. “What about Hernandez? Any more prank calls from his address? Or have you heard any prosecution rumors after our trial?”

“No calls and no rumors. However, I saw in the sports section of the paper that Hernandez is getting traded again. It’ll be interesting to see how his new team feels about his potential involvement with Shepherd, if and when it comes to light.”

Her brow wrinkled, and I touched my pinky to hers where it lay on the table, stroking it gently.

“We did the right thing,” I reassured.

She looked up, expression clearing. “You think so? I wondered how you’d feel about our jury experience together.”

My lip tilted up. “Like I finally got to see your persuasive magic in action, and how it worked on me.” Her fingers relaxed against the table, and I squeezed them briefly before releasing them. “What about you, how has work been since jury duty?” I asked.

Her expression soured and I regretted my question.

She traced a pattern on the table. “Just okay. I have a new boss, and he’s ... learning. I could handle losing out on the director job if it had gone to someone competent. But I’ve spent all week cleaning up his messes.”

Seeing her struggle didn’t sit well, but supporting her behind-the-scenes seemed to be what she wanted. And I trusted Andi to ask for help if she needed it.

“That stinks.”

Her lip tilted up at the corner. “Yeah, it does. I’m just so *tired*. I’ve worked too hard to stagnate now. Mark is making noises about a promotion

for me, but I'm not sure it's going to go through."

"If it doesn't, are you going to move on? Find something else?"

She went back to tracing designs on the table, and I held my breath. If she took a new job, would she move away?

"I'm thinking about it," she admitted. "But I haven't started seriously looking."

"Oh." I shook myself, trying to snap out of a selfish perspective. This was about Andi. Her happiness. All I could do was be supportive.

"You are a badass, and you deserve to work where you're appreciated. Does this mean you might move away?"

Her quick head shake dissolved the tangle in my gut. The question had escaped before I could call it back. I had no say in her decisions. Yet. Hearing she didn't plan to relocate soothed some of my fears about the future.

"Unlikely. I don't want to move far from Jimmy." Her gaze met mine across the table. "There are too many good things here."

Hoping I was reading the silent message there correctly, I put it to a test, unable to resist the urge to tease and lighten the mood.

"Do those good things include me?" I asked, letting a smile flirt with my lips.

"If you want it to."

Her playful tone reassured me, and I couldn't contain my grin.

"Oh, I definitely do."

After dinner, I drove us to an indoor go-cart track off the freeway. Andi's obvious excitement told me I'd chosen well. She bumped my hip with hers, and I resisted the urge to clasp her to me to prolong the contact.

"You're going *down*, Sheldon."

I couldn't help my gaze from flashing down to where her red dress flirted with her thighs. I choked on a laugh as she shoved me away, likely realizing her threat had come off more like an invitation.

"Not like *that*, pervert."

"Yeah? Want to make things interesting?"

"Are you trying to bet your way into my panties, Hot Stuff?"

Her heart. Her life. Her panties. I wanted my way into them all.

The moment crystallized, Andi's laughing, flushed face forever impressed on my memory. Warmth washed through me, and my heart raced. Was this love? Wanting to be there for her, with her, always? Andi challenged me in ways I'd never dreamed. She made me laugh, made me appreciate my gifts and hers. I could picture us, ten or twenty years down the line, just like this. Laughing and competing against each other. I wrangled in the impulse to share how I was feeling. Blurting out I believed I loved her on our first real date might not send the right message.

Shaking myself, I matched her playful tone to cover my thoughts. "Sunshine, I don't want to get *into* your panties, I want to get you *out* of them."

"Hmm ... what did you have in mind?"

I loved that every time I suggested a new game, she eagerly rose to the challenge. Like that competitive spirit was just as much a part of her DNA as it was mine. It was sexy as hell.

"How about, if I win, you have to slip off your underwear and hand them to me before dessert."

"Dessert, huh? Am I on the menu?" she teased.

Heart racing, I leant forward, letting my hips graze hers. "Only if you want to be."

Mischief flared in her expression, and she stroked a finger down my chest, curling it around the waistband of my jeans. Hiding my reaction wasn't an option. My erection pressed against her as she tugged me forward, and I groaned at the sparkle in her dark eyes.

"Tell you what, Hot Stuff. If you win, I'll slip off my underwear and hand them over before dessert. But. If *I* win, you've got to do the same."

Hazy with lust, I could only nod. I'd planned on ice cream after our race, but the heat in her gaze had me wishing for so much more. Capturing my prize would only make it harder not to want her for dessert.

Andi heckled me all through our heat, and I chased her around the track, doing my best to weave in and around her. The smell of exhaust nearly choked me as she sped away, and her frown of concentration as she pulled around me only spurred me on. Win or lose, flirting with Andi was the most fun I'd had in ages. Worries about the future, misgivings about everything

that could go wrong, all faded away under the warmth of her smile.

“Pay up, sucker.”

Her triumphant grin and the guilt of desire edging her expression eased any ache over losing our race. If Andi looked at me like that, had I truly failed?

Playfully, I reached for my fly, and she slapped my hands away, laughing.

“Not here, Hot Stuff. Again, with things that could get us arrested? You must really be jonesing for those handcuffs.”

With a saucy wink, I sauntered toward the bathroom. Pausing at the threshold, I glanced over my shoulder, catching her watching me walk away. I bit my lip and cocked a hip, hamming it up for her. Her belly laugh echoed behind me, and I hummed to myself as I slid into a stall to make good on our bet. Slipping out of the bathroom, my gaze caught on Andi standing in the hall. Lips full and turned up in a soft smile, hair a little wild from our race, she looked ripe for a tumble into bed, and my body tightened as the fantasy took shape.

Needing to get us back on silly footing to restore blood flow to my brain, I dropped to one knee as I presented my folded boxers, ostentatiously, like I was in the presence of royalty.

Andi bowed solemnly over my offering, then slid my boxers into her jacket pocket and patted the area.

“I dub thee: Sir Commando.”

“It’s my pleasure to serve,” I answered softly, losing my grip on the ridiculous in the face of the truth.

I stood, sneaking a quick kiss, before grabbing her hand and tugging her toward my truck.

“Where do you want to go for dessert?” I asked, keeping my expression innocent.

“Nothing beats Tacoma Creamery,” she said.

I tilted my head, squinting. “Is that a euphemism?” I asked hopefully. I could be down with visiting her creamery. My truck bench seats weren’t ideal, but we could be at my place in ten minutes. Eight if I slid through a few pink lights.

“No, it’s not,” she paused, chuckling. “You’ve never been to Tacoma Creamery? It’s the best ice cream in town. I’m surprised Rosie hasn’t begged you for a visit. I thought you were a cool uncle,” she teased.

Slightly let down that she hadn’t been issuing an invitation, I clutched my heart. “That hurts, Sunshine.”

The smile flirting with her lips bloomed into a full grin. “What, that you’re not so cool after all, or that you thought I’d suggest your place for dessert? What if I’m the kinda girl that wants to take it slow?”

I huffed theatrically. “I’ve known you too long to believe that.” I leaned in close, dropping into huskier tones, gazing directly into Andi’s eyes. “And, Sunshine, no matter what, you’re my kind of woman.” Her eyes widened and she went still as I leaned in closer to whisper in her ear. “Even if you steal my underwear and subject me to the terrors of the most popular ice cream parlor in town.”

Peals of her triumphant laughter broke over me, bathing me in warmth.

There’d be time enough later to tell her I wasn’t joking.

CHAPTER 13 – ANDI

Tacoma Creamery was overrun with families by the time we arrived. Judging from the uniforms, at least half of the crowd hailed from a local indoor soccer league. Girls and boys in knee-high socks bounced in line, excited to pick out their scoop flavors.

I sank back against Ty as we waited our turn, enjoying his strength at my back. He threw a casual arm around my shoulders, and I snuggled closer, inhaling to seek out the hint of soap beneath the aroma of sugar and waffle cones that hung in the air.

Go-cart racing with Ty had been a blast. Going toe-to-toe with him had been fun because he met me at every turn. In other relationships, I'd held back my competitive nature. Some men couldn't handle losing. But Ty took it good naturedly. I grinned at the memory of him posing on the threshold to the bathroom. Sexy and confident, even in defeat. Remembered heat washed through me at the memory of the swift kiss he'd seized after handing over his underwear. He'd left me slick with wanting him after the barest touch. Stroking my jacket pocket, the trophy there served to emphasize that whatever I threw at Ty, he could handle it. We were well-matched in that way.

It was the devil inside that made me poke and prod to see if I could scare him in a different way. I gestured to the horde of tiny soccer players around us. "Do all these miniature shin guards running around make you want a mini-Ty to coach? You already coach your niece's team, right?"

I glanced up, wanting to see his expression. I'd met Rosie, so the question didn't seem out of bounds. We'd known each other for years, but he hadn't settled down after Jess with someone new. Like poking at a piece of corn between my teeth, I had to know if he yearned for a family. Would he be satisfied with only me? I hadn't spent a lot of time around kids. Nervousness sped up my heart rate. My ambivalence about having a family had been a

deal breaker for more than one past boyfriend. Before Ty took any more pieces of my heart, I owed it to myself to find out how he felt.

His expression shuttered, closing down, and I bit my lip, regretting the loss of our easy comradery. Had I inadvertently hit on a pain point? Did he have kids running around I didn't know about? Had Jess been pregnant when she left him? The possibility that he'd experienced that kind of loss had my heart clutching in my chest. Something about the tension in his shoulders hinted at strong feelings.

Ty cleared his throat as the silence lingered, as if considering what to say. I couldn't put my finger on his expression. Not sadness exactly, maybe reluctance?

"I enjoy coaching Rosie. That's enough for me for now."

His answer was the one I'd hoped for. But my need to push, to take things too far, wouldn't let me leave it alone.

"I don't think I want kids."

I put it out there baldly, ripping off the Band-Aid.

"It's good to know what you want." Ty's weak smile didn't recapture his earlier ease. He didn't seem shocked, so why did I feel like I'd missed something important? His supportive response didn't exactly surprise me, but I noticed he didn't mention what *he* wanted. Men usually either shared their own dreams for a child-free life or backed away like I was toxic at this juncture. Ty had done neither.

Whether it was the crowded ice cream store or the too-serious talk about future desires, the mood was broken. Ty's smile didn't quite reach his eyes as he teased me about tasting every flavor before committing to my cone.

His kiss at the end of the evening felt almost contemplative, like he wasn't sure where to go next, and something in me shriveled. I'd grown used to brash, teasing Ty. This quiet, thoughtful version of him shook me. Had I succeeded in pushing him away, talking too soon about kids, what we wanted from the future? Should I have waited, held back?

I straightened my shoulders as I stepped back from the soft brush of his lips, my smile firmly in place. I'd promised myself I wouldn't settle for someone who wanted me to be less than myself. I'd believed Ty could be the

man who accepted me as is, without wanting me to change. If he wasn't that man, it was better to find out now.

"Good night, Ty."

"G'night, Sunshine."

The soft rumble of his voice echoed through me as I locked the door behind him, letting my forehead fall forward against the cool door.

"It's better this way," I whispered around a tight throat.

But I'd wanted to believe he wanted me. *Needed* to believe.

Pieces of my heart splintered as I breathed through the pain of rejection. Nothing outright or in your face, Ty had just shut down, choosing not to open up. But his non-answer seared just the same. I'd shared my feelings, the real me, and he'd pulled away, retreating.

After my date with Ty, I fell headfirst into work, focusing on my payroll conversion project. Avoiding thinking about love, mistakes, or men who didn't want me as much as I wanted them.

Mark had stepped up at the office, taking more ownership and helping take routine tasks off my plate so I could devote time to final preparations for our payroll system go-live. Working on the project reminded me of all the things I loved about my job and collaborating with Ed in person for once didn't hurt. Ed had been contracted to do the backend data transfer for our conversion to a new payroll system, and my role was to test and ensure everything loaded correctly, since I was familiar with the actual records. He operated out of a home office in Oregon, but we spoke on the phone and emailed frequently. We'd met a couple of times at the beginning of the project, and he'd struck me as slightly shy and one hundred and ten percent nerdy. In other words, a perfect fit for our trivia team.

I'm not sure who was more shocked when Ed accepted my long-standing invitation to join us at trivia. Ed, because I'd asked every time he visited and he never joined us, or me when he'd said yes. It'd been a standing joke between us as we worked together that he'd have to join Trebek's Rejects next time he was in town.

And in another life, pre-Ty, I would have been interested in more than Ed's brain if he'd lived nearby. Instead, we'd developed an easy virtual friendship. There was no way I'd disinvite him. Not when we still needed extra players. I bit my lip. It would serve Ty right if he experienced a little jealousy, seeing Ed at my table. Even if it was just envy for Ed's expertise when we won.

Not that I wanted Ty to be jealous.

Liar.

Okay, maybe a little jealous would have been fine. If not for his history with Jess. I fired off a quick text on my way to Haven, informing Ty about the Reject's additional teammate.

Andi: Hey, Rejects are bringing another player tonight, Ed, a contractor friend of mine from work. Maybe you can join us for drinks after trivia?

With things still unsettled between us, I didn't need him lumping me with Jess. He might not twitch over Shelly and Sam from jury duty joining us on occasion, but after witnessing my trivia 'ho' phase, I didn't need to look like I was cheating, recruiting strange men into our competition. Ty and I were struggling enough on our own to navigate our relationship. *Whatever it might be.*

The frustration of moving so slowly with Ty had been eating at me, the handful of flirty text exchanges killing me by inches. I couldn't figure out what was holding him back. After our date, we'd had a few casual texts, but that was it. And as much as I wanted to straight-up ask him what his intentions were with me, every attempt at honesty with Ty seemed to backfire.

Me being too much. Too honest. Too forward. And okay, that one time, too drunk.

When would I be someone's 'exactly right'?

Was I chasing the impossible with Ty? My competitive nature wanted to win, but it would be a hollow victory if he didn't truly want me. I'd expected him to make a move after ice cream. When he left me with a measly good night kiss, I'd been disappointed. Not with the kiss, but that there wasn't more. I always wanted more with Ty. He made me want everything.

My musings had to be put on hold as I waved down Ed in front of Haven. He nudged the frame on his glasses as he drew closer, and I couldn't help but admire his profile. He smiled, looking relieved to see me waiting, and I grinned in return, cursing the lack of attraction. Why did my type have to be a gruff and competitive 911 operator instead of the sincere and slightly goofy Ed?

"You ready for tonight?" I asked Ed on our way into Haven.

"You said all I needed was a brain, do I look like the Headless Horseman?"

I chuckled, pulling open the door and weaving my way back to our booth.

"Thankfully, you've got all the requisite bits and pieces."

"Andi, what are you doing talking about a man's bits and pieces? Didn't Gran raise you better?" Jimmy's teasing had me rolling my eyes as I introduced Ed to the rest of the group.

"My fellow Trebek's Rejects, this is Ed, IT nerd extraordinaire, trivia geek, and Bigfoot enthusiast. Ed, meet the Rejects: my brother, Jimmy, is a firefighter and his specialties are video games, sports, and home improvement. His wife, Melena, is our resident expert on the eastern half of the state and all things geography. Our high school friend, Chase, covers books and media and fights Jimmy on the video game questions. His fiancé, Tamra, we rely on for medical knowledge."

"And what do you bring to the table?" Ed asked.

"Unwavering confidence that we're always right and a healthy dose of pop culture and music," I answered playfully.

We settled in with drinks, waiting for the first round to start. I couldn't help sliding glances to the Knit Wits' table. No Ty yet. And no response to my text. Jeannie waved when she caught me looking, and a blush rose in my cheeks. Little Ms. Infatuated, that was me. Tempted beyond good sense or subtlety by Ty.

I did my best to focus on my own table, listening as my friends grilled Ed.

"So, you single?" Tamra asked.

"Yep." Ed's brow wrinkled. "You interested?"

“Are you interested in continuing to breathe?” Chase butted in.

Chase’s challenge cleared the confused frown from Ed’s face. “Sorry about that, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

In an awkward-off, who would win? Our table had so many contenders: Tamra, Chase, Ed.

My attention veered from the contest to see who could misunderstand and step in it most uncomfortably to the Knit Wits table, where Ty was just sliding in next to Jeannie. I waited half a beat to see if he’d acknowledge me, but Ty didn’t turn our way.

Disappointed, I returned my focus to our small group, to find Ed asking questions about the upcoming wedding. Tamra hadn’t lost the evil glint in her eye, and I shook my head, trying to signal her. Ed wasn’t for me. Guiltily, I slid one last glance at Ty, catching Jeannie’s eye over his broad shoulders. She gave a little finger wave, and I slid down in my seat.

Too obvious. My interest had been noted, but not by Ty.

It stung, and I couldn’t reconcile the sweet, playful man with the one currently ignoring me. What had I done? *Oh, yeah. Been myself. The kiss of death.*

The round started, and I patted myself on the back for how easily Ed fit in with our group. He’d started out stiff and unsure, but as the evening wore on, his sense of humor bloomed.

Pete said, “The creature Bigfoot has an alternate name. What is the linguistic derivative of the alternate name?”

“Sasquatch,” Melena answered quickly.

Ed’s grin couldn’t have been more pleased. “But do you know the origin?”

He glanced around at the blank faces in our group, seemingly at ease now that he could contribute. “It’s Salish for ‘wild man.’”

Jimmy hooted. “So, you mean I could have been calling Chase a Sasquatch all this time?”

My lips twitched. “He did used to run kinda feral. Never venturing out of his man cave.” I shifted him a teasing glance. “Hiding from life with unkempt hair.”

Chase held up his hands. “Guilty.” He leaned in, placing a quick kiss

at the corner of Tamra's mouth. "But reformed."

We won the first round, and I grinned over at Ty's table when Pete announced our victory.

But he didn't turn around.

"Brrrr ..." Tamra mimed rubbing her arms for warmth. "There's an arctic chill coming from over there. What did you do to earn the cold shoulder? Does he think you're here with Ed as something more than teammates?"

Any last hope it was all in my head evaporated.

The most Andi thing to do would be to confront him. At his table. In front of his teammates. Leaning into my personality to force a face-off. Clear the air once and for all. He either wanted me, or he didn't. It was that simple. Pulling back on my natural instincts hadn't gotten me anywhere with Ty.

Jaw firm, I pushed out of the booth, ready to march over. Like a rabbit sensing imminent destruction, Ty slid out of his booth, heading toward the restrooms.

My eyes narrowed. He couldn't thwart me that easily. I followed, winding my way through tables, hoping to reach him in the hall, building up a head of steam with every step.

I turned the corner to see him disappearing into the men's room.

Dammit.

Having a conversation at the urinal didn't appeal, and I could wait.

Ed slipped out of the bathroom as I tapped my foot impatiently, and I stilled, trying to hide my irritation from him. It wasn't Ed's fault Ty was being an ass.

"Thanks again for inviting me tonight," Ed said, leaning against the wall near me. He pushed his glasses up, the light in his eyes sincere. "I don't get out much. It's nice to have people to hang out with, especially when I travel alone."

I forced a smile. Again, not Ed's fault that Ty was ignoring me. I'd done my best to head off any drama there. "I'm glad you came too. We'll have to make it a habit if you come back to town."

Ty slid through the men's room door. His glance bounced off of me with Ed, a quick frown taking over his expression as he nodded briefly in

acknowledgement before stepping around us.

“Ty, wait.”

Ed glanced between us, then tilted his head toward our table in a silent excusal and strode away to safety with our other teammates.

Ty’s ball cap shadowed most of his features, but not those lips. Still slightly downturned, almost ... pouty? What did he have to pout about?

“What crawled up your ass?”

Could I have used a less confrontational tone? Sure. But his silent censure bugged the crap out of me, and I couldn’t resist poking him back. I’d texted him about Ed. He had nothing to be upset about.

He tilted his hat up, giving me a quick shot at his full expression, before pulling it back down, shrouding his features again.

“Who’s your new teammate? I don’t think I recognize him.”

It wasn’t an answer, but the hint of jealousy clued me in to the real problem. A thread of hurt washed through me. Did he still not trust me? Even after I’d given him a heads-up that Ed would be joining our team?

Ty leaned against the wall next to me, and I couldn’t help but drift a bit closer. The soft navy T-shirt clung to his upper body, emphasizing the musculature that made my mouth water. Heat from his body engulfed me, and it was my turn to rub my bare shoulders, but not from cold. Goose bumps peared on my skin, and my nipples peaked.

Unfair. My body acted like it was starved for him, but I couldn’t shake the irritation over his attitude.

“Ed’s just a friend from work. Which you’d know, if you read your text messages.”

His lips firmed, but I caught the flash of guilt as comprehension dawned. “I know we haven’t talked about exclusivity. I just didn’t expect you to bring someone else to trivia night. It’s kind of our thing. And I was running a little late. I didn’t check my phone,” he muttered.

A mix of frustration and understanding washed through me. “Ty. I say this with all sincerity. You’re. An. Idiot.”

I poked his chest with every word for emphasis. *Of course*, trivia was our thing.

His expression folded into something stoic and blank, and I gripped

my scalp, tugging at my hair. Name calling. Poking him. Not my finest moments. Why did Ty push all my buttons? I knew the rules of a fair fight, but I was breathing too hard to bring my emotions under control.

Disappointment cascaded through me. He was shutting down. Choosing flight over fighting for me. For us. I'd done my best to meet him halfway, aware that bringing Ed might jab at old wounds if I didn't. I'd been up front. Open. Sharing the parts of me that usually made men turn away. But Ty didn't want me. Unless someone else did. Then he put on the wounded bear impression. And locked down every single emotion. Looking at him now, I'd never guess he had a feeling. Ever.

He pushed away from the wall, backing slowly down the hall, hands up.

"I'm sorry I bothered you."

As apologies went, it sucked. *Bothered* me? Frustrated enough to scream, I stalked him instead.

"Yes, Ty, you *bother* me. I've been hot and *bothered* for weeks. I thought we had the start of something good. But you don't talk to me. You don't share. You shut down on me after our last date, and I don't know why. And I need more. I want someone who wants me too. To distraction. Not only when it's convenient."

He sputtered to a stop at my last words, gripping my elbows. Thanks to my advance, we were chest to chest, and I could easily see his eyes under the brim of his cap. They were on fire. For me.

"Hah. Convenient?" He tugged me an inch closer, near enough I could feel the bulge in his jeans. "You think *this* is convenient? I pride myself on being calm. Rational. I have to keep my cool in a crisis, and, Andi, you bring out the monster in me. Easy would have been ignoring what was between us. Not jeopardizing my friendship with Jimmy and Chase. Not putting my peace of mind at risk. Endangering my principles at court by being unable to think of anything but you. The one thing you'll never be, Andi, is *convenient*."

My pulse accelerated at his words, my breath coming fast. For once, I wasn't the one coming on too strong. Forgiving him shouldn't have been so easy but seeing the flare of lust convinced me it was necessary.

“Good.” I forced the words out between labored breaths, my focus narrowing on his chiseled lips. “We need to talk more.” Those lips. They called to me. “About all the things,” I murmured as he dipped closer.

“Agreed.”

His husky tone made me shiver, and he groaned as the ripple brought me in closer contact with his erection.

I sank into his kiss, letting the velvety wetness absorb every last thought and worry. Lost in him.

He tugged me closer, welding our hips together, and I rubbed against him, trying to assuage the ache between my thighs as he devoured my mouth.

The palm on my forehead pushing me away from Ty shocked me out of the moment.

“Ugh. Knock it off. It’s trivia time, and I drew the short straw of trying to hose you two down.”

Jimmy’s brotherly disgust jarred me back to reality, and I blinked.

With one hand on each of us, Jimmy stood like a referee, holding us apart. Ty scowled, and I batted at Jimmy’s hand.

“Knock it off, Jimmy.”

“*You* knock it off. This is a public hallway. There are children here. Innocent eyes.”

His tone was more playful than censuring, and I snorted. “You haven’t had innocent eyes since the seventh grade.”

Jimmy nodded to a mother and daughter exiting the bathroom behind me, and I shrugged away his hand.

“Point made,” I grumbled.

Ty relaxed back against the opposite wall, but I noted he was still breathing hard, and I let the evidence of how much he wanted me soothe any lingering embarrassment.

“Back to your tables. Next round is about to start. And we’re winning. Don’t blow it, Andi.” Jimmy narrowed his gaze, scowling. “Don’t make me come back here.”

Jimmy turned on his heel, striding down the hall, and I watched him go, using the extra moment to compose myself, smoothing my hair back.

Ty’s rueful smile echoed my own. “I guess we could have better

timing.”

“What is it with this hallway? Do they pump it with aphrodisiac gas or something?”

“You are a one-woman aphrodisiac, Andi. I think it’s the illusion of privacy that makes this hallway so tempting. But I’m done with illusions. I want the real thing.” His steady gaze watched my expression. “I want you.”

Warmth rushed through me at his words. It couldn’t get much clearer than his statement. As much as I wanted to drill him on why he’d cooled off after our date, why he’d been so aloof instead of talking to me about Ed, the thrill of him sharing his feelings for me eased some of my fears.

Before I could do more than lean in to ask, Jeannie was clearing her throat at our side.

“Round’s starting.”

Frustrated by the interruption, I did my best to tamp down the desire to hold onto Ty until we’d talked everything out.

Ty mouthed “One-woman aphrodisiac” to me as he followed the other woman back to his table.

I couldn’t hold back the grin as I returned to my team, though I studiously ignored their knowing smiles. Even Ed looked like he’d been clued in.

“Let’s do this, Rejects. I feel like winning,” I said instead, rubbing my hands together.

Whether or not they knew it, victory was already mine tonight.

CHAPTER 14 – TY

I had barely kicked my door closed before I was texting Andi. My fellow Knit Wits had ribbed me mercilessly when we lost, but my concentration was shot after our kiss in the hallway. All I could think of was spending more time with Andi. In private. I'd been a fool to take so much time, but I'd needed to be sure.

Seeing Ed with Andi at trivia had stung. I'd battled my conscience all evening, waffling between outrage that she'd brought a date and fear that I'd lost her by moving too slow, convincing myself it was my own fault for pulling back, keeping secrets.

I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. Andi wasn't Jess. I'd felt humbled when I finally read my text message from her. Flinging myself on her mercy in the hall had been a necessity, even if it destroyed my focus for the rest of the evening, fantasizing about taking those hallway kisses further. I needed to make it up to her. And that started with being clear.

Ty: I want to make it official. Come over tomorrow? I'll cook for you.

Andi: You said the magic words.

Her quick response eased some of the tension I'd been feeling. The return to our easy teasing helped reassure me that I hadn't done anything unforgivable.

Ty: What? I want to make it official? Be exclusive?

Andi: No. I'll cook. ❖❖

I grinned. She'd grown up in the kitchen with Jimmy. I'd been to her grandma's house more than once and been conscripted to help. No one escaped kitchen duty at the Torres house.

Ty: Wait. All this time, and that's all I needed to do?

Andi: Not ALL ...

Ty: ?

Andi: You need to do ME.

Laughter burst from my chest. That was my girl. Putting it out there. Her honesty was refreshing. And I owed her the same. About all the things. Rosie. All of it. She'd accused me of not talking enough about the things that mattered, and she was right. I'd been protecting myself. Force of habit. But one I had to change, for Andi and me to work. And I'd get there. Eventually. Was it wrong that I wanted to take a breath, enjoy her first?

Her admission about not wanting kids on our date had thrown me. Instead of blurting things out, I'd pulled back, needing time to process what it all meant. Did that mean she'd reject my role in Rosie's life? And did I want more kids? I hadn't thought about it. The longer I waited to tell her about Rosie, the more awkward I felt about my secret. Was it wrong to ease her into the idea by showing her what life for us could be like together? Letting her see the role I played in Rosie's life first-hand? I wrestled with my conscience and how best to broach the subject, feeling paralyzed about saying the wrong thing. Doing the wrong thing. She didn't need to justify her decision about her life or her desires to me. But it made it difficult for me to figure out how to approach her about who Rosie was to me.

I hummed, debating my response to her last text. As confident as Andi appeared to the world, her words from the hall haunted me. I couldn't leave her in any doubt about how I felt.

I took a snapshot of my grocery shopping cart, using the photo editor to highlight the item I wanted her to see and attaching it to my next message.

Ty: Preparing.

I grinned, trying to imagine her reaction. With any other woman, buying condoms in bulk would be too much, but I had faith in Andi.

Andi: Here's my favorite brand of lube.

I chuckled, adding her suggestion to my cart, along with the ingredients I'd need to cook her something special. Andi deserved everything I could give her.

“Hey.”

Andi's shy smile when I opened the door threw me. I half expected her to tackle me to the ground. It would have made things easier.

Instead, I put my adult face on, welcoming her inside.

"I've got dinner on the stove. Want to join me with a glass of wine while I wrap up?"

She nodded, toeing off her shoes, and I showed her through my apartment before ending the tour in the kitchen.

"You have a nice place," she said, slipping onto a barstool across the small prep space from me.

"One guess who helped me decorate," I teased.

"Jimmy?"

I nodded. "He called it his 'welcome to living like the rest of us' gift when I left soccer and moved back to town." I grinned, remembering. "Jimmy was the rare teen boy who kept lavender sachets to ward off the sports gear funk. I was glad to see that he hadn't changed much even if we didn't stay tight over the years. I missed him."

Her eyes softened, crinkling around the corners as she took a sip from the glass I'd poured for her. "I dunno, having your own interior decorator still sounds pretty bougie to me. Was it hard?"

I didn't pretend to misunderstand her meaning. "Excruciating. Soccer was all I ever wanted."

The soft understanding in her eyes helped me breathe past the admission. I didn't expect her to tiptoe around the subject, and she didn't expect me to be over it, no matter how much time had passed.

"How'd you get the job with nine-one-one?" she asked.

I grinned. "Jimmy again."

"What is he, your fairy godmother?"

"Sometimes I think so, but no. Just a friend. One I don't want to disappoint."

She sobered at the talk of disappointment, tracing a pattern with her fingertip on the counter. "You think letting him down is a risk? Where's that competitive spirit I love so much?"

She'd said the L word and my heart stopped. Pausing on the precipice. Did she even realize? She wasn't serious, but why did hearing the

word “love” on her lips sound so right?

I cleared my throat, stalling for time. If I didn’t address that first night I turned her down, what held me back, would she ever believe I wanted her? Maybe now, she’d understand.

I took a deep breath and jumped. “Full disclosure, I asked your brother for permission to date you.”

“Dumbass did *what* now? I’m nearly thirty, not thirteen.”

Unsure if she was referring to me or her brother, I hid my smile, focusing instead on the chives I chopped for our baked potatoes.

“When I lost my soccer career, most of my friends from the team ghosted,” I admitted, keeping my gaze focused on the chives I was scraping into a bowl so I wouldn’t have to see the sympathy on her face. “Jess dumped me. My agent quit returning my calls. One unlucky moment, one injury, and it all went poof.”

I finally looked up, wanting her to see my sincerity. “I don’t take real friends for granted.”

“And Jimmy’s one of them,” she acknowledged.

I nodded. “Jimmy. Chase. My trivia team. You,” I added softly.

“Are we friends, Ty?” she asked with a husky edge to her voice that did more to turn me on than every soccer groupie’s lewd suggestion. “Is friendship why you turned me down that night?”

I’d been building up to the topic, but it shouldn’t have surprised me when she went for it. I nodded, leaning across the counter to still her finger from continuing its path along on the countertop. She glanced up, and I held her gaze. “Friends don’t let friends make mistakes.”

“And sleeping together would have been a mistake,” she said as she leaned back, breaking our connection.

“I wanted to be more to you,” I admitted hoarsely. “And you’d had a lot to drink. I wanted to make sure it was you talking, and not the booze.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Then why didn’t you ask me out later? Or earlier for that matter? Was it because of Jimmy? Did the dumbass forget he isn’t my keeper?”

I shrugged. “I hadn’t asked him yet. After that night, you started dragging every random guy within a five-mile radius into your team. I

thought you'd moved on. I worried the same with Ed."

"And now?" she challenged.

"And now I'm buying condoms in bulk to show my commitment."

Her burst of laughter lightened the mood, and I grinned at the merriment in her expression, wishing I could capture the moment and keep it forever. Andi's dark curls rioted around her head, inviting me to get lost in them. Lost in her.

We swapped more stories and memories of the years after high school over dinner, and Andi seemed to appreciate the effort I put into cooking for her.

"How'd you know chicken cordon bleu was my favorite?" she asked as she pushed back her empty plate.

I grinned. "I did my time in your grandma's kitchen. And I remember things."

"Things about me?" Her raised brows indicated her disbelief, and I couldn't resist the challenge.

"You hate orange soda. Love chicken cordon bleu. Are allergic to strawberries. Used to listen to Dave Mathews Band on repeat. Need I go on?" I asked, ticking off each item on my fingers.

She folded her hands, placing her chin on top. "Fascinating, Ty. Keep telling me about me."

Warming to her playful tone, I dug into my personal vault, wanting to prove to her that she'd had an impact on my life long before she realized.

"If you hadn't given Andrew McDonnell a black eye for talking smack to you in the ninth grade, Jimmy and I would have taken care of it. Half the soccer team had a crush on you but didn't dare go against Jimmy. And it was Chase and I who started the nickname Bigmouth."

Her eyes widened at the last, and I regretted *my* big mouth.

Not to be outdone, Andi rubbed her hands together. "Okay, Hot Stuff. My turn. You aced advanced calculus but pretended to struggle so Jimmy wouldn't feel bad. When the Southie high school mascot disappeared, nobody but me knew it was you, Jimmy, and Chase who took the macaw for a joyride and put up pictures of its travels around the school."

She knew so many of my secrets. Was it the right time to take it a

step further, reveal my last one? I opened my mouth to interject, but Andi barreled on. “Jess was your first kiss, but only because I didn’t get there first.”

My eyes lit at her last words. She may not have been first, but she’d be last.

Something about my expression must have telegraphed my intentions, because Andi held up her hands.

“Not so fast, Hot Stuff. If you know me that well, then you remember Grandma’s major rule.”

“Everyone helps clean up before anything else,” we recited together.

I debated throwing her over my shoulder, but the reminder of all we had to lose, our shared history, everything we had in common, made me pause. Taking my time with Andi, doing it right—she was worth it. I ignored the fire of anticipation racing through me, focusing instead on not dropping the dishes as we cleared the table. Chipping a dish or two was a small price to pay if it meant getting Andi naked faster, and my enthusiasm for loading the dishwasher didn’t go unnoticed.

“You ready to make good on all those shopping cart promises, Ty?” she asked with a saucy grin, her hip cocked in a seductive pose. The glint in her eye had me immediately hard.

“Major Erection, reporting for duty,” I saluted her jauntily, grinning like I was thirteen again. All teeth and no finesse.

Her belly laugh made the agony of waiting for tonight worth it. I couldn’t imagine being this playful with anyone else. Taking her by surprise, I lowered my shoulder into her midsection, boosting her over my back, enjoying the firm globes of her ass, ready for me to stroke. Maybe spank, if she got too uppity.

“Ty, what are you doing?” Andi screeched around her giggles.

I smacked her ass and bounced to get her settled more firmly on my shoulder.

“Just showing you a good time.”

“While I do like ogling your butt, it’s not exactly what I had in mind,” she wheezed out as I walked us toward my bedroom.

I set her down gently on my king-size bed, crawling until I had a

knee on either side of her hips. Hair spread like a halo, lips soft and open, lashes at half-mast, she seemed more than ready for every dirty suggestion I wanted to share.

“What *did* you have in mind?” I prompted, settling back on my heels to strip off my T-shirt.

She grabbed the front of my jeans, hooking a finger over the waist and tugging me until my pelvis met hers. I’m not ashamed to admit it, I groaned.

“My idea of a good time starts with you naked. Think you can manage that?”

“Bet I can beat you to it.”

“You’re on.”

Her raised brows challenged me as she pushed up from her prone position, teasing me by slowly lifting the edge of her shirt to expose a strip of soft, golden skin.

My tongue suddenly thick in my mouth, I bit at the tip and hissed as she scraped the fabric up her sides, torturously slowly.

Distracted, I paused with my hands at my fly, watching her slumbrous eyes and the hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth disappear beneath the shirt as she stripped it off. She bit at her bottom lip, and I couldn’t focus on anything else, totally missing her push her leggings and underwear down her hips. She propped a hand beneath her head, running a fingertip down one bare hip, and my limited synapse function could only focus on her feminine nail, stroking where I wanted to be. Licking along her satiny skin.

She cleared her throat, gesturing to my hand at the front of my pants.

“Need a little help there, Hot Stuff?”

Losing suddenly felt a lot like winning. I swallowed around the desire clogging my throat.

“Sure. I’m all yours.”

Did she hear the bald truth in those words?

She slid a slim hand between my jeans and the taut skin on my abdomen, and I inhaled quickly. Those hot hands, so close to where I wanted them. Needed them.

Andi made quick work of shucking my jeans and boxers, until we were both blessedly naked, tracing each other's bodies with hungry hands.

Each stroke sent a zap along every nerve, until I was trembling from the effort to go slow. Give her time to be as aroused as I was.

Andi kissed me hungrily, as if she were starving for me, and I shuddered.

The trickle of awareness that had always been present had exploded into a flame. No longer just friends, desire raced through me.

We came together, pushing, pulling, merging. Andi wasn't shy about telling me what she wanted, what she needed.

"Touch me here," she urged, guiding me between her thighs.

"More lube."

She gave as much as she took, stroking me mercilessly, bringing me to the edge.

"Now, Ty. I need you."

Her breathy demand nearly undid me. I surged into her, enjoying the warm clasp of her body, the heat of the friction we generated with every stroke. I pushed, working myself in her, angling to hit her clit and using my fingers when she directed. Rocking into her, thrusting, she grasped my shoulders on a groan and I saw stars, exploding deep inside her.

We flopped down side by side, breathing hard. Our race to completion had ended in the best possible way: with both of us winning. I couldn't help my goofy grin. Winning with Andi was almost as much fun as competing against her.

I could show her my hidden pieces, and she wouldn't turn away. Confidence in our connection blazed through me. We'd come together as friends, now lovers. And I'd never felt that word more. *Lovers*. I'd had plenty of sex. But this felt like more. Like everything. Not one night or one relationship, but like the rest of my life. Someone I could laugh with. Love with. Live with.

"I think I love you."

The admission burst from my lips as I stared up at the ceiling, still breathing hard.

Too soon. And yet, years too late. We'd wasted so much time.

“Ah, Ty.” Her breath came in pants, and I held back the urge to high five myself. “If you’re still *thinking*, we didn’t do it right. And I refuse to accept that, because we were *on fire*. I might need to ice my vagina to recover. Don’t tell me what you *think*, tell me when you *know*.”

Uncertainty washed through me. On one hand: we were on fire. She didn’t deny it. But her admonishment to speak only when I knew, jarred me. Did she doubt my feelings? I cast a quick glance at her next to me, taking in the mussed sheets, the corner of one soft blue edge almost covering the tip of her rosy nipple. She looked sated. Satisfied. I’d done that. No, *we’d* done that.

Searching her expression, I saw only lazy contentment. I had time to prove myself to her. Prove my words were more than a spur-of-the-moment confession. Time to share my last secret.

Before any doubts could trickle in about how she’d react to Rosie, I pushed to my elbows, slipping from our bed.

“Where are you going?”

I gestured to the condom I still needed to take care of.

“I have to reload for round two and get you an ice pack.”

Her satisfied chuckle followed me to the bathroom. I used the moment alone to collect myself. Andi might not be ready for me to love her. But we’d get there. Neither of us were willing to lose. And after experiencing what we could be, I was only willing to win together.

CHAPTER 15 – ANDI

I groaned, snuggling into Ty's shoulder, as his phone buzzed, ungodly early.

"Who's texting you so early," I grumbled.

We'd been up late, and every muscle ached from overexertion. If it was Jimmy texting to suggest a workout, I think Ty could safely decline. I smirked. We'd more than burned a few calories over the course of the night before falling into an exhausted slumber. We'd come so far from challenging each other not to touch in a single hotel bed, to being able to touch as much as we wanted, reveling in each stroke and feather-light caress.

"Jimmy," Ty yawned. "He's confirming that I'm going to meet him at the gym this morning. Should I send him a selfie of the two of us along with my regrets?"

I smacked his shoulder gently, trying not to get distracted by the tiny, inked frog I'd discovered there.

"That's my brother, so gross. The only one you should be sharing sexy photos with is me."

"Sunshine, I promise—it wouldn't be a sexy photo. We look like we've survived a tsunami."

"A sex tsunami?"

He backtracked at my arched brow. "Scratch that—you're gorgeous as always, but exhausted."

"No, no. I like the metaphor. Does this mean you're overwhelmed by me and my bodacious waves?"

He nodded sagely. "And never inclined to recover."

"Hmm. Should I be getting you an ice pack?"

His laugh warmed something inside, a long-dormant desire for belonging. Connection. Ty snuck a quick kiss before eluding my grabby hands to slide out of bed.

“I’m going to go make us a pot of coffee and respond to your brother, let him know I’m bailing on him today.”

It was hard to grumble when he was leaving bed to make me coffee. “Do you have any cream?”

Ty’s eye roll wasn’t subtle. “Yes, I know how you like your coffee.”

“And?” I arched my brow imperiously, secretly impressed.

“Of course, I bought cream. Can’t leave my kitty unsatisfied.”

His smirk made me regret letting him out of bed but shifting my legs had me wincing thanks to the overused muscles. Maybe coffee was the safer stimulant this morning. My thighs would thank me later.

I slipped into Ty’s shower, smiling at the extra towel he’d left out. Neither of us had even brought up me going home last night. There had been no question that we weren’t ready to separate so soon. As it was, I’d be showing up to work with a satisfied smile and a sex hangover Mark would spot a mile away on Monday. I heaved a happy sigh, sliding into last night’s clothes. Not even a forest of wrinkles could bring my mood down.

Curious, I opened the door to the extra room at the end of the hall. Ty hadn’t exactly skipped it on his tour, just noted it was the guest room. I cracked the door, peering inside.

“Holy crap.”

Wall-to-wall stuffed animals. It was like a Build-A-Bear threw up in there. Not exactly the bachelor guest room I’d envisioned. And definitely not something Jimmy would have helped decorate.

Ty placed a quick kiss at the juncture of my neck and shoulder, wrapping an arm with a steaming cup of coffee in front of me.

“It’s for my niece,” he murmured.

I relaxed into his embrace, sinking into Ty’s warmth, letting his words skip through me.

“Rosie?”

He nodded, before resting his chin on my shoulder, taking in the collection of stuffed bears, unicorns, and every other creature known and unknown. In addition to the stuffies, the room sported a single bed with a colorful quilt and walls painted a shocking yellow.

“This is her room when she stays with me.”

“Does she stay over a lot?”

I felt his nod more than I saw it, before he placed another quick kiss and withdrew.

“At least once a month I keep her, so her parents can have a date night.”

I rubbed at my chest, letting the sweetness sink in. In what universe was Ty still single? How had someone not snatched him up already?

Sipping from my cup of coffee, I stared into his deep brown eyes, enjoying the love and affection for his niece I could see there. “You, Ty Sheldon, are a prince among men.”

His eyes shadowed, and he hesitated a moment before smiling at me. “There’s plenty of time to learn about all my flaws. Right now is about wooing you.”

“Wooing me?” I hooted on a grin. Eyes sparkling, I couldn’t resist teasing him. “Are you going give me your high school letterman jacket next? Take me out for a milkshake at the drive-in? Maybe give me your pin and ask me to go steady?”

“You would look cute in my jacket—and nothing else.”

I chortled. “Thank goodness it’s not the fifties, and hallelujah, we’re not in high school anymore. Jimmy would have skinned you alive for suggesting that back in the day.”

“Yes, one of the few pleasures of adulthood is being able to see you naked.” He winked. “I have a shift at the market today, but join me for dinner, tonight?” he asked hopefully.

Heart full, I agreed immediately, eager to spend as much of the weekend together as possible.

Another delicious cup of coffee and a goodbye kiss that threatened to turn into more thigh chafing later, I left Ty’s so he could get ready for the Farmer’s Market.

On Monday, I floated through my meetings and work tasks, mostly ignoring Mark’s frantic requests for updates on our payroll project. Ed and I had nearly finished testing. Nothing could hold back my afterglow.

Ty: I can’t stop thinking about you.

So. Damn. Sweet. I bit my lip as I considered my reply.

Why had we not done this earlier?

Right.

We hadn't been ready yet.

Andi: Well, there's a remedy for that, ya know?

Ty: So, you say you're coming over tonight?

Andi: Or, you could come to me.

Ty: So long as we come. ❖❖

Andi: I wouldn't want your half-and-half to go to waste ...

I snorted at my fake-casual reply. Right. Because groceries spoiling was my key concern, not the orgasms we'd be missing if we weren't together.

Trivia night became much more interesting after Ty and I made things official, though we sat at separate tables. My team thought it was *hilarious* to synchronize making moony faces at Ty. Jimmy had perfected lash fluttering, but Chase still looked like a cross between getting dust in his eye and faking a seizure. Shelly had taken to joining us regularly, dragging Sam along when he was free, and she was the worst of the bunch. At some point she'd grabbed a picture of Ty and I canoodling in the hall between rounds and got it printed on a T-shirts with I SHIP IT. She distributed them to our whole team. All of Trebek's Rejects in their matching T-shirts, staring Ty down longingly didn't go unnoticed. It became a game between our tables. We'd moon, and the Knit Wits would retaliate by mouthing "I love you" and holding their hands overhead in the shape of hearts. Our teams were still neck and neck for the most wins for the trivia season and the competitive edge between Ty and me made Thursday nights extra hot when we were finally alone together. Things between us were nearly perfect.

As happy as I was with how our relationship was progressing, I had to wonder – why hadn't I been invited to family dinner night yet? Or Rosie's monthly Uncle Ty Sleepover? I could understand not spending the night with him and Rosie when she visited, but he seemed reluctant to share his time with her. Not that we had to do everything together. We didn't. But I was beginning to feel paranoid he was keeping me away from his sister and the

rest of his family. Did they not approve of our relationship? The exclusion hurt. But I didn't know how to approach the topic with him. Outside of that little snag, everything was so good between us.

Glancing at Melena, snuggled up against Jimmy in our trivia booth, content under his casual arm, I had to wonder: had my rejection of her hurt this much? I'd been a royal pain, mispronouncing her name and wearing black to their wedding, accusing her of taking advantage of Jimmy. Not accepting her as family. Over time, I'd relented, working to mend my relationship with her, but being on the other side made me realize I still had a lot to atone for. It was fine to protect the ones we loved, but that didn't mean I couldn't make room for new family. Treating love as a finite resource had only stifled Jimmy when I should have been supporting him.

In between questions I blurted out, "Hey, Melena. How about I take you out to lunch this week? Do you have time?"

The glint of approval in Jimmy's eye when Melena accepted didn't assuage my guilt, but it was a start.

Trebek's Rejects wrapped up another trivia night victory, and I couldn't help my triumphant smile as Ty dropped by our table to take me home.

"Hey, Ty. You want to join us Wednesday for some gaming?" Chase asked after a suitable amount of ribbing about the Knit Wits' loss.

Ty shifted a quick glance my way. "Actually, that's family dinner night, and I'm hoping Andi will join me this week."

My pulse picked up. Finally. Who would have imagined an invite to family dinner as the highlight of my week? My month? It felt like a promotion, going from exclusively dating to true partner.

"Ooooh ..." my team teased in unison.

Sometimes they really were of one mind. One puny, single-celled mind. Like they were watching a tennis match, six gazes swung from Ty to me. Our gallery of interested bystanders remained silent as I pretended to think it over.

"Hmm ... okay," I said with mock reluctance to hide my racing heart.

"Ahhhhh ..." the satisfied moan from Chase and Jimmy made Ty

grin.

“Andi and Ty, sitting at the dinner table ...” Tamra started.

“Telling his family their relationship is stable ...” Shelly continued.

Melena stared into the distance for a moment before snapping her fingers. “Got it.” Her wicked grin should have warned me. “First comes love. Then comes marriage. Then comes Ty sitting at the Rejects table!”

She, Shelly, and Tamra snickered at their own terrible rhyme while the others watched indulgently. Ty shook his head, all smiles now that I’d said “yes” to family dinner. I held back my snort. Not like my acceptance had been in doubt. It was only the invitation I’d been waiting for. Surely, he could see my heart eyes?

“You ready to go home?” he asked with a hand over mine.

“Home?” I asked, caught woolgathering. I squeezed his hand, letting the rush of warmth bubble through me as my thoughts turned to getting Ty alone.

Jimmy couldn’t let Ty’s word choice go. He stared at me. “Do you have something to share with the team, sis? Are you and Sheldon shacking up now?”

“Nope.” I answered promptly, trying to hide my pleasure. I didn’t need to tell my nosy brother that we’d compared lease end dates and started looking at apartments together.

My immediate denial didn’t convince Jimmy, judging by his skeptical expression. I spent more time at Ty’s than my own place lately, but my address hadn’t changed.

Ty’s lips twitched, but he supported me. “You know, anywhere Andi is, it’s home to me.”

“Aww ...” The peanut gallery singsonged, saving us from too sober a moment, but I hugged his words close to my heart.

Every day I fell a little further and discovered the bone-deep contentment that came from sharing my life with Ty. And it had nothing to do with him being bone-deep in me on the regular. I kept the smirk off my face with effort, afraid my expression would telegraph my dirty thoughts. Thinking about Ty’s “bone” in front of my brother would be a sure recipe for further teasing.

Ty seemed oddly nervous about dinner with his sister, and as I noticed his tense jaw on the drive across town, I felt my own nerves grow progressively more strained. Did Julie secretly hate me? It wasn't like either of us was an unknown quantity to the other—we'd gone to high school together, albeit briefly. I was two years younger than Jimmy, Ty, and Chase, while Julie was a year older. We'd only overlapped a single year, when she'd been a senior.

The anxiety Ty telegraphed through his body language had me second-guessing his family's opinion of me. I'd met Rosie. She was a cute little girl, nothing to be nervous about. Julie and I hadn't exactly run in the same circles, but we didn't have any bad blood I was aware of. As far as I remembered, I'd never met her wife before, but that didn't explain his apprehension.

I trailed a hand down one tense arm, ignoring the way my libido revved as I registered his firm, corded forearm sprinkled with hair.

“What's wrong?”

Ty swallowed as if building courage. He didn't meet my eyes.

“Tonight's important to me.” He turned his face to mine briefly, as if to reassure me, but his smile looked forced. “I'm close with Julie and her family, and I want dinner to go well.”

“You think I'm going to do something offensive?” Meeting the family was always fraught, but I believed Ty knew me well enough, trusted me enough, to take this step. The bright star I'd been carrying around in my chest since Ty had extended the invitation dimmed slightly. Was our trust one-sided? I'd been excited for tonight, thinking it represented a progression of our relationship. So why was Ty acting like it could be the end? I searched my memories, thinking back to any stray comments or interactions with Julie. Had I done something unforgiveable? Teenage girls could be shitty. Especially as we were figuring out who we were, how we fit. I liked to think I'd been a garden-variety doofus in high school, but did Julie view me as something different?

“Does Julie not like me? I barely remember her from high school.”

Ty placed a hand on my knee, squeezing gently.

“Julie likes you just fine. It’s not that.”

“Then why are you so nervous?”

He pulled up to a small house painted a creamy yellow. The wide front porch shaded a set of wicker chairs, and the little girl hopped up from one as the SUV slid to a stop.

“Uncle Ty!” Rosie squealed.

“It’s not you, it’s me,” Ty rushed to reassure quietly before he pushed open his door and scooped his niece up in a bear hug.

I watched the tableau play out as I paused in the truck. Ty’s love for his niece was obvious. Her face lit up in his presence, reinforcing my impression that they were close. I pushed open my door, stepping with leaden feet to Ty and Rosie. Ty relaxed under his niece’s influence, and I questioned again why he’d been so tense earlier. What more did Ty have to tell me?

I debated confronting him, but a conservatively dressed blond pushed open the door to the house, a welcoming smile on her face. “Hello, you must be Andi. Come in, come in, I’m Kirsten, Julie’s wife.”

I shook hands with Kirsten and complimented their home. It was lovely. Cottagecore come to life, with lots of delicate prints and houseplants tucked into every nook and cranny.

Rosie and Ty came in behind, Rosie tugging on his hand and talking a mile a minute about her week. I couldn’t help but feel a pang for the rapt attention Ty paid her, the love clear on his face.

“They’re adorable, aren’t they?”

Startled, I cast a guilty smile at Kirsten. She’d caught me mooning over Ty.

I cleared my throat to push away the bubble of emotion seeing them together had wrought. He was lucky to have so much family. I’d only had Jimmy and my grandma after my parents were deployed overseas. Growing up without a large safety net had drawn Jimmy and I closer, but I still missed my folks and that special adult and child bond. More so since our grandma had passed.

“Yeah. He’s a great uncle.”

Kirsten’s smile took on a knowing twist. “In a lot of ways, he’s more

than that. Rosie adores him.” Her expression turned stern. “And so do we.”

The *so don't fuck this up* was implied. I smiled, appreciating that Ty's sister-in-law was looking out for him. I'd been blunter with Melena back in the day, and I had to admire Kirsten's finesse.

I followed Kirsten into the kitchen where Julie was putting the finishing touches on dinner.

“What smells so good?” I asked with a smile.

Julie looked up from a pan. “Meatloaf.”

“And mashed potatoes,” Rosie singsonged. “My favorite!”

I returned her gamine grin. “Mine too,” I whispered conspiratorially. “How can I help?”

“Why don't you and Rosie finish setting the table, then we'll eat.”

The homey chore reminded me of meals in my grandmother's kitchen. I glanced up from placing forks next to the plates Rosie laid out and caught Ty watching me. His soft smile melted some of the hard casing I'd put in place for tonight, softening my armor. I'd worried over nothing.

Dinner passed in a blur of good-natured teasing and general updates. Rosie shared every last thing she'd learned about seed germination in science class, clearly enthralled. I watched as Ty listened attentively, my heart clenching. If he wanted children, he'd be a knockout as a father. It stoked my previous fears, that ultimately, we'd want different futures.

Julie seemed content to let the conversation flow naturally, but Kirsten kept up a subtle grilling. I hid my smile behind my water glass when she asked how I felt about children. Intrusive? Sure. But I could tell it came from a place of love and concern for her brother-in-law, and she didn't turn up her nose or extoll the many virtues of parenthood when I murmured noncommittally.

Ty squeezed my hand as we wished them a good night after dinner, tugging me gently toward his truck.

“What's the rush?” I laughed, as he opened the door for me, placing his hands on my waist to help boost me up.

He leaned in, capturing a quick kiss, before pulling back with a twinkle in his eyes. My heart dropped to my toes at the expression of open tenderness there.

“I’m glad you came with me tonight,” he admitted huskily. “My family really likes you.”

The last bit of tension I’d been holding through the evening relaxed, and I let a smile twitch my lips. His earlier strain appeared to have evaporated. Did that mean that I’d passed the test? He’d claimed his reasons for being stressed had nothing to do with me, was now the time to ask?

“And?” I queried, wondering if he’d give up what had concerned him.

“And *now*, I want to get you somewhere I can have you all to myself.”

I buried any disappointment that he dodged my question. I could push harder, but something about his good mood made me want to enjoy the moment. He rushed around the hood and climbed into the driver’s seat, and I laughed at his eagerness. There’d be time to question him later.

He fired up the engine, checking behind him before pulling out onto the street. I slid my hand to his thigh, enjoying the rough texture of denim beneath my fingertips.

“We’re by ourselves *now*,” I teased, letting the light of challenge seep into my expression as I squeezed the firm muscle beneath my hand.

“Andi Torres, safety first.” He groaned as my hand crept higher.

He widened his thighs, and I smirked.

“We’re not sixteen anymore,” he wheezed as I stroked him more firmly at a red light. His hands gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles whitened.

“Where would you have taken me when we were teens?”

“Five Mile Drive.”

I leaned across the seat, inhaling the skin at his neck, the faint aroma of a woody aftershave lighting my libido. I placed a kiss along his collarbone.

“Take me there,” I whispered.

“Only if you behave ... until we get there.”

“Deal.”

I kept my hands to myself the rest of the short trip, watching Ty drive. He appeared extra attentive to the road and almost sedate, at odds with

the bulge in the front of his jeans.

Somewhere, sixteen-year-old me was squealing in excitement. Adult me wasn't far behind. I'd been too sheltered in high school to ever venture with a boy to Five Mile Drive.

Ty pulled into the park entrance at Pearl Street as the sun started to set behind the clouds over the Sound. He followed the signs for Five Mile Drive, wincing at every speed bump.

I couldn't help my giggle. "Sorry."

"No, you're not." He grinned. "But I'm not either."

He drove us into the heavy woods bordering the groomed area of Point Defiance, and the truck was immediately cloaked in twilight thanks to the trees. We wound along until it felt like we were the only ones on earth, shrouded in tall fir trees and a mix of other vegetation.

Ty cut his engine, letting the natural sounds of the forest take over. It should have been soothing, but my pulse raced. I unclipped my seatbelt while he did the same. Ty slid one long leg up on the bench seat as I boosted to crawl over him. I winced as I hit my elbow on the steering wheel and he laughed.

"This was a lot easier when I was sixteen."

I smoothed the flare of jealousy at the reminder of Jess and their history. I'd emerged the victor, with Ty's heart as the prize. And together, we'd make new memories.

"Sixteen-year-olds have smaller bodies? I've got to admit, we don't exactly fit."

He traced a finger down my arm, and I shivered.

"Oh, we fit." His smoky smile sent a rush of slick moisture between my thighs.

He pushed forward, trailing kisses along the exposed skin at my clavicle before capturing my mouth in a mind-drugging kiss. There was a desperate edge to his caress, as if he were trying to hold onto every moment, reassure himself somehow. When he pulled back, breathing hard, I had to agree with his earlier assessment. We absolutely fit.

I pushed my hips into his, enjoying the heat and length of his erection pressed against me. We kissed for what felt like forever, hands dragging

across a mix of skin and fabric, hips pressing. Ty didn't make any moves to take our makeout session further, and I didn't know if I should appreciate his restraint or pout. He seemed content to luxuriate in each kiss, as if he could absorb me through his skin. Imprint on me forever. As if he were worried each kiss could be our last.

The sky beyond the truck window had darkened steadily, and as the temperature outside dropped, our windows fogged. Ty distracted me with another round of wet kisses, and I lost myself in the moment. Lost myself in him. Never had I met a man so inherently kind and good, who also made me shudder with desire.

Bang. Bang.

Ty ripped his mouth from mine, breathing hard. His pained chuckle gave me the strength to pull away.

"Park's closed. Time to take this home, otherwise I have to ticket you," someone said through the window. From the deep bark of the voice, I guessed a park employee.

Ty looked chagrined as we disentangled ourselves, and he rolled down the driver's window.

Blinded by the flashlight, we both squinted, holding up hands to protect our eyes.

"Move it along. You can't park here."

We'd been behaving like teenagers, so I couldn't fault the ranger for treating us like them.

"Yes, sir," Ty intoned with a straight face. "We'll head out now."

"See that you do."

We still couldn't see the source of the severe voice on the other end of the flashlight, but Ty didn't waste any time cranking up the truck to drive me home.

I held back my chuckle until we made it out of the park before the guffaws took over.

"I'm so sorry, Ty."

He cast a sheepish smile my way. "You know, I'm glad it was a park employee, not Tacoma PD. I'd never hear the end of it at work if they had to dispatch someone to boot me from the park for necking."

I snickered, trying to feel shame, but failing at the picture Ty created. We had been acting like kids. I glanced at him fondly. Something about Ty made me feel freer than I had in years. Renewed. He brought back the sense of humor and fun that had been slowly strangling out of me with the descent into adulthood. I'd been ticking boxes, moving forward, instead of enjoying life.

I was young. In love. And I wanted to enjoy every moment.

My mental record scratched. *Love*. Was this love? Feeling goofy over Ty?

If ever there was a man to lose my heart over, Ty had to be him. Fiercely loyal to his family and friends. Competitive, but not unkind. Loving, and willing to show it.

The wonder of my self-discovery kept me quiet on the way home, but Ty brought me out of my silence as we pulled up to my apartment complex.

“Okay if I stay over? There’s still something I want to talk to you about.”

The soft vulnerability on his face had my heart cratering. His earlier nervousness seemed to be returning. What was so important, that he’d be this concerned?

I nodded, subdued by the rush of possibilities. Dinner had gone well. My chest tightened, my breathing growing restricted, as he followed me inside.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked.

He swallowed, nodding, and followed me into the kitchen, watching steadily as I poured us each a glass of wine. I tried not to let my hand tremble. As each second ticked off, I felt more vulnerable. What did he have to tell me?

“I’m glad you came with me tonight,” he started.

I forced a smile to my too-tight lips. “Me too,” I said softly.

My pulse raced as I waited for him to say more. He took a quick sip, as if fortifying himself, before his brown eyes met mine.

“Family is important to me. Rosie is important to me. Not just because she’s my niece. She’s also my daughter.”

My mouth formed an O of understanding and he nodded, watching me steadily.

“You and ... Kristen?”

My gut swirled. Pretty sure, I still needed to check.

“IVF or ...”

His quick chuckle immediately reassured me. “Yes! IVF. We’re close, we’re not *that* close. They considered going the anonymous donor route, but I volunteered.”

“Okay ...” I let the word draw out, as I considered my feelings.

Ty *would* make a wonderful father. Because he already was one. I had questions. But watching his expression, poised on the edge between fear and hope, I couldn’t ask any. Not until he understood.

“You’re a great father.”

He swallowed, and I smiled as the hope spread from a spark in his dark eyes to a broad grin.

“It’s not a deal breaker?” the relief in his voice had me shaking my head.

I wasn’t opposed to family, just unsure I wanted to be a parent. After watching my own foist us off on my grandma, I’d decided I’d only have kids if I desperately wanted them and was fully committed to caring for them. Nothing less. I wouldn’t make a child of mine feel unwanted, unloved, while I explored the world. Ty’s situation was altogether different.

He’d been scared to tell me. Afraid I would reject him. For loving his family enough to help it grow. I couldn’t fault him for that. Not when I’d witnessed how deeply he loved Rosie, was there for her.

My love for Ty expanded with every breath, until I was afraid I would burst. He’d trusted me with someone close to his heart. A family secret. Risked rejection, so I’d have all the facts. Did it mean he loved me too? It was on the tip of my tongue to ask. To tell him how I felt.

But at the last moment I bit back the words. The dark voice inside still whispered *too soon*. Instead, I held my feelings close to my heart, letting them fill me up until the warmth of my love for him shone out of every pore.

Ty’s face lit at my expression, and he pulled me close, smoothing his hands over my shoulders and down my arms until he grasped my hands in

his.

“I’m so glad you’re okay with this. I couldn’t imagine telling you, and having it break us. You’re too important to me.”

I wrapped his words around me, using them to soothe the ache for more. For admissions of love. We’d taken a major step today. I’d met his family; Ty had shared his secrets. I could keep my love for him to myself for now; give his time to grow. Rushing wouldn’t make him love me more or any faster. We were on a happy path. One I didn’t want to stumble off of with admissions too early. We had time.

CHAPTER 16 – TY

Andi's easy acceptance of my role in Rosie's life broke down the remaining barriers between us. With my secret exposed, I could fully relax. Be myself. Shower her with my love without fear. Only the last niggling doubt about how she felt kept me from admitting how strong my feelings were.

Life settled into an easy rhythm together. We both worked, but we spent as much time together as we could. I'd been the first person she called when her boss finally recognized her brilliance with a promotion. Watching her pleasure at the much-deserved raise and acknowledgement of her contributions, I couldn't help my pride. She was amazing—and it made me glad to know that others knew it too. Her shift in perspective at work as she stepped into her new position helped me look more objectively at my own situation. Calls hadn't worn me down as much when I knew I had Andi to come home to. And hearing Jimmy compliment me and my operator team as partners in emergency management didn't hurt. The obvious respect when he recounted the hand-off on a recent fire call reminded me that however hard it was to see at times, my work mattered. We saved lives. Maybe not in a vacuum, but together.

A thousand times, I almost blurted out my love to Andi. She smiled at me over our cups of coffee at the farmer's market, and I barely resisted. We grazed hands, washing dishes at Julie's, and it was all I could do not to push her up against the counter and growl it in her ear. Witnesses and all. Every day not telling her was becoming more torturous.

I couldn't even explain what held me back. I knew she cared about me. Andi had shown her acceptance of me, and every moment we spent together looked and felt a lot like love. But I'd been burned before. Lingering memories of Jess, of her betrayal, still lurked in the background. The ghosts of the past weren't done with me. And they kept my tongue still.

Andi: Do you want to come home with me after trivia tonight?

I wanted to come home with her every night. Maybe it was time to push through the past and tell her.

Ty: I only want to come home to you every night.

I deleted the honest response before I could be tempted to send it, but only because I wanted to tell her in person. She deserved the words. Andi deserved everything. Instead I sent,

Ty: I'll pack a bag.

Andi: Assuming you won't be a sore loser tonight. The only thing I won't rub is your ego.

I grinned. That was my Sunshine.

Bag packed, I couldn't help double-checking that my symbolic addition hadn't slipped out.

Keys. Keys to my heart, keys to my life. She needed her own set.

I loved Andi Torres, and it was time to make it clear. To her, to the world, to everyone on my trivia team and in my life. I wanted a life together. I couldn't imagine mine without her anymore, and I wanted to come home to her every day.

Heart full, I couldn't stop myself from glancing at the Reject's table as soon as I arrived at Haven. I debated going to her first, but I'd cut it too close, and Jeannie hailed me from our table as soon as she spotted me.

"Ty. Get that sweet brain of yours over here. We need to kick some Trebek's Rejects butt tonight. No gawking at your girlfriend."

Our waiter blocked my view of Andi's table when he took our drink order, and I tried not to shift impatiently while I waited for my team to place their orders.

A couple of the players from the Guessing Gays stopped by as soon as Jake left with our order, and I did my best to focus on the conversation, trying not to be rude.

My breath caught in my chest when I finally glimpsed Andi across the room. Radiant, in a bright pink top that enhanced the roses in her cheeks and the sweet tilt of her mouth, my ribcage squeezed at the sight of her. I barely noticed the man sitting next to her. Until he threw an arm around her shoulders. The easy familiarity jarred me. Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, chin

covered in stubble, he seemed all too comfortable with her. I expected Andi to push him away, but her only response was an indulgent laugh. I could see the pleasure on her face from across the room.

Jeannie dug a bony elbow into my side.

“Who’s the handsome cuss with your girl?”

I held back the scowl, smoothing my expression. “No idea. Family friend, maybe?”

“Well, they certainly *look* friendly,” Maggie cackled at her own joke, and I soothed the savage beast inside with a sip of my beer. Because alcohol was sure to make things better.

I drank more, faster than usual as we burned through the first round of questions. Unable to focus on our game, I kept glancing at Andi’s table. At the stubbly stranger. Another co-worker? He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t place him. Shaking my head, I forced my eyes to our answer sheet.

Pete asked, “Pound for pound, what is the most efficient carnivore on the planet?”

Jeannie and Linda were stumped, but I came through.

“Domestic cat,” I said confidently.

“Really?” Jeannie’s side-eye game was on point, but I held firm.

“Really. They also have two noses and three eyelids, if you’re searching for fun facts.”

Her nose wrinkled, and I nodded wisely.

When the round ended, I checked my phone, hoping for an explanatory text, disappointed when there was nothing to clue me in. I pushed to my feet to turn in our answers, ignoring the light-headed sensation as I glanced across the bar to see Andi laughing with the mystery man. Too much beer, not enough food. *Not enough Andi*, the last functioning part of my brain whispered.

I nodded to Jimmy, who was turning in the Reject’s answer sheet, and bit back my questions about their new team member. Talking to Andi had to take priority. I turned on my heel, heading for their table, only to spot her disappear into the hall.

I could work with that. Many of our meaningful moments had happened in the halls of Haven. What was one more?

I trailed her across the floor, pausing when one of the Smarty Pints team asked me if we had the cat answer. After extricating myself as quickly as possible, I made my way to the hall.

To see Andi, snuggled in the embrace of the mystery man from their team.

My breath seized in my chest, and I leaned against the opposite wall. Andi with another man.

My moment of truth. I could believe in our past, our present, and our future. Believe in us. Or I could yield to the fears that haunted me after Jess. My competitive side awakened. I was better than that. We were better together. Andi had always been trustworthy, and I needed to let the ghosts of the past fade if I wanted them to quit haunting me. We had a brilliant future. Together. And I wouldn't let anyone, not even myself, get in the way of that.

I pushed away the dark whispers, focusing instead on my love for Andi. My confidence in us.

"Hey, who's your friend?" I asked lightly, applauding myself for my nonchalant tone.

Andi gasped, glancing up from where she'd pushed the vaguely familiar man away from her.

"Ty. It's not what it looks like."

Her pleading eyes reached straight into my gut, squeezing in an iron-tight grip.

"I know."

Something about my confidence rebuilt hers, and she scowled at the man in front of her.

"Zander, be glad it's my boyfriend who saw you, and not my brother."

The name was vaguely familiar, memory scratching at the back of my brain. I'd heard of Zander. But what context?

"Yeah, what would your brother do?" the man slurred. "He's my bro too now, you know."

I held back my groan as comprehension hit me. Melena. Zander had to be one of her brothers. Suddenly, Andi's long-suffering but patient expression made more sense. Up close, he appeared more miserable than

horny. I resisted the urge to forcibly remove him from her presence and Haven. Booting him out on his ass would be satisfying, but unnecessary. Proving Andi's faith in my cool was more important.

"Jimmy would probably do something really immature, like give you a wedgie," Andi admitted with a small smile. "You're lucky you're technically family and he loves your sister enough not to rearrange your pretty face."

"What? I'm sad. In my family, we hug when we're sad. I couldn't help myself," he protested. Zander caressed his chin, a dreamy expression in place. "You think I have a pretty face, Andi?" He slumped against the wall, a pout in place. "Then why doesn't Gwen think so?"

Rolling her eyes over her charge, who slumped against the wall, she turned to me beseechingly. "Zander is visiting Melena and Jimmy. He *might* be a little depressed. Maybe not the best time to load him up with beer. Apparently, making bold decisions under the influence runs in the family, whether you're a Torres by blood or marriage."

I could think of at least one bold Torres move I was thankful for. If Andi hadn't approached me that night at Haven, would I have ever shaken out of my funk and pursued her?

"She said she never wants to see me again," Zander mumbled morosely.

I shared a glance with Andi, joining in a secret smile. Maybe we weren't the only lovesick ones. Sounded like Zander had it bad.

Yes, Andi was extended family. *Not* an excuse to grope her in the hallway. Even if it looked more like she was propping him up. Before I could scold him for his ham-handed hug, Andi threw herself into my arms. I clasped her to me, enjoying the warm weight of her breasts crushed against my chest. Her dark eyes sparkled as she stared up at me.

In the background, Zander moaned softly, shaking his head over our embrace before heading back toward the bar.

"You had me worried, there, champ," she admitted.

"Yeah, Sunshine?"

Her lips twitched, and I loved the zing of pure happiness that arched through me. Love shone in her expression, and I wondered how I'd missed it

before.

“I thought for sure you’d lose it and think I was messing around with Zander.” Her gaze remained steady on mine, searching for hints I was upset.

“Is that what you’d do in my shoes?”

Andi’s expression darkened. “I’d cut a bitch.”

The belly laugh burst from me, peals of laughter ringing through the hall. She grinned, and I let the certainty settle over my shoulders. I loved Andi. And it was time to tell her.

“Is that your way of saying you love me?” I asked teasingly.

Her expression sobered, and I rushed to fill the silence. I hadn’t meant to push for her to say it first.

“I love you, Andi Torres.”

Maybe I’d blurted it out in the dingy hall of our local bar, but from her expression, you’d think I’d professed my love in a notarized letter with a lifetime guarantee. Andi lit up from the inside, the corners of her eyes crinkling as she smiled at me. I let her confidence burn away any lingering doubts that we’d make it. Even when we competed, we were a team.

“Yeah, Hot Stuff? You think saying it first makes you the winner?” she teased.

I shrugged, trying for nonchalant, though two fingers to my racing pulse would have immediately revealed me as a liar.

If I had her love, I was the winner. And so was she.

No matter who said it first.

“Well, consider this a tie. I love you too, you know.”

A grin that hurt my cheeks split my face.

“Yeah?”

I cut off her nod, hauling her into my arms, crushing us together. I couldn’t stop placing kisses on her face as she giggled, protesting.

Only to be interrupted once again by Jimmy’s grumbling. “Knock it off. Round two’s starting. If you care ... Why do I keep drawing the short straw?” Jimmy’s complaint faded into the background as he threw up his hands and returned to their table, but his words broke the moment.

Andi pulled back, pressing her forehead to mine.

“You want to get out of here?” she asked.

“And miss trivia?” I asked.

“I feel a lucky streak coming on,” Andi said with a grin.

EPILOGUE – ANDI

I should have known something was up. Ty had been sneaky all week, tapping away on his phone. He thought he'd been smooth, but I could tell he was working on something. I figured he'd tell me when he was ready.

We'd settled into a new normal, after our exchange of faith and feelings at Haven. That night marked the beginning of a new phase in our relationship. One of certainty. When my lease expired, there was no question we'd move in together.

I reveled in knowing I was loved. Wanted. Necessary to Ty's survival. He never left me in doubt.

Trivia Night had continued as a weekly tradition. We'd flirted with splitting time between teams like kids juggling divorced parents, but ultimately, the zip of competition added too much spice to ignore.

I bet Ty I could win with no panties.

He was so distracted glancing at my short skirt that the Rejects were a slam dunk as victors. Playing with him, competing, never got old. Side bets for sex acts became our go-to method of ramping up the tension.

When he slid into the booth next to me instead of joining the Knit Wits, I should have suspected.

The air was ripe with anticipation, and I mistook it as the routine thrill of battling with our wits.

"I'd like to propose a special one-night team name, since I'm playing with y'all tonight," Ty proposed.

I squinted at him. Was this some sideways plot for the Knit Wits to pull ahead? We'd finally eclipsed them with a rout last week, pulling in front by two wins. I couldn't imagine my team going along with his scheme if that were the case, but Tamra, Chase, Melena, Jimmy, Shelly, and Sam nodded like toddlers ready to doze in the back of the car, all sleepy contentment.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked suspiciously.

There had to be a catch. Ty didn't do anything without a reason. But I couldn't guess his game.

Ty pretended to think, tapping his chin theatrically. It only highlighted his dark handsomeness, and I was sure my expression communicated things my brother really didn't want to see.

"Stop eye-banging your boyfriend. It's gross," he complained.

I rolled my eyes, and Ty cleared his throat to get my attention.

"I've got it. But I'm not sure you'll like it. It's important for you to agree," he said.

"What?" I asked, exasperated. What was his deal?

His lips twitched, and my chest expanded as he grasped my hand in his, the light of mischief warning me I might not like what happened next.

"How about, 'Will you marry me, Andi?' as our team's name?"

I tilted my head, ignoring the excitement that threatened to swamp me at his words. If this was a joke, he was a dead man.

Fighting to remain calm, I mirrored his pose, tapping my chin in faux contemplation. Happiness made it nearly impossible to keep the smile from tilting up my lips. "Don't get me wrong, I like the sentiment, but most of our team is already married or engaged. I think it might confuse our rivals."

Ty's dropped jaw sent a surge of triumph racing through me. Jimmy cast an uncomfortable glance Ty's way, and Chase shifted, not meeting my gaze as I looked around the table. Only Shelly gave me a wink of approval, clearly thrilled by my roasting.

Ty cleared his throat, changing tacks. "How about I love you and want to marry you? Or I can't imagine my life without you."

I kept the triumphant grin in check, drawing out the moment.

"Ooh, that's much better. I love you and want to marry you too."

The grin that split his cheeks had me smiling in return, the light of love shining between us.

"So, you're saying we're engaged?"

I nodded. He tugged me from the booth, speeding toward the hall. Behind us, I heard Jimmy squawk. "Hey, Sheldon! We still need a team name."

"Ty and Andi are engaged and don't care who knows it!" he

bellowed over his shoulder.

A cheer went up from the surrounding tables of players, and I laughed, enjoying Ty's firm grasp. As soon as we drew into the relative privacy of the hall, he crowded me up against the wall, peering at my expression.

"Was that too much?" he asked.

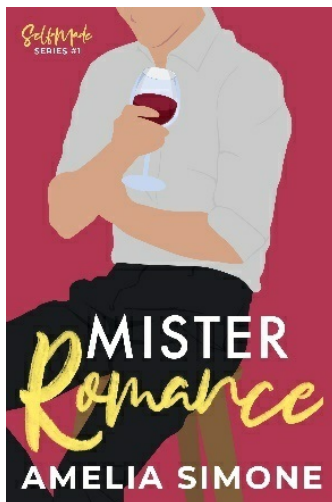
In the face of his uncertainty, I let some of my mirth over *him* was asking *me* if he was too much spill into my expression.

"You could never be too much, Ty. There's no such thing when it comes to us."

He cupped my cheek.

"Andi, I love you so much. Every day with you feels like I'm winning."

"When I'm with you, Tyler Sheldon, I don't need to keep score."



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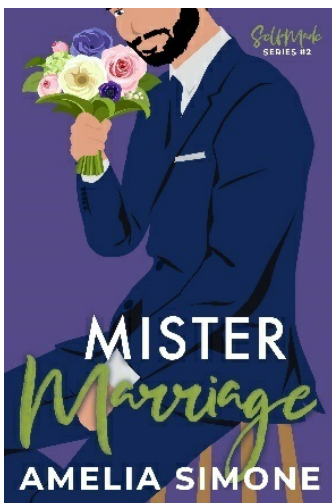
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Chase Hoffman

The sultry siren masquerading as a practical nurse can't fool me. Tamra is romantic lead material. Being her date to her brother's wedding is a dream come true. Or my worst nightmare.

There's a reason I live my life behind a keyboard. No one wants me running my mouth without preparation. Boobs. Aliens. You never know what might pop out. Me and my blundering mouth can keep it together for one tiny favor – right?

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Jimmy Torres

My life as a firefighter revolves around serving and protecting. The last thing I wanted was to be the kiss of death. When Melena collapsed at my feet, I knew I'd do everything in my power to help the woman who'd already stolen a piece of my heart. Our marriage was a match made for mutual convenience, but my feelings were anything but. Did Melena share my malady? Or was I the only one suffering from a different kind of heart ailment?

Melena Nemitz

Jimmy was amazing when I needed him most. His insurance was life-saving in more ways than one. My faulty heart may recover medically, but something tells me Jimmy's impact is long-term. He's been so kind, but does it mask something more, or am I alone in thinking this marriage deserves a real shot?

Humor and all the feels abound in this modern marriage of convenience romance. Mister Marriage is book 2 of the Self-Made Series and can be read as a stand-alone or after Mister Romance.

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